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Gender Equality within the British Trade Unions: The Incomplete Revolution
Égalité des sexes dans les syndicats britanniques : la révolution incomplète

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Gender Equality within the British Trade Unions: The Incomplete Revolution

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The system of hegemonic masculinity and arbitrary social values ascertained that women's 'industrial' lives were limited to the few years between school and marriage and the fact denied women any ability to develop habits of trade unionism. Despite overtly sexist opinions and behaviours, women have demonstrated before and during world events their economic awareness as an increasing industrial workforce; and their political consciousness as belonging to a class whose interests were unrepresented within mainstream unionism; and ignored by a hegemonic capitalist system.

Adopting a feminist approach which identifies women as deserving economic and political rights, this article is also concerned with the discursive representation of gender within the working classes and suggests that such representation has a close relationship to material changes in working class life. In theory trade unions have put in place various structural reforms to promote gender equality, however in practice; these strategies are far from reflecting gender proportionality. This fundamental difference informs the discussion in this article about women and gender politics in British trade unions. It draws on a range of published academic material whose concern with the woman's issue certainly highlights the topic at hand.

Women workers today constitute a third of British trade union members. This statistic is a result of unremitting struggles because women were systematically excluded from male dominated unions that sought to confine them to an exclusively domestic role. The prevailing ideology of the epoch was that of the 'separate spheres,

and only occasional voices wanted to adjust the position of women to adapt it to the economic and industrial changes that were occurring. However, it is to be noted that since the 1960s onwards there has been considerable expansion in women's studies as their labour force participation rates continue to increase owing to industrialisation and lately to globalisation, which forced women to fight for their rightful place within the trade union movement.

1. A Historical and Analytical Overview

Trade unionism in Britain traces its origins back to the seventeenth century with its closed system of apprenticeships and journeymen; but developed at a rapid pace during the Industrial Revolution as a reaction to the ascending capitalist system which impacted on the society as a whole including men and women. It brought a clearer sexual division of labour within the working class family and introduced a new paradigm that of the paid work as opposed to the domestic services performed by women as their primary responsibilities as housewives. This revolution introduced new know-how, installed new relationships between the workers and the employers, and reshuffled people's lives endowing some with the opportunity to make great fortunes while bringing disaster and misery to the majority of the citizens.

Thus, the creation of the trade unions was the response to redress social, political and economic injustices as a union was the channel via which men and women workers could claim for higher wages, the betterment of workplace conditions and the acquisition of political rights. But, once institutionalised, the labour movement became focused on the needs and concerns of the 'standard male worker'; women workers became part of the women's movement – viewed as 'the other' – rather than an integral part of the British workers' movement. In fact, women workers have been discriminated against in every sphere: within the unions, at the

workplace, and in political participation “in spite of their increasing proportion of the labour and of trade union membership” (Ledwith 2012: 1). Little justice has been done to the role they played in the labour market and in the inception of the trade unions from which they were systematically excluded; even though in some industries such as spinning they outnumbered men. Nonetheless, their position outside the mainstream labour movement has been maintained for a long period, raising thus pertinent questions about the relevance of traditional trade unionism to addressing the ‘woman’s issue’.

Trade unions class-consciousness and awareness did not extend to encompass women nor did it voice their needs and desires contradicting somewhat Freeman’s and Medoff’s thesis that unions have two faces: ‘monopoly and voice’ and that they play an important role in voicing workers’ needs to the management. Considering women’s issues this finding call into question the real role of the unions and urge us to wonder if they really promote gender equality and whose voice they effectively represent. In fact, there is no wide consensus among researchers that unions promote equality in general and gender equality in particular. The common ground assumption is that unions tend to promote wage equality in corporatist countries such as Britain where “the existence of centralized wage bargaining has a considerable impact on reducing the gender-wage differential” (Whitehouse 1992: 68). As such, women remained “under represented at all levels of union decision-making structures, from the local level of workplace representatives to paid officials and executive bodies”. (kirton 2006: 14).

At any rate, union representation is fundamentally disputable and women representation issue makes it more problematic. According to Robert Michels union leaders get hold of and maintain power over the political process which they often use against the interests of their memberships, arguing that “leadership brings importance, expertise, and different life styles that the leaders seek to protect” (Michels 1959: 78). More importantly they often avoid challenging

the managerial control advocating and negotiating compensations for the median workers at the expense of women and the minorities. In other words, “they tend to neglect workers in the periphery and the lower echelons of the market”. (Ibid).

Some reasons are put forwards to explain women’s under-representation. First and most important reason is that most if not all union representatives are men who tend to represent the standard full time worker who works for a single employer. Second, the nature of the work assigned to women which often consisted of part-time, casual, contract or domestic work, explains in part their poor organisation making it difficult for them to be elected as union leaders. More significantly, it is argued that unions “do not always have the capacity to represent outsiders such as contractors and agency workers” (Fredman 2004: 96).

The other reason for women’s under-representation is rooted in the patriarchy ideology that has been summed up by Lewis Minkin as the “the usual covert prejudice plus a set of beliefs about the proper domestic role of women” arguing that “all this produced resistance to the registration of women’s issues and to the furtherance of women’s interests” (Minkin 1991: 5). These patriarchal stereotypes which limit the work of women to house work and whose status was defined in advance by the Catholic Church, constituted the narrative about the ‘woman’s question’ and enhanced the ideology of the separate spheres, whereas the social, cultural and political environment encouraged neither an awareness nor a discussion of women’s issues.

In retrospect, the eighteenth century which was a period of revolutionary political thinking that coincided with the American Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Men and the rise of radicalism in England, proved to be very crucial in addressing the woman question. The philosophers of the Enlightenment defended reason and asserted the natural rights of individual who according their theses was the master of his own

destiny. Accordingly, it marked a turning point in the gradual emergence of a “woman consciousness” that historians connect more to the middle class women as “class consciousness and political choice...are a product of a variety of contexts, ranging from work to family life, education and religion”. (Laybourn 1992:76). Effectively, the majority of women workers of the lower class were more concerned by domestic and material issues than reflecting about gender equality or political representation.

Indeed, the dominant image of the Victorian working class woman was that of the ‘factory girl’ as the expansion of the textile industries led to the growth in the labour of women and children. The demand for a massive production both at the national and international level speeded up the hiring of women who constituted a cheap labour force to be used as a substitute for the skilled work of men. It is thus unsurprising that early demands for political and economic reforms were made by women textile workers. Their action instead of being supported by their fellow comrades was met by rejection and misogynous attitudes by trade unionists to the extent that Ben Tillet, of the General Labourers’ Union, warned that “the day is coming when husband and wife will fight at the same factory door for work”. (Hunt 2012: 86). This fear of competition and feminization of the work place perfectly sums up the general mindset of the majority of unionists despite the fact that the movement was presented as an egalitarian one committed to equal rights, and its members identified as socialists. Hence, the position of women vacillated between the theory which presents unions as important organisations in the promotion of gender equality, and practice whereby the visibility of women within mainstream unionism was not on their agendas.

Undoubtedly, at that time, the ideal of the skilled independent male worker was both an expression of class ideal and a valorisation of a certain gender ideology which determined for instance, wage negotiations, trade union development and the political outlook of

the labour movement as a whole. As such, the process of feminization of the trade unions was the long lasting fight -among others- such as education, the gender pay gap and gender deficit in leadership-of women workers whose situation still arouses controversy in the fields of political and social history. It is a delicate issue as arguments revolve around whether women are capable of organising themselves in a union or whether they should be incorporated into men's unions, with the subsidiary question of class identity and the working status of the women concerned.

2. Challenging the Established Norms

The ancillary position of women in the British trade unions is embedded in the literature of the labour movement in general where deep and pervasive gender discrimination remains a reality in the world of work. Certainly, the active participation of women workers in the trade union movement has historically been weak or almost inexistent. This was due most to the hostile attitudes of trade unionists to their joining a union, than to women's engagement in the labour movement. In fact, mainstream unionism characterises women as passive workers, reluctant to take industrial action, who lack any commitment to unionism as their primary concern is family. This schematic approach pervaded many centuries, and it is only in the late twentieth century that academics as well as union leaders came to acknowledge the significance of women's organised labour, and to recognise its significance for the whole labour movement. Likewise, many trade unions from which they were excluded reconsidered their position and showed their readiness to adopt "extensive structural reforms to encourage gender equality" (Ledwith 2012: 1).

Certainly, a class analysis approach informs us that "working men and women are each oppressed by capital in its various forms, with the expectation that they will both collectivise against this

oppression” (Ledwith 2012: 87). This sameness entails solidarity and the idea of forming workplace alliances to confront adversity via collective activism and commitment to trade unionism. However, reality contradicts this expectation and unveils exclusionary practices against women who were oppressed both by the system and by male workers. To find their rightful place within the trade union movement, women workers in the nineteenth century felt obliged to form different societies in many trades that were directed more towards social purposes than political ones, and via which they could secure more industrial rights and a better legal status. Their systematic exclusion from the different work processes associated with skill and good wages gave rise to their consciousness and largely contributed to the growth of feminist thinking which resulted in their earning the right to vote in 1918.

Whatever the appreciations, this first move towards the improvement of their social and economic conditions proves the existence of a degree of women’s consciousness even if it was not fully expressed within the framework of a well structured ‘gender consciousness’. It also deepened women’s awareness that their issues and interests could only be secured and forwarded via the creation of women unions at a national scale. However, this was not an easy enterprise. In fact, women’s early attempt to take collective action against their employers was perceived as a serious threat to social cohesion as female militancy was “more menacing to established institutions even more than the education of the lower orders” (Hole 1996:160). Accordingly, once women ventured beyond work such as spinning and weaving- considered extensions of ‘womanly duties’- into the factories, they were considered as real threats to societal order and moral values. They were excluded from trade union meetings, strikes and negotiations and the stereotypical image of the average trade unionist continued to be working class blue-collar bloke ‘male, pale and stale’.

Feminists as well as activists have encountered many tensions while claiming same treatment as their male counterparts alongside issues related to their 'special needs' as women. They had to convince them that they had distinct issues, as women and as trade unionists, worth fighting for. Many working class women believed that both sexes should be organized in the same branches as "trade unionism is sexless" (Hunt, 2012: 88); thereby there was no need to create sex antagonism or to 'feminize' the debate; and that their interests could best be advanced "through the transformation of practices, policies and cultures" (Colgan 1996: 158). Indeed, women's activism which is rooted in their communities "marked a willingness to work across groupings, and across identities of class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and so on that is less evident among their brothers". (Ledwith 2012:88).

Accordingly, not all women supported single- sex unions arguing that "reserved places are patronizing and tokenist and that special women's conferences and committees can ghettoize women and women's issues" (Laurence 1994: 3). As well, many historians have emphasized the precariousness of being women organisers as they had to take care not to alienate men whose support was a sine-qua-non condition to their success. The general mood then, was to campaign within male unions and to formulate their positions clearly on every aspect of women's lives, "from questions of suffrage to marriage and motherhood in addition to questions of wages and legislative protection in the workplace" (Hinton 1982:32). However, studies have proved that even if they were integrated within a union, women members were not treated as equals. For instance, the five women elected to attend the 1943 National Committee "were only given non-voting delegate status" (Gardner 1943: 174).

Within this hegemonic patriarchy ideology, domestic work in the private sphere rather than paid work was the normative state of working class women. This dominant ideology that perceived women as second class citizens or as 'the problem' failed to see how

this divide created tensions and estranged the other half of society. In the face of implacable male opposition attempts to organise women often came through the work of philanthropic middle class women and of some socialist outsiders such as Eleanor Marx and Annie Besant, who campaigned for the extension of protective legislation for female workers. Their dedication to the feminine cause encouraged women activists to fight for their acceptance at the workplace and to establish their own union in 1875 the Women's Protective and Provident League, which represented women textile workers. Later renamed the Women Trade Union League (WTUL) it favoured the growth of separate associations of women and was a key institution in reforming women's working conditions. As such, it played a pivotal role in the creation of several women's unions such as: the Society of Women Employed in Bookbinding, the Society of London Sewing Machinists, the Society of Upholsteresses, and the Leeds Spinners' Women Association, to cite a few. It was an important training place for women interested in labour issues and political actions to promote women's rights within a male sclerotic society.

However, despite its activism and the added value it brought to the world of labour, the League was criticised by many observers as ineffective as their leaders lacked organisational competence, and because they were disproportionately concentrated in different sectors. This geographical dispersion made them vulnerable and easily replaceable in the absence of a strong bargaining power. This rather comforted the dominant patriarchal theory that "women do not make good trade unionists and for this reason we believe that our energies are better used towards the organisation of male workers" (Hinton 1982: 30). All in all, we can say that the 1890s were a period of blossoming of women's organising and that by 1931, there were 1,400 branches totalising a membership of 67,000 members.

3. Women's Political Commitment

There were endogenous and exogenous events that provided opportunities for women to be at the forefront for claiming equal rights at the workplace. Chartism, a 19th century radical political and social protest movement, enhanced women's awareness over the issue of social and political inequalities. Composed of radical families, the Chartist movement widely appealed to female activists whose militancy greatly contributed to the growth of feminism among working class women. Accordingly, a substantial number of women's organisations came into existence throughout the country galvanised by the radical ideas conveyed by this national movement.. The militancy of female Chartists gave birth to unions such as the Female Political Union, the Patriotic Societies and the Universal Suffrage and Chartist Associations. They actively participated in organising meetings and demonstrations, preparing banners and flags and publishing letters and political pamphlets. As evidenced, they were not passive partners and their contribution to the general debate over the issue of the emancipation of the working classes highlighted their commitment as well as their political consciousness; even though their entry into Chartist politics was not seen by male Chartists as a departure from their traditional role or as a challenge to their position. Certainly, what needs to be determined is the significance of their involvement in that national movement and the possible contribution to the growth of feminism among working-class women.

From a contemporary outlook, it can be advanced that Chartism was a turning point in women's battle for equal rights and wages as well as opportunities even if these aspirations did not materialize rapidly. Women workers were aware that their interests were not in opposition to those of the men workers as they both suffered from the same oppressive and exploitative capitalist system. Henceforth, besides the battle for gender equality within the workplace and

within the unions for '*a fair day's wage for a fair day's work*', they had also to engage in a class struggle that would determine their whole existence as workers. Chartism, which advocated justice and political equality could but attract women of the working class whose economic power was under serious threat. The role they played is certainly not that of passive partners or mere supporters of male Chartists; and their contribution to the general debate concerning the emancipation of the working classes has to be assessed against this background.

Women's unionisation and workplace feminization process was also boosted by WWI and WWII that were powerful catalysts which incites gender dilution and which undermined the male breadwinner ideal. WWI is often referred to as being "the first time in history, (that) women outside the cotton industry were learning the power of trade unionism" (Drake 1983:99). Though they did not altogether erase established beliefs of gender and class within the working classes, the wars- especially WWII which is often seen as a period of emancipation because of the influx of women into paid work- have accelerated the growth of women unionisation as they were massively recruited into jobs vacated by men. They emerged from this exceptionally liberating experience stronger and more politically sensitized. At the end of the hostilities their contribution to the war effort was duly acknowledged and many tributes were paid to them by the entire nation such as the one in the Listener Magazine (May 1944) where it was testified that: "In any war factory you may see hundreds of women... wielding the hammer, operating machines, riveting metal sheets, all in trousers and overall... They are among the great soldiers of the war".

However, this tribute did not materialize in concrete terms as just after the war they were sacked from their jobs to make way for demobilized men; but at the same time, it certainly may signal that in the long run, advancing gender equality in employment would be on the agendas of most unions as an inevitable issue. More

importantly, women's organisations anticipated a post-war backlash, joined forces to demand rights including their special needs as women that are summed as follows: "equal pay for equal work, regulation of wages, 48 hours, abolition of fines, more women factory inspectors, protection in the dangerous trades, maternity provision, co-operative homes for working girls, reforms in technical education (and) the vote" (Rowbotham 1977: 117). Despite that the mobilisation of women in industry and other war services "offered up an innovative vision of active women, it was one which nonetheless remained strictly within the boundaries of traditional gender ideologies" (Summerfield 1989: 50). This vision was enhanced by the Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services which was rather "an ode to the pre-war world, grounded in the centrality of the male breadwinner and the marginality of the female worker; Beveridge envisioned women as primarily tied to the wheel of a "natural" and patriotic maternity" (Ibid: 52).

These deeply engrained prejudices about women's place and role were not easily overcome even if there were piecemeal provisions indicating a change towards the 'woman question'. To combat exclusion and sexism, women workers engaged in social and economic battles such as that of the Equal Pay Campaign in 1943 which urged the government to establish a Royal Commission over this sensitive issue. The end report of this Commission concluded that women in teaching and in certain grades of the civil services might benefit from equal pay. The Equal Pay Campaign lost momentum as both the government and the TUC sought to persuade women to return to more traditional paid work such as domestic services.

Given such systemic opposition to women's economic emancipation, it is little wonder that the fight for equal pay is till nowadays not a settled issue in most of Western countries. In Britain, however, two events were decisive in advancing the equal pay issue. The rise of the global civil right movement in the 1960s

coupled with Labour Party's wish that UK should join the European Economic Community; and the 1968 women's strike at Dagenham's Ford factory, a turning point in the battle for sex equality, which resulted in the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1970. It also prompted other pay strikes in different fields and in the formation of the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights (NJACCWER). Moreover, the Labour Party's manifesto (1970) called for a charter of Rights for all employees including the right to equal pay for work of equal value; and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) supported the principles of equality of treatment and opportunity for women workers in industry.

However, the development in trade union policies on women's rights constitutes a sort of a dilemma. The implementation of the Single Status Agreement which achieves greater gender pay equality requires necessarily a decrease of men's pay. This would certainly create tensions and dilemmas for trade unions who cannot promote gender equality without creating divisions or alienating male members. This unveils the difficulties faced by unions in managing the potentially conflicting interests of an increasingly diverse membership. It requires unions to challenge established interests and power structures but is also a requirement for the survival of trade unions.

As women increased their share in employment, unions had no alternative than to recognize the importance of engaging with women's workplace concerns "not only in the interests of gender equality but also as an essential element of union revitalisation strategies" (Dickens 1999: 12). Rather than women posing a threat to societal order and to the structure of the trade union movement, it is unions' continuous lack of engagement with women workers that certainly threatens the very existence of such organisations. In fact, union membership has declined since the 1980s due in part to a

rapid deindustrialisation of the economy that deprived unions of their traditional strongholds.

In addition, the expansion of service industry jobs and those with atypical arrangements, largely filled by women workers, have hastened the decline in the overall union membership. Statistically, the proportion of union members in workplaces with more than twenty-five workers fell from 65% in 1980 to 26% in 2011. As the academic literature suggests, union revitalisation is dependent on the repositioning of unions as representative agents for women and minorities, and it is widely recognized that trade union renewal depends on representative membership that reflects the changing world of work. Undeniably, women play a pivotal role in this regard.

Accordingly, progressive sections within the labour movement as a whole reassessed their position and redefined their understanding of the woman question and working class politics to regain the movement's relevance and dynamism. Many large unions have at last recognised that gender equality cannot be obtained without cultural and structural changes within their organisations. Thereby, there was a nascent commitment to correct inequalities in practice that involves improving the employment conditions of the disadvantaged groups mainly as women's labour force participation rates continue to increase; and as globalisation has fragmented work and workforces.

In fact, women workers constitute nowadays a half of the British workforce and in some places they even outnumber men; hence the success of union revitalisation strategies will depend to a great extent on how trade unions handle the existing tensions and resolve their dilemmas. Certainly, the danger of women workers in male dominated industries was that employers undercut male wages by using women. Whatever the degree of their vulnerability and exploitability, they remain 'dangerous' as their industrial presence threatened the family wage which preserved the pay differential between men and woman.

Despite their marginalisation and all criticisms, women no longer dwell in the shadows of the labour movement, however, the stubborn persistence of a gendered gap and continued discrimination particularly in relation to pregnancy and childbirth; mean that the unions are no longer seen as an effective bastion of protection for a new generation of women workers. More importantly, and since industrialization and globalisation have led to a rapid restructuring of the economy; the traditional regulations of gender ridden employment relationships were becoming obsolete and inconsistent with the new social and economic realities. Accordingly, it is evident that without the complete smashing of patriarchy ideology there can be no real advance in class struggle. Hence, the inclusion of women in trade unions is no more an ideological issue but has rather become a matter of trade unions perpetuation and preservation.

Conclusion

In discussing gender issues, sociologists have observed changes in masculinity and in expectations of domesticity and marriage. The discourse suggests that gender ideology has become more complex within the working classes, and that the transformation in working class life was often bound up in the perception of change in gender roles. Thus, the 'feminisation' of the trade unions was not an easy experience as the gender ideology underpinned the historical development of the British working classes where the articulation of class was often intertwined with gender. Despite constraints, the incremental participation of women has largely contributed to the refashioning of many trade unions programmes, resulting in the Union Modernization Fund (UMF) initiative that "sought to facilitate the integration of women's interests and equality concerns into union agendas" (Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), 2005).

Women's struggle for inclusion and gender parity was built upon decades of fight and compromises made by women to ensure their inclusion within the labour and the trade union movement as shown throughout this article. It has also underlined the difficulties faced by unions in managing the conflicting interests of an increasingly diverse membership. Women's victory was a very far prospect; however internal and external factors helped women activism and shaped their awareness to emphasize solidarity and similarities between women and men workers "whose strength lies in their inclusiveness and their ability to recruit all the workers in the field they are organizing" (Lawrence, 1994:4), with respect to diversity. Thus, the discourse of transformation in working class life is tied to the perception of change in gender roles, hence "the persistent interweaving of gender and class identity in mid-twentieth-century Britain". (Brooke 2001:18)

Nowadays, the average British trade unionist is not the white working-class and blue collar bloke, but is a young, degree-educated, white professional woman whose 'revolution' culminated in the election in 2013 of Frances O'Grady the first ever woman General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress in 144 years of its existence. However, this does not necessarily imply that the fight for gender equality has become unfashionable or an obsolete rhetoric. Despite all the gains made by women in the 1970s and 1980s, where there were major developments in trade union policies on women's rights, equality is not totally reached even in the 21st century, as there are variations not only between unions but also within the different branches such as in Unison and Unite to cite only a few. This complexity has been revealed by many studies which point to the fact that there are different approaches concerning the equality issue as not all the unions have been proactive in developing actions, strategies or policies in favour of women's career advancement issues.

Even if they are nowadays integrated in unions, women are still under represented in the different union structures and are still

suffering from a gender deficit in leadership. Deeply ingrained challenges remain namely the rejection of change by union traditionalists, the masculine culture of leaders in general, and issues within unions over how to achieve equality. Many studies point to the fact that women still constitute the majority of precarious workers which has led to the growth of precarious employments with all the disadvantages relating to it namely: low wages, few benefits, lack of collective representation, and the absence of job security. Statistically, a Labour Research Department Survey found that in the 1990s women were 34 % of the membership of TUC affiliated unions, but were only 20 % of national executive committee members and 20% of national full-time officials of unions. It is clear then, that “the tensions between women’s challenge and traditionalism’s backlash, experienced by women throughout the history of women’s unionisation, are likely to continue even while the imperative for union solidarity and renewal demand that unions make space for women to develop their own agendas according to their needs as well as standing shoulder to shoulder with the brothers”.(Ledwith 2012: 110)

In view of all the above cited arguments, the ‘revolution’ is far from complete; since a gender balanced workforce and equality policies are still considered as a threat to union power. However, this conception may be too general and not consistent with the views of many male unionists; nonetheless it is an indication of the kind of covert resistance towards advancing equality within the workplace. The irony is that the tensions created by the equality agenda “is at odds with the traditional strategy of building union strength upon members’ common collective interests and identity”. (Lawrence 1994: 18). Accordingly, trade unions must be one area where the feminist agenda is far more concerned with emphasising and encouraging solidarity between male and female workers rather than cultivate differences. This is the sine-qua-non condition and also a requirement for the survival of the trade union movement, knowing

that statistically nowadays women represent almost half the UK workforce.

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Abstract

This article examines the gender politics within British trade unions and their role in advancing gender equality at the workplace in the nineteenth and twentieth century Britain where unions' feminization process encountered social and ideological impediments. The study explores the ostracism experienced by women within a totally male

dominated labour movement with a focus on their demands for inclusion, and their consciousness in setting up their own unions to challenge the patriarchy ideology which describes the structuring of society on the basis of family units where man is the 'breadwinner'. Despite overtly sexist opinions and behaviours, women have demonstrated before and during world events their economic awareness as an increasing industrial workforce; and their political consciousness as belonging to a class whose interests were unrepresented within mainstream unionism; and ignored by a hegemonic capitalist system.

Keywords

gender politics, gender equality at the workplace,

Résumé

Cet article propose de mettre en lumière la politique du genre telle que pratiquée par les syndicats britanniques ainsi que leur rôle en faveur de l'égalité des sexes sur le lieu du travail, et ce aux dix-neuvième et vingtième siècle, ou le processus de féminisation a rencontré des obstacles à la fois sociaux et idéologiques dans les instances dirigeantes et décisionnelles des syndicats. L'article s'attelle aussi à explorer l'ostracisme ambiant dont furent victimes les femmes au sein d'un mouvement ouvrier complètement dominé par les hommes. Afin de faire entendre leur voix et rééquilibrer la représentation des deux sexes, les femmes ont procédé à la formation de leurs syndicats en signe de défi à l'idéologie patriarcale qui réduit la structure sociale à l'unique soutien de famille en l'occurrence l'homme. Malgré les idées conservatrices et rétrogrades de la société concernant le rôle des femmes, elles ont prouvé avant et surtout pendant les deux guerres mondiales leur prise de conscience comme étant une force industrielle croissante, ainsi que leur perception politique d'appartenance à une classe dont les intérêts n'étaient pas représentés au niveau du syndicalisme traditionnel, et de surcroît ignoré par un système capitaliste hégémonique.

Mots-clés

la politique de genre, syndicats Britanniques,

ملخص

هذا المقال يدرس السياسة الجنسانية في وسط النقابات البريطانية و دورها في تعزيز المساواة بين الجنسين في مقر العمل وذلك في القرن التاسع عشر و العشرين حيث واجهت عملية 'ثأنيث' النقابات حواجز اجتماعية و عقائدية عديدة التي حالت وانخراط المرأة في النقابات العمالية المهيمنة من طرف الرجال. كما أن الدراسة تستكشف الرفض الذي عانت منه العاملات و نضالهن لرفض أنفسهن كقوة فعالة وسط مجتمع ذكوري الذي أرغمهن لتشكيل نقابات نسوية خاصة لتحدي الأيديولوجية الأبوية السائدة و التي تصنف هيكلية المجتمع على أساس الوحدة الأسرية حيث يكون الذكر هو المعيل. رغم كل الانتقادات والآراء المتحيزة استطاعت العاملة البريطانية قبل و أثناء الحربين العالميتين أن تبرهن عن وعيها الاقتصادي كونها قوة عاملة متزايدة، ووعيتها السياسي كونها تنتمي إلى طبقة عمالية لم تكن مصالحها ممثلة ضمن النظام الرأسمالي المهيمن آنذاك.

الكلمات المفتاحية

السياسة الجنسانية، النقابات البري، حواجز اجتماعية و عقائدية