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# Women In the Union Movement: Organisation, Representation and Segmentation

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## **Women In the Union Movement: Organisation, Representation and Segmentation**

Mike Donaldson

In New South Wales in 1986, 48 per cent of women workers were unionised, making up 34 per cent of the State's trade union membership (Phillips 1987, 43). Australian women accounted for 72 per cent of the growth in union membership between 1974 and 1984, and as a result, the proportion of women union members in Australia has risen slightly over the decade. Charles' (1986) study of 160 women in trade unions in seven workplaces found that most were interested in unions and supported the principles of trade unionism. The labour movement, however, has been slow to translate this interest into the involvement of women as activists, delegates, shop-stewards or officials. Nor are women proportionally represented on management committees and executive's, even in unions in which men are a minority, and are too seldom sent to trade union schools or go as delegates to conferences and : congresses.

Of the nineteen unions in Australia with memberships of more than 40,000, seven have memberships less than 50 per cent male. Only one, the nurses' union with a membership ten per cent male, sent delegations to the 1983 and 1987 Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Congresses that were more than 50 per cent female. In 1983, ten of the nineteen large unions sent no women at all to Congress. In 1987, six did. While men made up 68 per cent of the membership of the nineteen, in 1987 they comprised 83 per cent of Congress delegates, 87 per cent of the ACTU executive and 100 per cent of the ACTU officers.

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**Table 1: Women Delegates to ACTU Congress from Unions with 40,000 or More Members, 1983 and 1987**

Union	Percentage in the union	Percentage in the ACTU Delegation	
		1983	1987
ACOA	26	33	37
AMWU	4	3	0
AMIEU	25	0	6
ABEU	53	7	6
APTU	11	0	9
ARU	8	0	15
ATF	60	46	48
AWU	1	0	7
ETU	5	0	0
FCU	69	24	33
FIA	5	0	0
FLAIEU	60	17	23
MWU	51	18	32
MEU	13	0	0
SPU	34	0	6
PKIU	20	0	0
RA NT	90	88	65
SDA	70	22	39
TWU	7	0	0
Average	32	14	17
ACTU Executive		3	13

Source: Mainly Davis (1987-88) in Women at Work 7, 4, 3

Note : Abbreviations are as follows: Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association; Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union; Amalgamated Meat Industries Employees' Union; Australian Bank Employees' Union; Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union; Australian Railways Union; Australian Teachers' Federation; Australian Workers' Union; Electrical Trades Union; Federated Clerks' Union; Federated Ironworkers' Association; Federated Liquor and Allied Industries Employees' Union; Miscellaneous Workers' Union; Municipal and Shire Council Employees' Union; Storemen and Packers' Union; Printing and Kindred Industries' Union; Royal Australian Nursing Federation; Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association; Transport Workers' Union.

Nor does this under-representation occur only in the peak bodies of the union movement. As recently as the early 1970s, women were largely absent as union officials or organisers (Hargreaves 1982, 303). Less than one third of health and safety representatives trained between 1985 and 1987 by the Victorian Trades Hall Council were women and 65 out of 83 workers who attended the Council's one day work hazard courses were men, despite the fact that workplaces designed for men may not be suitable for women, and that women have experiences which men don't including menstruation, menopause, pregnancy (Women at Work 1987c).

### **Unions for Whom?**

The reasons for this over-representation of men are several and interconnected. In March 1987, the Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union federal women's committee reported to their union executive that women in the union 'lacked confidence' and that at the shop floor level and at higher levels in the union there was a 'negative, if unintentional, attitude' by male unionists to women workers. A Municipal Officers' Association survey of its membership in Victoria concluded that women workers had substantial difficulty obtaining information from and about the union and that the timing and location of union meetings was a problem as was a 'lack of encouragement' from the union (Women at Work 1987a, 1987-88c, 1988a, b).

Women wishing to become union activists find it difficult to 'learn the ropes', to find sponsors and mentors to give 'encouragement, assistance and advice' (Ryan and Prendergast 1982, 271). In 1989 Advocate Jan Marsh left the ACTU after ten years. According to ACTU secretary, Bill Kelty, Marsh 'almost single-handedly wrote the [ACTU's] Working Women's Charter and had it endorsed by an ACTU Congress' (Women at Work 1987-88a). Marsh's reminiscences of those years are instructive in terms of 'lack of encouragement' and 'negative attitudes':

First I remember being taken to one side by a mature ACTU staff member, who described me as a 'nice girl' and warned me

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to leave the ACTU before it changed me . . . Second, I remember the considerable pressure placed upon me for contemplating marriage - such a move was deemed incompatible with a female working in a relatively responsible job for the ACTU (Women at Work 1987-88b.)

It is of course, not at all incompatible for men. According to Anna Booth, the Federal Secretary of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union, women 'have to make personal sacrifices that men don't have to make, especially women with families. It's incredibly difficult to combine the responsibilities of active parenthood, as opposed to passive parenthood which many men undertake, with an active trade union role' (Conway 1959). When Jennie George, the first woman to be elected to the ACTU executive, stood down from her position as president of the NSW Teachers' Federation, she remarked:

Without sounding like a martyr, when you break new ground you make choices. It was probably useful for the cause, but maybe not for me that I had time. There is no work that could have meant more to me. I love what I have done, but there has been a price. Today its easier for women. But until women with normal responsibilities car. take on what I have, we really haven't made revolutionary changes. If ten years ago I'd decided to have a child, I

know in my heart I'd never have been union president or on the ACTU executive (Susskind 1989, 33.)

In 1988 ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty tried to rearrange his workload and come into the office only three days a week so he could share the parenting of his recently-born daughter but the pace of events and demands on his time since then have made that regime impossible (Sydney Morning Herald, 8/7/89, 76). Nonetheless Kelty still has his child and his job. It's not unusual for young workers to go from being someone's child to having someone's child in under a year; and most regard marriage and motherhood as inevitable steps to adulthood, as central to life. Ninety-two per cent of Australian women aged between 15 and 19 expect to have children, and at the time they were surveyed, 93 per cent of those over 19 did have children, with the vast majority living in a sexual relationship with a man. Although in terms of time involved, the long span of paid work dwarfs the years spent in full-time [133]

mothering, the significance of the period of maternity can't be grasped in terms of time alone (See Donaldson 1991, Chapter 3).

It is precisely when men are becoming shop-stewards and job delegates in their early twenties, building up their experience and support, that women are most likely to be bearing and rearing children (Ellis 1988, 140). The shop stewards interviewed by Purcell (1979, 128-9) were generally prevented from attending evening branch meetings and weekend conferences by their family commitments. They accepted this not so much because they thought such work right and proper for women, but because they could see no way out of it. They often mentioned explicitly that their husbands discouraged or forbade union activities. Others active in the union movement have reported not so much opposition, as a debilitating lack of support.

The pressures of working for the family-household may lead to a disengagement from unionism altogether. Some workers are driven to making personal 'deals' with employers about time-off for child-care and other tasks, deals which leave them particularly vulnerable in a number of ways. Brenda Moore (1984, 3, 4), a press operator, explained that no one in her Melbourne factory belonged to a union and that all are permanent casual employees with no sick pay or holiday pay but who instead receive a slightly higher rate. 'But on the other hand', she said, 'women can arrange to have time off work during school holidays to look after their kids. This is a really important asset to working mothers. To most of the women, this is far more important than belonging to a union ... We think we get more consideration from the management by not belonging to the union. Maybe if we did join some of our working conditions would improve but we would probably lose our privileges such as having days off when our kids are sick or on school holidays ... We are not like professional women who can afford to have someone paid to look after their children. We are all trying to juggle with the problem of filling the roles of good wife, good mother and good worker'.

Other employers are even more systematic in their co-option of women's needs. One company encourages staff to introduce members of their families as potential workers because it promotes cohesiveness. The manager explained, 'We also try to follow the cycle of family life.

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If a woman has just had a baby, she will want to work a short evening shift only. Later as her family grows up, she may want to go on night shift, and after that back on to a full day shift' (Leighton 1981, 150).

Clearly parenting, even from a purely instrumental viewpoint, is a union issue. But even assuming that women obtained more representatives on organising bodies, part of the problem still remains that what constitutes a union issue for women workers is somewhat different than what constitutes one for male workers. A workers' 'way-of-life' project organised by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions involved 41 people (19 women) from eight factories in intensive discussions over a two year period. The 41 concluded at the end of that period that among men, trade union consciousness remained essentially economic and narrowly focused, while women were interested in and more prepared to discuss 'way of life' issues, stressing ways of improving human relationships, helping each other and taking care

of one's health. The men often seemed to think in terms of how private life resources might serve to benefit the working community. Women, on the other hand, thought about how their working lives might help them with the most urgent problems of their private everyday lives. The men appeared to think that one of the problems in trying to change ways of life was that it is very difficult to get to know peoples' private lives. The women drew no mechanical distinctions between their working and their private lives (Holmila 1986, 3, 5, 8). As Anna Booth argued for her union, 'The whole movement has to become more human-centred and acknowledge that the standards it sets have to take into account people's personal and family lives. We get our lives all mixed up and work our guts out' (Conway 1989).

Thus the gender-specific experience of class and its resultant shaping of the nature and purpose of struggle around paid work, has led to emphases, strategies and victories for women workers which males have yet to emulate. In the United States, for instance, trade union quiescence for decades on the question of paid working time has not prevented unions with high percentages of women workers from making major gains in the shortening the full-time paid working week (Roediger and Foner 1989, 276).

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### **Job Militancy and Industry Traditions**

It may be that these different priorities are articulated in ways which are invisible to male unionism, and that 'the Achilles heel of the logic of domination lies in the multiplicity of subversive tactics employed by individuals' in which 'dispersed creativity' leads to the 'horizontal proliferation of micro-activities' of resistance (de Certeau in Godard 1985, 318). Perhaps. Certainly a number of social scientists have recently published studies of forms of resistance and methods of self-organisation, which, as in a study of militancy in a Southern US hospital, illustrated the importance of social networks both within the workplace and outside it, for organising and sustaining job-related class action. Workers use these political and economic relations, among other things, to struggle against oppression in waged work, to engage management in a 'silent struggle' over the control of the work process through 'enduring, creative, informal ... low risk, low gain strategies' in the 'calculated defence of class interests based on an experiential understanding of class struggle' (Sacks 1984a; 16; 1984b, 183; ShapiroPerl 1984, 194-5). The extent to which these cultures will be 'in resistance' or mechanisms of incorporation depends, as Lamphere (1985) has demonstrated in a comparative study, on the nature of the production process, the state of the industry and the economy, the strengths of management in relation to the workers. Also crucial is the degree of organisation and quality of imagination of trade union activists.

In making their struggles more visible and effective, workers join and express support for unions and engage in action according to the traditions of their industry (Purcell 1979, 122-3). If militancy is context specific, a crucial variable is the lack of industrial bargaining power of those workers concentrated in catering, clothing, footwear, distributive and service jobs which are found in small firms or small units of production. Size of workplace, Leighton (1981, 106) found, was the most reliable indicator of strike action. Workers who are scattered, are unable to express (or sometimes perceive) common interests (Purcell 1979, 125,127) and are difficult to organise. Gina Vance (in Vance and Bishop 1983, 51), a cannery worker, talked of

an approach to her union hierarchy: 'I've asked the national president about unorganised [137]

plants...?' He said, without thinking, 'Oh, there's a couple, but they're less than a hundred workers. They're not worth our while'.

The job specific context and tradition includes not only size and dispersion but also the attitudes of official union organisations to workers' self activity. One steelworker told how, when she wanted a union mailing list to get in touch with women steelworkers, she was informed that the names were listed only by initial when in fact they were listed by first name (Halascsak 1976, 278). Another told of the successful struggle for women's employment at BHP Port Kembla which would not have been possible without the solid support of her union branch and rank and file (Anon 1988). There can be no doubt that 'industry tradition' is a crucial factor, but it is one which has gender at its essence. Thiele's (1982) review of 374 strikes over one year in Western Australia showed that 78 per cent involved mining, maritime, stevedoring, transport and building and construction industries, all of which are concentrations of male employment. Most of the rest involved male workers in male sections of industries which were not rigidly gender defined as a whole. She points out that since women are predominantly located in industries which serve people rather than produce commodities, one of the things with which they must contend is an ideology of service. This characterises industrial militants as workers who 'don't care' and is based on the simple reality that a stoppage or 'go slow' has an entirely different meaning for a worker digging minerals out of a hole in the ground than it does for one working in intensive care.

### **Union Organisation and Gender Segmentation**

The labour market in Australia is more sex-segmented than in any other OECD country. In 1989 nearly 80 per cent of women wage and salary earners were employed in only four industries: community services (31 per cent); wholesale and retail trades (22 per cent); finance, property and business services (15 per cent); and manufacturing (11 per cent) (Department of Education, Employment and Training in Anon 1990). Occupational categories demonstrate even greater restriction. [138]

**Table 2: Percentage of Women in Selected Occupations, Victoria, 1987**

Sales assistant	64
Stenographer, typist	99
Numerical clerk	71
Receptionist, telephonist, messenger	85
Registered nurse	93
Cleaner	63
Teller, cashier, ticket seller	78
Personal service worker	93
Data process and business machine operator	74

Source: Women's Employment Branch, 1987



Union responses to gender segmentation have at best been ambivalent. Women were restricted from certain occupations by outright prohibition, as in the printing trades until the 1970s. Within occupations they were restricted in the range of work which could be done as in the picture framers' award, which listed the activities permitted. The 'protection' of female workers from certain forms of work such as night work, underground work or work with dangerous machinery was another mechanism of exclusion (Ryan and Prendergast 1982, 265-6).

Unions have been even more reluctant to address those exclusionary effects which are the product of work rules and procedures which appear universal and thus, fair. The British Women's Trade Union Congress noted in 1987 that the traditional work-experience and apprenticeship route into most trades was an example of this, and it called for special 'link' and conversion mechanisms to help resolve the problem (Ellis 1988, 149-151).

This gender segmentation of the workforce, in turn, has a profound affect on trade union organisation itself. The effects of the concentration of women within a narrow range of industries and occupations is reflected in Table 1 above. Not only is it the case that only seven out of the nineteen biggest unions have a membership that is more than fifty per cent female, but also that all of the remaining unions are at least two-thirds male. There are, then, many more 'men's' than 'women's' unions which makes fair representation and non-masculinist agenda-setting within the labour movement difficult to achieve.

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But even in those unions with an equal gender ratio or even in those where the ratio favours women, gender segmentation of occupations has other tricks to play. Below is an outline of the structure of the New South Wales Public Service Association, presenting a fairly typical picture of women's under-representation in the labour movement.

**Table 3: Women in the NSW Public Service Association, 1982**

	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Executive</b>	35(a)
<b>Central Council</b>	27(b)
<b>Union</b>	42
<b>Workforce</b>	51

Note a, b: Three Executive members and four Central Council members were elected directly from the Women's Council. Without these, the proportions would be 18 and 22 per cent respectively. Source: Hague 1984, 19.

This gross under-representation, in which half the workforce but only one-third of the union executive were women, occurred in a union with a strong and active women's council within an organisation committed to gender equality. It is a product of the relationship between gender segmentation and organisational structure.

Most women in the public service are concentrated in very few occupations. A very high proportion of them, for instance, are typists, librarians, secretaries, clerks, telephonists, social workers. This occupational concentration locates most of them

within very few branches of the union. Thus they belong to the Clerical Assistants, Typists and Telephonists Branch, Librarians' Branch, School Ancillary Staff Branch and so on.

The branches in turn are located within four Divisions within the union. In 1984, the Administrative and Clerical Division was 50 per cent female. It was comprised of 54 branches which contributed to decision making within it. Sixty-three per cent of the total female membership within that Division was concentrated in only one of those 54 branches, the Clerical Assistants, Typists and Telephonists Branch. Similarly, the General Division, 50 per cent female, contained 60 branches. Eighty nine per cent of women were located in just ten per cent of those branches. The Professional Division, 38 per cent female, also had sixty

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branches. Sixty-five per cent of the women were concentrated in six of its sixty branches (Hague 1984, 19).

In other words, with women comprising 42 per cent of that union, 161 of 174 union branches were male. In no division were women's occupations sufficiently diverse to give them even parity in the number of branches which were female.

As is clear from Table 1 above, gender segmentation has a similar adverse affect on women's representation on peak trade union bodies. In addition, some proportion of the executives of state and district labour councils, like that of the ACTU, is generally elected by and from 'industry groups' of labour council delegates. Thus, not untypically, the NSW South Coast Labour Council elects nearly half its executive by and from the following industry groups of delegates to the Council: Building Trades; Marine Transport; Metals; Mining; Transport; Public Sector; Retail and Hospitality; Manufacturing, Administrative and Services (South Coast Labour Council 1990, 3). Of these eight groups, the first five represent almost completely male occupations, and the last three contain male and female occupations.

The greater number of male industry groups is related to the greater number of men's occupations, which in turn is connected to the greater range of skills which are male . For Anna Booth, 'The key to the solution is Award restructuring, where we create career paths which are accessible to women and which acknowledge their families' (Conway 1989 ). But despite the opportunity apparently offered by restructuring, those in jobs which for historical reasons were poorly organised and hence 'unskilled', will still find it difficult, for the same reasons, to benefit under the current climate (Bolton 1989). Indeed, the whole notion of restructuring as it is currently presented, may not be serving women well. Machinists in the textile, clothing and footwear industry, for instance, already do work which is broad-banded and flexible. A process worker in the electronics industry may place components on a circuit or she may test and identify faults in the board. Both are usually classified the same and paid the same wage. What is needed is not 'multi-skilling' but a recognition of the complexity and variety of skills already involved (Hall 1989; Windsor 1989).

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Similar problems emerge with Affirmative Action and EEO strategies which attempt to change existing recruitment, selection, training and promotion procedures to remove obstacles in the progression of women and minorities from one job to a better one. In 1973, Elizabeth Reid, the staff assistant to Prime Minister Whitlam, argued that 'the concept of equal opportunities seems to be tied to that of a race to get to the top' (Reid 1973, 5). She rejected EEO as a useful strategy because making training schemes available to women would not mean that women could avail themselves of them; because such schemes did not address the problem of the 'double shift'; and because 'the existing career pattern is based on the expectation of unbroken continuity of service' (Reid 1973, 4-5). Thus, it is not only that 'the orientation of affirmative action officers towards management perspectives' compromises the relevance of EEO to working class women (Franzway et al 1989, 103). But also that as long as continuity of employment and the availability to work full-time are what secure the better jobs, EEO will not be real to most working women 'who take their families seriously' but will rather 'assist a privileged minority of women (and ethnic minorities) to the top' (Lynch 1984, 43).

In addition, within the context of both restructuring negotiations and affirmative action programmes, typically managing people is more valued than caring for them; physical effort is more valued than (most) mental effort; responsibility for machines or money more valued than responsibility for people; supervision more valued than co-ordination; subordination and super-ordination more valued than co-operation; strength more valued than accuracy and concentration (Burton et al 1988, 7, 31, 88, 94). In a nutshell, the problem with comparable worth strategies is simply that the categories determining 'worth' are themselves as gender-biased as the occupations whose low pay-low skill gender segmentation they are attempting to remedy. Most current jobevaluation schemes exhibit a gender bias both in their design and implementation, and their value in arresting the process of gender segmentation is limited (Kokkinos 1989, 13).

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### **Women Changing Representation, Changing Organisation, Changing Conditions**

Probably for the mass of working women, the slow, hard slog through the unions may be the only sure way to win change and, in the longer term, EEO may have its greatest significance in the changes it is bringing to the labour movement itself, which is in principle not unreceptive to them. But how does this address the structural problems described earlier? The movement for such change is complex and dialectical, for it seems that only through an increase in the number and visibility of activist women in workplace, branch, State and national levels can the conditions of their absence and invisibility be rectified.

The Women's Section of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions (ICEF) met in Brussels in October 1989, and emphasised that affirmative action programmes in sectors covered by the ICEF should:

- encourage trade unions to lead by example within the personnel policies of their own unions;
- ensure that women have a place at the negotiating table during collective bargaining sessions;

- focus on the pay and conditions of unskilled and semi-skilled women workers, as 'equal opportunity should not just be for high-powered career women';
  - promote 'family-friendly' working hours.
- (Anon 1989b.)

The struggles around such demands, with forms and priorities different from cultural feminism and its concerns but sharply critical of the power of men (Connell 1987, 269), are quite widespread and effective. In September 1989, the ACTU Congress adopted a new strategy on equal pay, as a result of which it has successfully sought the establishment of an Equal Pay Bureau within the auspices of Federal Department of Industrial Relations. Addressing the Congress ACTU Secretary, Bill Kelty said that it was time unions asked young people and women - groups where trade union membership was weakest - what they wanted from unions. 'We have to ensure that women are seen and involved in unions as equal partners - anything less is a failure' (Anon 1989a)

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he said, announcing that it was his intention that women should make up half the ACTU executive by the turn of the century.

At the 1987 Congress, the ACTU had voted to expand its executive from 31 to 38, with three positions reserved for women. In addition Jennie George from the Teachers' Federation became the first woman vice-president and Joan Baird from the Hospital Employees Federation was elected to the executive as a representative of the health group of unions. According to Kelty the three positions 'would not be a substitute for normal processes of election, and we hope to get more women up that way as well' (Women at Work 1987b).

Subsequently, the Western Australian Trades and Labour Council created three executive positions for women chosen by the Council's women's caucus. The three joined two other women on the executive, bringing the proportion to fifteen per cent (Women at Work 1988c). In 1990, the South Australian Trades and Labour Council elected its first woman President, Clare McCarty, and has decided to create a female vice-president's position. Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales state labour councils all have women vice-presidents (Women at Work 1990,3; Murphy 1990,4).

Accelerating this mounting pressure from the bottom is the dramatic change in the composition of the working class itself. The growing proportion of women in paid work and the decline in numbers in the key centres of union power - wharfies, metalworkers, miners, seafarers, for instance, will compel unions to take women workers and their demands seriously. The nature of paid work itself, too, is fundamentally altering. Technological change, 'flexibilisation' especially of time, and discontinuities in employment, all mean that patterns which previously reflected the paid work of women, increasingly represent that of all workers.

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