

Workplace union representation and gender in the British workplace

Anne-marie Greene, Gill Kirton, Amy Humphris and Maria Koumenta

ILERA European Congress, Milan, 8-10 September 2016

Introduction

This paper outlines and discusses from a gender perspective critical aspects of union representation in the British workplace. The paper utilises original analysis of data gathered by the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Studyⁱ (WERS 2011), and illuminates the gender structure of workplace union representation. The analysis allows us to address questions including: bio-demographic characteristics of male and female union representatives; what they do on behalf of their union; how managers and employees perceive union representatives by gender, and male and female union representatives' involvement in workplace employment relations processes. To our knowledge, researchers have not used WERS 2011 previously to examine these issues with a gender lens (see Millward et al, 2016).

The backdrop for this discussion has two main dimensions. First, recent resilience of workplace union presence and recognition is notable between WERS 2004 and 2011 (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). While the latest available evidence from WERS reveals that only 12% of private manufacturing workplaces and 14% of private services workplaces have union members and only 9% and 12% respectively recognise unions, the enormous union decline of the 1980s/90s had stabilised by WERS 2011. Meanwhile comparative figures for the public sector demonstrate the resilience of unions there: 89% of workplaces have union members and 92% have union recognition (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). Second, workplace representatives remain at the centre of employment relations processes: they are the face of the union for most members, they give voice to members' concerns through their interactions with employers/managers, and they represent the union and members, vis-à-vis the employer in local consultations/negotiations (Murray et al. 2013). Available evidence suggests high levels of employee confidence in union representatives: the vast majority of employees would choose a union representative to represent them in a range of issues (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). Conversely, given the centrality of workplace representatives to members' experiences and perceptions of unions, member dissatisfaction with workplace representation may also account for membership attrition among a significant minority of union leavers (Waddington 2006).

Thus, workplace union representatives continue to occupy a critical position in unions and remain important for employment relations in the British workplace. However, workplace union representation in its own right has not been the focus of much research since the early 1990s (Darlington 2010) when attention turned to union renewal and national organising strategies, which have subsequently dominated academic research on unions. The debates – renewal/organising and workplace representation – are of course not entirely divorced (e.g. see Simms 2013). Indeed, authors have argued that renewal will come from greater member participation at workplace level (Fosh 1993; Fairbrother 1996). Nevertheless, the weight of debate has turned to national strategies and structures, especially around ‘organising unionism’. While this turn was perfectly understandable given the membership crisis facing the union movement, the on-the-ground reality for most union members is that workplace union representation matters most, with representatives providing the link between the national union and the members (Darlington 2010).

Our specific focus on workplace representation and gender is located within a wider debate concerning women’s lower participation in unions when compared with men. Research highlights that women are under-represented in all union structures from the grassroots workplace committees to the apex of national executive committees and paid national officers (Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Kirton and Greene 2002; Kirton 2015; Greene, 2015; Moore and Tailby 2015; Munro 1999). The gender representation gap is regarded as particularly apposite and worthy of attention at present when women comprise just over half of union members and many highly unionised workplaces (particularly in the public sector where resilience is greatest) are feminised (Moore and Tailby 2015). Thanks to a body of literature investigating gender and trade unionism, we now know far more than formerly about the dynamics of women’s participation in *national* union structures, the myriad causes of their under-representation in this level of leadership and decision-making, and the activities and priorities of female paid union officials (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Kirton and Healy 2013). However, there is far less known about and much less debate about women’s participation in employment relations processes at workplace level and the successive iterations of WERS have to date not been used to study this specific issue. Nevertheless, qualitative research in this area does suggest that women bring different life experiences, ideas, beliefs and values to workplace trade unionism and that these influence their priorities, goals and practices and hence local employment relations processes (Conley 2005; Kirton 2005).

Our paper engages with debates in this extant literature, but its specific contribution is: (i) detailed examination of the gender structure of workplace representation in the British workplace; and (ii) identification of relationships between the gender of workplace representatives and critical employment relations processes in the British workplace. The next section draws on existing research to set the scene in a bit more detail for our discussion of unions, workplace representation and gender. Following this, the WERS data utilised and analytical methods are described. The results section addresses three main areas: (i) gender and characteristics of workplace union representatives; (ii) gender and workplace representation processes, and (iii) employer and member opinions of union representative involvement by gender. The discussion and conclusions reflect on the implications of the findings for workplace representation.

Setting the scene: unions, workplace representation and gender

Despite the undeniable weakening of workplace union organization over the last 30 years (Darlington 2010), the Trades Union Congress estimates that there are around 200,000 workplace union representatives in the UK (TUC 2011) and according to WERS 2011 nearly half of employees (46%) are located in a workplace with at least one on-site representative (Van Wanrooy et al. 2013). While this leaves more than half of employees without access to a workplace representative, the evidence does point to the continuing importance of this traditional British model of union organisation. The establishment in 2006 of the virtual National Shop Stewards Network (<http://shopstewards.net/>), now supported officially by several unions suggests that workplace organisation is alive and well in (at least some parts of) the British labour market. Darlington (2010) describes a rich array of activities in critical areas undertaken by workplace representatives including, health and safety, learning and training, equality, in addition to dealing with the traditional ‘bread and butter’ issues of pay and working hours. Darlington (ibid: 130) characterises workplace representatives as ‘the backbone of the union movement in dealing with workers’ grievances, standing up to management and attempting to preserve/advance their members’ pay and conditions of employment’. Further, workplace trade unionism and representation have huge salience in the decentralised employment relations context entailing devolvement of managerial responsibilities, which we are now seeing across the private and public sectors. The decentralised context has far-reaching implications for local variations in working conditions such as pay, hours of work, availability of flexible work arrangements, all areas where employees may call upon union representation

individually and/or collectively (Calveley and Healy 2003; Fairbrother 1996; Thornley 1998). Even though it is widely recognised that the balance of power in workplaces has shifted in favour of management, union representatives are still able to exert some influence on local employment relations such as the way managers manage, the way they implement organisational policies, the way work is organised, etc. (Darlington 2010).

Turning to the substance of representation, there are many reasons posited as to why women and other minority groups should be present within union leadership and decision-making including democracy, voice, and, interest identification (e.g. Kirton and Healy 2013). However, as stated in the introduction, there has been only scant attention paid to the *workplace representation* gender gap. One recent exception is Le Capitaine et al's (2013) work, which provides a gendered analysis of workplace representative empowerment in Canadian schools. The authors found that older male representatives were most likely to feel empowered, drawing on more intense information exchange through interactions with individual and small groups of members. This research gap is particularly noteworthy given that by the early 21st century, women had increased their share of union membership significantly in many countries and now comprise the majority of union members in the UK (around 55%) (BIS 2014). Over the last 25 years or so, British unions have made significant progress in increasing women's representation in previously male dominated national union structures; that is, national paid union officers and members of national executive committees are now more representative than formerly (Kirton 2015). Nevertheless, when it comes to the workplace level, the majority of representatives are still male, even the relatively new 'equality representatives', which some heralded as a new opportunity to bring in members of previously under-represented groups (Bacon and Hoque 2012; Darlington 2010; Van Wanrooy et al. 2013). Thus, the male-gendered structure of workplace union representation has proven relatively resilient in the face of the gradual feminisation of membership, which has occurred over the last three decades and against the more recent expansion of union roles (specifically learning representatives and equality representatives).

At national policy level, most unions are now conscious of the need to have women better represented in workplace representation and bargaining processes. Putting the spotlight on issues of under-representation, since 2003, the TUC has invested resources in conducting biennial equality audits of affiliated unions to map their action on internal equality as well as externally facing activities. The TUC also trained 500 workplace equality representatives in

the early 2000s. The latter was an initiative intended to improve the unions' capacity to deliver more effectively on issues of specific concern to women and minority groups. On the question of how successful the initiative has been in improving women's representation in workplace union structures, the evidence is somewhat inconclusive but points to only limited 'new (female) blood'. As stated above, in their survey of equality representatives, Bacon and Hoque (2012) find that just over half are male (55%), and interestingly the overwhelming majority (85%) hold another union position in addition to being an equality representative. This could possibly result in lack of specialism/expertise on equality, as well as suggesting that this new role has not significantly increased the pool of (female) activists at workplace level.

Implications of the workplace representation-gender gap

Despite huge decline in coverage (now 7% of private and 57% of public sector workplaces), collective bargaining is widely seen as having the potential to tackle gender inequalities including the gender pay gap, horizontal and vertical gender segregation, and access to flexible work arrangements, (Milner and Gregory 2014). Many authors argue that union involvement in the equality project is imperative, or what Dickens (1999) called an essential part of the jigsaw for tackling employment inequalities. This call for union involvement has to be seen against concerns that although formal equality policies cover 76% of workplaces (Van Wanrooy et al. 2013), such policies are heavily criticised for failing to deliver significant equality outcomes or even meaningful and impactful practices/initiatives, and therefore for being 'empty shells' (Hoque and Noon 2004).

Can workplace unions help to turn the 'empty shell' of many equality and diversity policies into something meaningful for employees? Authors have long argued that the gender participation and representation gaps described above impede unions' capacity to develop a bargaining agenda that deals effectively with specific issues of major concern to women (Briskin and Muller 2011; Dickens 1999; Hoque and Bacon 2014; Kirton and Greene 2002). Colling and Dickens put it like this nearly 30 years ago: 'the absence of women [trade union representatives/negotiators] at the [bargaining] table has to be part of the explanation for the absence of women on the table' [i.e. on the bargaining agenda] (1989:32). There is evidence of some progress since Colling and Dickens made their observation and unions do seem to be taking 'women's issues' more seriously with or without women's presence at the (bargaining) table (Heery 2006; TUC 2011). In fact, Heery (2006) finds that while female paid union officers

were more likely than their male colleagues to report involvement in equality bargaining, the gender difference was only marginal; a personal interest in and commitment to equality (regardless of the officer's gender) were more important. However, this concern about the gender representation gap goes beyond collective bargaining to the ways in which unions *represent* female employees at the workplace in a wider range of activities including formal and informal consultation with management, individual member casework (e.g. grievances and disciplinaries). Speaking to the wider array of activity undertaken by workplace representatives, we also see some encouraging signs. Charlwood and Angrave's (2014) analysis of WERS 2011 shows that while the largely male workplace representatives most frequently cited working on disciplinary and grievance, health and safety, staffing levels and pay, the proportion of representatives spending time on equal opportunities/diversity had increased since WERS 2004. In fact, 43% of (predominantly male) union representatives surveyed in WERS 2011 reported spending time on equality issues (van Wanrooy et al. 2014). Further, Bacon and Hoque (2012) claim (based on a survey of union equality representatives) that there is no consistent evidence that *equality* representative effectiveness varies by gender or ethnicity. In fact, their evidence suggests that white males (who comprise a narrow majority of equality representatives) are just as effective as female or BME equality representatives. However, even if male representatives are now more receptive to a diversity of member interests, many qualitative studies conducted over the last decades show that we should not yet dismiss the idea that having women involved in employment relations processes generally does make a difference to union activity. Many qualitative studies, which offer in-depth examination of workplace union representation, do claim that an increase in women's involvement altered local union priorities and scope of activity (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Sayce et al. 2006). Moreover, Australian research in a similarly feminised union membership context found that local union power was higher where the union was perceived as paying attention to women's issues (Peetz and Pocock 2009). Further, beyond concrete negotiating priorities or representation outcomes, women's presence among workplace representatives could also help to improve women's subjective perceptions and experiences of unions. The behaviour of workplace union leaders influences member attitudes towards the union (Greene et al. 2000) as well as their willingness to participate in the union and in union action such as strikes (Fosh 1993; Nicholson et al. 1981). Taking a gender lens to this question, previous research has found that women generally show lower favourability towards unions largely borne of their experiences at the workplace than of any political or ideological opposition to unions,

specifically experiences that tell women that union representatives are indifferent to their concerns (Sinclair 1996; Walters 2002; Tomlinson 2005). Inevitably, members' lower favourability to unions can lead to membership attrition or simply failure to join, which unions can hardly afford in the present context. Addressing the workplace representation gender gap could go some way to tackling these relational and substantive issues of representation, which threaten union legitimacy as well as effectiveness at workplace level (Le Capitaine et al. 2013).

Data and methods of analysis

The data used in this paper is drawn from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) 2011. The survey questions workplaces with 5 or more employees across the private and public sectors in all industries apart from agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishing, mining and quarrying. In 2011 the survey gathered responses from 2,680 workplaces, 21,981 employees and 1,002 worker representatives. Large workplaces are over sampled but the use of weights mean the results are representative of all workplaces.

WERS has been used extensively within the field to investigate a variety of topics associated with employment relations and employee representation (Millward et al 2002). For the purposes of this paper, WERS allows for the responses of managers, employees and worker representatives to be merged together allowing for a clear picture of the attitudes, process and results of female representation to be investigated. As the focus of this paper is the representation of trade union members our sample consists of 797 worker representatives who are representing the largest trade union in their workplace (either recognized or not). Within our sample 34% of representatives are women (270 representatives).

The analysis is concerned with three main aims: (i) to determine the likelihood of female representation; (ii) to investigate the process and involvement of female representatives; (iii) and to examine opinions towards female representatives.

In the first instance each aim is investigated through the computation of t-tests, and chi-squares, so any significant differences between male and female representatives can be identified. Following on from this first investigation, a series of regression analyses are undertaken to take into account other factors that may influence the appointment, role and perception of female representatives.

The likelihood of female representation is analysed using a binary logistic regression because the gender of representatives is a dichotomous variable (1: female, 0: male). As the intention is to predict female representation from workplace characteristics, the independent variables are sourced from the management questionnaire. The equation is as follows.

$$\ln\left(\frac{\hat{p}}{(1-\hat{p})}\right) = b_0 + b_i X_i$$

Where \hat{p} is the probability of female representation and X_i denotes the independent variables: the sector of the organization, proportion of the workforce that are female, proportion of managers and senior officials that are female, age of the organization, number of trade union members and whether representatives are elected by union members, are the variables included in the equation.

To investigate the process and involvement of female representatives compared to men, a series of linear regressions are undertaken. The variables are sourced from the workplace and worker representative surveys. The equations take the following form.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + e_i$$

Where Y_i is the dependent variable

β_0 to β_n are the regression coefficients

X_1 is the independent variable, female representative

X_2 to X_n are the control variables (years as a representative, average hours worked, number of trade union members, size of the organisation, sector and how favourably managers view trade unions)

e_i is the residual error

Lastly, to examine the opinion of representation, data is used from the worker representative, workplace and employee surveys. A series of different questions are sourced to capture the opinions of managers and employees with regard to the union representative in their workplace. Managers are questioned about their attitudes towards the usefulness of trade union involvement with change, performance and consultation. Employees are asked whether they believe trade unions are the best form of representation in a series of different topics and if they believe management in their organization takes trade unions seriously. Just as the investigation

into the process and involvement of female representation, a series of regression equations are produced. The equations take the following form:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + e_i$$

Where Y_i is the dependent variable

β_0 to β_n are the regression coefficients

X_1 is the independent variable, female representative

X_2 to X_n are the control variables (Manager perceptions: years as a representative, average hours worked, number of trade union members, size of the organisation and sector. Employee perceptions: gender, age and ethnicity of the employee, how the employee views their job security and average earnings of the employee)

e_i is the residual error

Results

Gender and characteristics of workplace union representatives

With regard to the individual characteristics of workplace representatives, from the WERS data 34% of workplace representatives are female. Not only are representatives more likely to be male, we also observed no statistically significant differences between men and women representatives in terms of age and ethnicity. What this means is that both male and female representatives are likely to be aged 40 or over and to be white. This finding is unsurprising and accords with previous research looking at both lay representatives and paid union officers (e.g. Heery and Nash 2011; Hoque and Bacon 2014). We also found that while women were slightly more likely than were men to be newer to their representative role, i.e. to have been a union representative for less than five years, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that we can predict only slow change in the gender structure of workplace representation – i.e. there does not appear to be anything like an influx of women into representative roles, nor a male exodus.

As shown in Table 1, the workplace representatives' trade unions are very similar for both genders. The top three trade unions represented in the sample were the same for both men and women. These unions are three of the UK's 10 largest and they all have a significant presence in the public sector (and privatised areas) where the vast majority of union members are located.

The findings also suggest that these three unions are the ones with the greatest representative coverage.

Women representatives were far more likely to be present in female dominated public services union Unison and also slightly more in female dominated civil service union PCS, than in male dominated general union Unite. In contrast, almost equal proportions of male representatives are in female dominated Unison and male dominated Unite. This is important for the gendered structure of union representation, where it appears that men are just as likely to represent women as other men, but women are more likely to represent women.

Table 1: Representatives' Affiliation by Gender

Union	Men (N=524)	Women (N=270)
Unison	123 (23%)	118 (44%)
Unite	117 (22%)	25 (9%)
PCS	47 (9%)	26 (10%)

Source: Worker Representative Dataset, WERS 2011

There were differences between the male and female representatives and the occupations they worked in, as shown in Table 2. However, for both genders, the most likely occupation is a professional one, mirroring the contemporary predominance of skilled professionals within union membership. 60% of female representatives and 53% of male are in the first three major occupational groups. This is almost certainly a function of the concentration of union presence in the public sector, which has a large number of (feminised) professional occupations. Nevertheless, it is interesting because the unions, of which the greater number of workplace representatives are members (Unison, PCS, Unite) do represent occupations across the full spectrum from low paid, low skill, through intermediate layers to the highest level of the occupational hierarchy. When we look at the other six major occupational groups in Table 2 combined with what we know about the gender-segregated nature of them, we can observe that it appears that female union representatives are more likely working in female dominated occupations. For male representatives, the picture appears more mixed, again highlighting the gendered structure of union representation.

Table 2: Major Occupational Group by Gender

Major Occupational Group	Men (N=524)	Women (N=270)
Managers and Senior Officials	64 (12%)	32 (12%)
Professional Occupations	164 (31%)	102 (38%)
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	50 (10%)	27 (10%)
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	66 (13%)	56 (21%)
Skilled Trade Occupations	51(10%)	4 (1%)
Caring, Leisure and Other Personal Service Occupations	7 (1%)	20 (7%)
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	18 (3.4%)	18 (7%)
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives and Drivers	62 (12%)	3 (1%)
Routine Occupations	39 (7%)	8 (3%)

Source: Worker Representative Dataset, WERS 2011

T-test results suggest that there are significantly more female representatives in the public sector than male ($t=-4.731$, sig.0.000). Additionally, in organisations with a female representative there are a significantly higher proportion of female workers and a higher number of female managers and senior officials ($t=-7.802$, sig. 0.000). To investigate further the influence of these factors on the likelihood of female representation, a binary logistic regressionⁱⁱ was undertaken (Table 3).

Table 3: Binary logistic regression: likelihood of female representation

Dependent: Gender of Representative		
Public sector	B	-0.082 (sig.) (0.696)
Proportion of the workforce who are women	B	4.987 (sig.) (0.000)

Proportion of managers and senior officials who are women	β	-0.773
	(sig.)	(0.091)
Elected by trade union members	β	-0.460
	(sig.)	(0.025)
<hr/>		
N		711
Cox and Snell R-Square		0.196
Nagelkerke R-Square		0.272
<hr/>		

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

The results from the regression indicate that when all of the factors are taken into account, it is only the proportion of female workers in the organisation that significantly increases the likelihood of female representation. Descriptive results reveal that 84% of women representatives are in workplaces with more than 40% female employees, as opposed to 56% for men. Again, this highlights the gendered structure of representation and resonates with research beyond the UK (Blaschke 2011; Pocock 2005). Interestingly, where elections are held to appoint representatives, females are significantly less likely to be representatives. This echoes qualitative research suggesting that women are less likely to contest union elections (Kirton and Healy 2013).

Gender and workplace representation processes

Workplace representatives were given a list of 11 items and asked to identify the most important issue at their workplace over the past 12 months. This question provides a clear sense of representatives' priorities and activities. Table 4 shows the results. For women, the top three issues identified as the most important were disciplinary and grievance matters, staffing levels and pensions. For men, the first two were identical and pay was the third most important issue. Both men and women ranked equal opportunities and diversity of very low importance. Where we saw the greatest gender difference was in the proportions of men and women citing pay

($\chi^2= 6.619$, sig. 0.006), and health and safety as the most important issues in the past 12 months ($\chi^2=3.253$, sig. 0.047).

Table 4: Most important issue at workplace over the past 12 months by gender

			Male	Female	Total
Most important issue at this workplace over the past 12 months	rates of pay	n	82	23	105
		%	15.60%	8.50%	13.20%
	hours of work	n	28	15	43
		%	5.30%	5.60%	5.40%
	holiday entitlements	n	3	5	8
		%	0.60%	1.90%	1.00%
	pension entitlements	n	66	37	103
		%	12.60%	13.70%	13.00%
	recruitment or selection of employees	n	9	3	12
		%	1.70%	1.10%	1.50%
	training of employees	n	5	2	7
		%	1.00%	0.70%	0.90%
	disciplinary matters or grievances	n	122	69	191
		%	23.30%	25.60%	24.10%
	staffing levels	n	92	41	133
		%	17.60%	15.20%	16.80%
	equal opportunities and diversity	n	7	2	9
		%	1.30%	0.70%	1.10%
	health and safety	n	35	9	44
		%	6.70%	3.30%	5.50%
performance appraisals	n	5	5	10	
	%	1.00%	1.90%	1.30%	
other issues	n	54	35	89	
	%	10.30%	13.00%	11.20%	
none of these issues are important	n	1	3	4	
	%	0.20%	1.10%	0.50%	
Total	n	524	270	794	
	%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	

This section now considers the effects of gender on workplace representatives' involvement in a range of critical representation processes: (i) frequency of representatives' meetings with management/employees/paid union officials; (ii) occurrence of disputes; (iii) number of hours representatives spend on union duties; (iv) if they receive pay for this time.

Table 5: t-test of processes of representation

				N	Mean	Std.dev	t-value	Sig.
Frequent meetings with managers	Men			521	0.789	0.409	3.668	(0.000)
	Women			268	0.664	0.473		
Frequency of informal contact with managers	Men			201	5.901	0.825	0.934	(0.351)
	Women			92	5.804	0.802		
Frequency of meetings with employees represented	Men			524	2.903	1.348	3.973	(0.000)
	Women			269	2.502	1.340		
Frequency in meeting with paid officials to discuss workplace issues	Men			523	4.484	1.486	3.604	(0.000)
	Women			270	4.048	1.675		
Occurrence of disputes in the last 12 months	Men			523	0.488	0.500	1.254	(0.210)
	Women			270	0.441	0.497		
Hours spent on representative work	Men			524	18.083	17.250	3.971	(0.000)
	Women			270	13.178	16.081		
	Men			523	0.924	0.266	3.533	(0.000)

If paid by the organisation for	Women			
representative work		270	0.833	0.373

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

While for some processes, gender of representatives makes little difference (e.g. prevalence of disputes), the results in Table 5 indicate that there are some significant differences in the processes, in which male and female representatives engage. Male representatives have more frequent (formal) meetings with managers, employees and paid union officials and they spend significantly more hours on representative work. To investigate the differences between male and female representatives further, a regression was conducted (Table 6). The regression allowed us to control for other factors that may influence the processes of representation. The factors included, besides the gender of the representative, were years as representative, average hours worked by the representative, number of trade union members, size of the organisation and whether public sector and how favourably managers viewed trade unions.

Table 6: Linear regression: process of representation

		(1)	(2)
Frequent meetings with managers	β (sig.)	-0.693 (0.000)	-0.608 (0.002)
Frequency of informal contact with managers	β (sig.)	-0.105 (0.319)	-0.085 (0.433)
Frequency of meetings with employees represented	β (sig.)	-0.387 (0.000)	-0.326 (0.002)
Frequency in meeting with paid officials to discuss workplace issues	β (sig.)	-0.445 (0.000)	-0.399 (0.001)

Occurrence of disputes in the last 12 months	β	-0.119	-0.271
	(sig.)	(0.441)	(0.103)

Hours spent on representative work	β	-4.883	-2.780
	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.018)

If paid by the organisation for representative work	β	-0.873	-0.790
	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.001)

*(1) independent variable only, (2) controls added (years as representative, average hours worked by the representative, how many trade union members, size of the organisation, public sector, how favourably managers viewed trade unions)

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

The results from the regression indicate that once all control variables are added, female representatives have significantly fewer formal meetings with managers, and they meet less frequently with employees and paid union officials. Female representatives are also spending significantly less time on representative work overall and are less likely to receive paid time off for the union work they are doing.

Associated with the processes of representation, an interesting avenue is to consider the involvement of trade unions in different decisions in the organisation. This sheds light on the union-management relationship and on the influence of the union in the workplace. We used a scale from no involvement to negotiation. To begin with, a chi-squared test was conducted to highlight any significant differences between the observed and expected valuesⁱⁱⁱ. The results indicated that pay setting ($\chi^2=23.697$, sig. 0.000), hours of work ($\chi^2=18.256$, sig.0.000), holiday entitlement ($\chi^2=15.876$, sig.0.001), training ($\chi^2=23.735$, sig.0.000), disciplinary ($\chi^2=11.315$, sig.0.010) and health and safety decisions ($\chi^2=22.142$, sig.0.000) had observed values that were significantly different from those expected. To investigate this further and to conclude whether

this distortion was because of the gender of the representative, a linear regression was conducted (Table 7).

Table 7: Linear regression: level of involvement

		(1)	(2)
Setting of	β	-0.39	-0.277
changing pay	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.002)
Hours of	β	-0.286	-0.225
work	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Holiday	β	-0.294	-0.186
entitlement	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.027)
Pension	β	-0.083	-0.022
entitlement	(sig.)	(0.295)	(0.789)
Training of	β	-0.315	-0.297
employees	(sig.)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Development	β	-0.144	-0.067
of	(sig.)	(0.058)	(0.370)
disciplinary			
and grievance			
procedures			
Health and	β	-0.205	-0.168
safety	(sig.)	(0.002)	(0.012)

*(1) independent variable only, (2) controls added (years as representative, average hours worked by the representative, how many trade union members, size of the organisation, public sector, how favourably managers viewed trade unions)

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

The results, as presented in Table 7 above, indicate that when all control variables are included there are significant differences between the level of involvement between male and female

representatives. Female representatives are significantly less involved in decisions relating to pay setting, hours of work, holiday entitlement, pensions and health and safety. The only areas where women have equal involvement are employee training and development of disciplinary and grievance procedures. Levels of involvement only partially reflect male and female representatives' priorities (Table 4) and this indicates that representatives, especially women, have no formal arena for pursuing all the key issues they identify.

Gender and union representative relationships with managers and employees

In order to be effective in their roles, workplace union representatives need to navigate relationships with managers and employees. WERS data provides a manager and employee perspective on these relationships through a series of questions to determine both managers' and employees' attitudes towards unions. In the case of managers, the majority (64.8%) was in favour of trade union membership, while only a minority (34.2%) said that they would rather consult directly with employees. The majority also (67.6%) said that they had negotiated or consulted with unions on change in the past two years and 60 per cent of managers strongly agreed or agreed that unions help to find ways to improve workplace performance. The regression results in Table 8 show there were no significant differences between male and female representatives in terms of the mostly positive opinions managers expressed about unions. Therefore, we conclude that managers have a neutral attitude towards the gender of union representatives.

Table 8: Linear regression: Managers' opinions

		(1)	(2)
Unions help find ways to improve workplace performance.	β	-0.025	-0.004
	(sig.)	(0.729)	(0.953)
We would rather consult directly with employees than with unions	β	0.201	0.159
	(sig.)	(0.021)	(0.064)
	β	-0.161	-0.107

Involvement trade unions	(sig.)	(0.031)	(0.154)
had			
in			
introducing/implementing			
change in the past 2 years.			
Description	of β	0.000	-0.057
management's	general		
attitude towards trade	(sig.)	(0.997)	(0.430)
union membership.			

*(1) independent variable only, (2) controls added
(years as representative, average hours worked by the
representative, how many trade union members, size of
the organisation, public sectors)

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

On the question of employee perceptions of representation, the data indicate that the majority of employees believe that a trade union is the best party to represent them in three areas: getting a pay increase (55.60%), imposed cuts in pay or hours (59.40%), disciplinary proceedings (52.2%). The results of the regression in Table 9 indicate that there are no significant differences in employee views with respect to male and female representatives; that is, employees have equal confidence in men and women to represent them effectively. However, worth noting is that women have less involvement in the first two of these areas – pay increases, imposed cuts in pay or hours – (Table 7).

Table 9: Binary logistic regression: Employee's opinions on representation

Trade unions best represent				
employees		(1)	(2)	
Getting	pay B	-0.102	0.035	
increases	(sig.)	(0.014)	(0.851)	
Cutting	hours or B	-0.228	-0.45	
pay	(sig.)	(0.190)	(0.807)	

Getting training	B	-0.390	0.102
	(sig.)	(0.355)	(0.824)
Complaints about	B	0.001	0.195
Working	(sig.)	(0.995)	(0.347)
Disciplinary action	B	-0.102	0.088
	(sig.)	(0.121)	(0.630)

*(1) independent variable only, (2) controls added
(gender of the employee, age of the employee,
whether the employee is from an ethnic minority,
how the employee views their job security and how
much the employee earns)

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

With regard to how satisfied employees are with the trade unions in their workplace, initial results indicate that the majority are very satisfied or satisfied that unions take notice of members' problems and complaints (68.5%) and that the unions are taken seriously by management (56.3%). However, fewer (just under half – 44.1%) employees were very satisfied or satisfied that unions make a difference to what it is like to work in their workplace. The regression results in Table 10 reveal that there is no significant gender difference on the first and third satisfaction measures, but on the second, employees believe that management takes female representatives more seriously than they do male representatives. This is quite surprising and perhaps signals a break from the male-gendered stereotype of the (effective) trade unionist (e.g. militant, aggressive style) extracting concessions from management through adversarial confrontations (Sayce et al. 2006).

Table 10: Binary logistic regression: Employees' satisfaction

Employee satisfaction with			
trade unions		(1)	(2)
Dealing	with B	0.15	0.139
problems	and (sig.)	(0.084)	(0.125)
complaints			
Taken seriously by	B	0.189	0.181
managers	(sig.)	(0.032)	(0.043)
Making	a B	0.058	0.08
difference	(sig.)	(0.530)	(0.411)

*(1) independent variable only, (2) controls added (gender of the employee, age of the employee, whether the employee is from an ethnic minority, how the employee views their job security and how much the employee earns)

Source: merged manager and worker representative WERS datasets 2011

Discussion and conclusions

What do our findings suggest about gender and workplace representation in the British workplace?

To begin with, despite some case studies charting incremental change in the gender composition of workplace representation over time (e.g. Sayce et al. 2006), overall the characteristics of workplace union representatives reveal the persistent bias towards older, white males (confirmed by the WERS series), especially where elections take place and especially outside of the public sector. Some studies find that women are more likely to step forward when ‘no one else will do it’ (especially when pushed or encouraged by another existing (often female) workplace representative), rather than contest elections, where there is a male incumbent willing to continue in role (Kirton and Healy 2013; Munro 1999). In addition, there is a persistent problem with age and ethnic diversity irrespective of gender: younger and

BME members remain under-represented among union representatives, which is obviously a major concern from a broader diversity perspective. Finally, the concentration of workplace representatives in professional occupations – again regardless of gender – means that female members in non-professional occupations are under-represented on two counts: gender and class positioning. The substantive problem here is potentially one of both union democracy, and interest definition and identification; in other words, whether/how the full spectrum of membership diversity is integrated into union leadership, priorities and activity when such diversity remains marginal among workplace union representatives (see McBride 2001; Munro 1999).

There has been some discussion in the literature about whether some of the newer union roles (e.g. learning representative, equality representative) provide new opportunities for involvement of social groups such as women previously marginalised from union representation structures. Contrary to previous claims that ‘new’ union representative roles have attracted those previously under-represented in workplace unionism such as women (e.g. Darlington 2010), it appears from our analysis of WERS that women representatives are only slightly more likely (16%) than men (12%) to be learning representatives, and the gender difference is not statistically significant ($t=-1.503$, sig. 0.133). WERS 2011 does not provide any information about equality representatives unlike WERS 2004, however, according to Bacon and Hoque’s (2012) survey, over half (55%) are male.

The terms of engagement between union representatives and managers are critical for effective workplace representation. The more representatives meet with management, the more able they are to influence workplace decision-making and outcomes (Bacon and Hoque 2012). Equally, where employers are supportive of union involvement, union representatives are more confident and active suggesting a virtuous circle of union capacity (Peetz and Pocock 2009). Our finding that female representatives spend less time overall on union business is troubling as well as perplexing, because it could potentially be a source of member dissatisfaction, especially the lower level contact with members (Waddington 2006). Clearly formal and informal interaction between workplace representatives and their members is essential for sustaining union legitimacy. Less time spent on union work could also diminish workplace union capacity and competency if representatives do not accumulate vital experiences or practise essential skills. However, the analysis shows that employee confidence in female representatives is high, which is something that future qualitative research could usefully

explore as it would be better placed to identify relational elements in the representative-member dyad which could be influencing perceptions of representative effectiveness. We cannot say with certainty why female representatives are spending less time on critical union activities. The fact that our analysis also reveals that women receive less facility time than men is no doubt a large part of the explanation. In addition, we know from previous research that female representatives are ‘time poor’ in comparison to male by virtue of the fact that women take primary responsibility for home and family in addition to paid work and union activism lengthening the working day, and stretching their capacity to cope sometimes to breaking point (Kirton 2005). Previous research would also caution that women representatives might be spending less time because their workplace unions are allocating them marginal union roles with less facility time within a male dominated union context (McBride 2001; Munro 2001). It may also be that female representatives are less well equipped to deal with the range of representative duties due to less experience and/or training (Greene and Kirton 2002). Seen through a gender lens, this all underlines the gendered structure and character of union representation not only in terms of the processes of local employment relations, but also local union organisation. These conditions might also have consequences for local employment relations *outcomes* if we consider the argument that women representatives are more likely to identify and take up ‘women’s issues’(Colling and Dickens; Munro 2001). Further, if there is less facility time available at some workplaces we might speculate that men are gradually disappearing from union roles partly for this reason. While this might create a space for women to become representatives without confronting the gendered contestation for union roles that might come with elections, women might end up having to do at least some union work in their spare time squeezing female representatives even more than suggested by previous studies.

One question underlying our research was whether female representatives are engaging in processes likely to make a difference to workplace decision-making in critical employment relations areas. Crucially, female representatives are less involved in most areas of workplace decision-making. In fact, the only areas where women seem to have equal involvement are training of employees and development of disciplinary and grievance procedures. Again, we cannot tell from WERS 2011 why this is the case, but the fact that female representatives are significantly less involved in workplace decisions relating to pay setting, hours of work, holiday entitlement, pensions and health and safety is of great concern, particularly as WERS also tells us that these are areas considered to be the most important by representatives and where unions are deemed to be most useful by employees. All of these issues have gendered

dimensions, which are not always immediately obvious, but towards which we contend women are more like to have greater sensitivity. Women's relative absence from union-management discussions about such issues can mean that the gender dimension goes unnoticed and not acted upon by unions (Bercusson and Dickens 1996).

Finally, we considered employer and member perceptions of union representative involvement in employment relations processes. This is highly important given that in the present era there can be little doubt that employers and managers set the terms of union-management engagement and define the employment relations terrain overall (Greene et al. 2000). The findings do not indicate management hostility towards workplace unions, rather the opposite. This is likely partly explained by the fact that union membership and workplace representation are now concentrated in the public sector where the longstanding pluralist tradition of employment relations might have eroded somewhat, but has not disappeared. This finding also complements previous research, which found that managers in union recognised workplaces generally felt that union representatives helped to achieve conciliation and conflict resolution (Saundry et al. 2011). From the employee perspective, union representatives need to maintain credibility with members in the way they interact with managers (e.g. Greene et al. 2000). We identified that employer and employee perceptions of union representative involvement were to some extent gendered, but not necessarily in ways suggested by extant literature; that is, employee perceptions of female representatives are actually rather positive. The fact that managers appear agnostic as to the question of workplace union representatives' gender is notable and it might reflect the changing gender structure of management especially in the public sector. In other words, female managers might be more comfortable consulting and negotiating with female union representatives, particularly if they perceive women as adopting a less adversarial style as suggested by some literature (e.g. Kirton and Healy 2012). The fact that employees believe that managers take female workplace representatives more seriously is also noteworthy and suggests that employees have favourable attitudes towards female representatives' competence.

Our analysis has added to existing knowledge by examining the structure and processes of workplace representation through a gender lens, something which has not occurred before. This analysis has made particular use of the worker representative survey, an instrument of WERS which to date has been very underutilised (see Millward et al, 2016). The analysis within this article is useful in setting out some key points regarding the state of trade union representation

at workplace level, not least establishing the important but perhaps not surprising finding of the continued resilience of the male model. However, while the WERS data set has strengths in terms of its generalizability in offering a macro level picture across the British workplace, as the foregoing discussion illustrates, it also leads to a number of unanswered questions that are clearly fruitful for future research.

For example, the question of women and union elections at workplace level has been flagged as a potentially interesting area of inquiry. Women seem to fare badly in union elections, yet we have little understanding as to why, given that once in union roles employees have high confidence in them. In this regard, it would be interesting to compare the experiences and outcomes of positive action initiatives at national union level with what happens at workplace level (Kirton and Greene 2002). Here, some of the debates around quotas and reserved seats that are of current political interest would be pertinent. The finding that once in positions of workplace representation women are less involved in critical union activities is also in need of in-depth analysis. What are the inhibitors and facilitators for women's involvement at workplace level and how are these experienced by the women representatives themselves? These areas are most usefully dealt with through qualitative enquiry rather than more quantitative analysis as it is the qualitative detail that we are currently missing. Deeper understanding of the gendered nature of workplace union representation is crucial not only to progressing equality agendas, but also facilitating improved representation of a diverse membership.

References

- Bacon, N. and K. Hoque (2012). "The Role and Impact of Trade Union Equality Representatives in Britain." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **50**(2): 239-262.
- Bercusson, B and Dickens, L. (1996) *Equal Opportunities and Collective Bargaining in Europe: Defining the Issues*. European Commission.
- Blaschke, S. (2011). "Determinants of female representation in the decision-making structures of trade unions." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* **32**(3): 421-438.
- Briskin, L. and A. Muller (2011). Promoting gender equality through social dialogue: Global trends and persistent obstacles. Geneva, International Labour Office. **Working Paper No. 34**
- Calvey, M. and G. Healy (2003). "Political Activism and Workplace Industrial Relations in a UK 'Failing' School." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **41**(1): 97-113.

Charlwood, A. and D. Angrave (2014). *Worker representation in Great Britain 2004 - 2011: An analysis based on the Workplace Employment Relations Study*. Research Papers. London, Acas.

Colgan, F. and S. Ledwith (2000). "Diversity, Identities and Strategies of Women Trade Union Activists." *Gender, Work and Organization* **7**(4): 242-257.

Conley, H. (2005). "Front Line or All Fronts? Women's Trade Union Activism in Retail Services." *Gender, Work and Organization* **12**(5): 479-496.

Darlington, R. (2010). "The state of workplace union reps' organization in Britain today." *Capital & Class* **34**(1): 126-135.

Dickens, L. (1999). "Beyond the Business Case: a Three-Pronged Approach to Equality Action." *Human Resource Management Journal* **9**(1): 9-19.

Fairbrother, P. (1996). Workplace Trade Unionism in the State Sector. *The New Workplace and Trade Unions*. P. Ackers, C. Smith and P. Smith. London, Routledge: 110-148.

Fosh, P. (1993). "Membership participation in workplace trade unionism: the possibility of union renewal." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **31**(4): 577-592.

Greene, A.M (2015) 'Voice and Workforce Diversity', Chapter 4 in P. Ackers and S. Johnstone (eds.) *Finding a Voice: at Work? New perspectives on Employment Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 67-94

Greene, A. M., J. Black and P. Ackers (2000). "The Union Makes Us Strong? A Study of the Dynamics of Workplace Union Leadership at Two UK Manufacturing Plants." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **38**(1): 75-93.

Greene, A. M. and G. Kirton (2002). "Advancing Gender Equality: the Role of Women-only Trade Union Education." *Gender, Work and Organization* **9**(1): 39-59.

Heery, E. (2006). "Equality Bargaining: Where, Who, Why?" *Gender, Work and Organization* **13**(6): 522-542.

Heery, E. and D. Nash (2011). *Trade Union Officers and Collective Conciliation A Secondary Analysis*. Research Papers. London, Acas.

Hoque, K. and N. Bacon (2014). "Unions, joint regulation and workplace equality policy and practice in Britain: evidence from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey." *Work, Employment and Society* **28**(2): 265-284.

Kirton, G. (2005). "The influences on women joining and participating in unions." *Industrial Relations Journal* **36**(5): 386-401.

Kirton, G. (2015). "Progress Towards Gender Democracy in UK Unions 1987–2012." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*.

Kirton, G. and A. Greene (2002). "The dynamics of positive action in UK trade unions: the case of women and black members." *Industrial Relations Journal* **33**(2): 157-172.

Kirton, G. and G. Healy (2012). "'Lift as you rise': union women's leadership talk." *Human Relations* **65**(8): 979-999.

Kirton, G. and G. Healy (2013). *Gender and Leadership in Unions*. London, Routledge.

Le Capitaine, C., G. Murray and C. Lévesque (2013). "Empowerment and union workplace delegates: a gendered analysis." *Industrial Relations Journal* **44**(4): 389-408.

McBride, A. (2001). *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*. Aldershot, Ashgate.

Milner, S. and A. Gregory (2014). "Gender equality bargaining in France and the UK: An uphill struggle?" *Journal of Industrial Relations* **56**(2): 246-263.

Millward, N., Woodland, S., Bryson, A., Forth, J., Kirby, S. and Stokes, L. (2016), Bibliography of Research: Comprising research publications based on WIRS 1980 - WERS 2011, National Institute of Economic and Social Research, London, Last updated May, <http://www.wers2011.info>

Murray, G., C. Levesque, et al. (2013). "Workplace representatives: strategic actors of union renewal?" *Industrial Relations Journal* **44**(4): 340-354.

Millward, N., Woodland, S., Bryson, A., Forth, J. and Kirby, S. 2002. "A Bibliography of Research Based on the British Workplace Industrial Relations Survey Series." National Institute of Economic and Social Research, London.

Moore, S. and S. Tailby (2015). "The changing face of employment relations: equality and diversity." *Employee Relations* **37**(6): 705-719.

Munro, A. (1999). *Women, Work and Trade Unions*. London, Mansell.

Munro, A. (2001). "A Feminist Trade Union Agenda? The Continued Significance of Class, Gender and Race." *Gender, Work and Organization* **8**(4): 454-471.

Nicholson, G., G. Ursell, et al. (1981). *The Dynamics of White-collar Unionism*. London, Academic Press.

Peetz, D. and B. Pocock (2009). "An Analysis of Workplace Representatives, Union Power and Democracy in Australia." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **47**(4): 623-652.

Saundry, R., L. McArdle, et al. (2011). *Transforming Conflict Management in the Public Sector? Mediation, Trade Unions and Partnerships in a Primary Care Trust*. London, Acas.

Sayce, S., A. M. Greene, et al. (2006). "Small is beautiful? The development of women's activism in a small union." *Industrial Relations Journal* **37**(4): 400-414.

Simms, M. (2013). "Workplace trade union activists in UK service sector organising campaigns." *Industrial Relations Journal* **44**(4): 373-388.

Sinclair, D. (1996). "The Importance of Gender for Participation in and Attitudes to Trade Unionism." *Industrial Relations Journal* **27**(3): 239-252.

Thornley, C. (1998). "Contesting local pay: the decentralization of collective bargaining in the NHS." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **36**: 413-434.

Tomlinson, J. (2005). "Women's attitudes towards trade unions in the UK: a consideration of the distinction between full- and part-time workers." *Industrial Relations Journal* **36**(5): 404-418.

TUC (2011). *TUC Equality Audit 2011*. London, Trades Union Congress.

van Wanrooy, B., H. Bewley, et al. (2013). *The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study: First Findings*. London, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Waddington, J. (2006). "Why Do Members Leave? The Importance of Retention to Trade Union Growth." *Labor Studies Journal* **31**(3): 15-38.

Walters, S. (2002). "Female part-time workers' attitudes to trade unions in Britain." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **40**(1): 49-68.

ⁱSee: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-2011-workplace-employment-relations-study-wers>)

ⁱⁱ A binary logistic regression is necessary given the binary nature of the dependent variable (1=female rep, 0=male rep). For a binary logistic regression R-squared is approximated by the Cox and Snell R-squared and R-squared adjusted is approximated using Nagelkerke R-square.

ⁱⁱⁱ A chi-squared is necessary because there is a scale of four rather than a single numeric answer.