

Commitment and collective identity of long-term union participation:

The case of women union leaders in the UK and USA

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Introduction

Using insights from three interconnecting bodies of literature with roots in classical sociology – social movement (SM), industrial relations (IR) and feminist – this article attempts to shed light on the dynamics and politics of women union leaders' *long-term* participation. Long-term social movement participation generally, particularly in movements in decline, is an area identified as under-researched in the SM literature (Klandermans 2003). Whilst IR research has investigated extensively reasons for union *joining* there is a dearth of recent studies of long-term union participation. Further, although union leaders and their ability to collectivize and mobilize members has received attention (e.g. Greene et al. 2000; Darlington 2002; Metochi 2002), recently there has been less focus on leaders themselves in terms of what motivates them to stay active, particularly in the context of union decline when there are arguably fewer instrumental incentives to participate. We see the discussion of women union leaders as intricately connected to, yet neglected in, the union renewal and revitalization debate that has understandably so preoccupied the North American and British IR literature for the last couple of decades. This paper presents findings of a qualitative study of American and British women union leaders; its primary focus is on actors and their subjectivities, set against the organizational and environmental employment relations contexts, with which we begin by sketching the most relevant aspects for our discussion.

The UK and US union movements share many broad similarities including weak institutionalization, industrial relations characterized by decentralized bargaining structures and relatively strong ties to mainstream political parties. Over the last three decades, both countries' union movements have faced significant membership decline and the erosion of their institutional power bases. Revitalization is high on the agenda in both countries and the need to attract new members, particularly previously marginalized groups (especially women and black and minority ethnic workers) is recognised (Baccaro et al. 2003). Thus, this similar institutional context has the effect of creating similar goals between UK and US unions – organizing workplaces; collective bargaining and mobilizing member voting in political elections (Kelly and Frege 2004).

The union movements of both countries are also characterized by similar gender regimes. They are historically white male dominated, but women are now just over half of members in the UK and close to half in the USA. Despite the white male leadership context, the push from within towards greater inclusiveness has resulted in women's increased share of union leadership in both the UK and USA compared with that of the 1970s. However, women remain underrepresented in power structures in both countries, particularly black and minority ethnic women. Yet research in the UK and North America has found that unions are more effective in organizing and representing women and their issues when women themselves have a significant presence in leadership and to this extent, women's under-representation matters for renewal and revitalization (Briskin 2002; Bronfenbrenner 2005; Kirton 2006; Milkman 2007; Bradley and Healy 2008). We consider the puzzle of sustaining long-term women leaders' union participation in a period of decline by drawing on two interconnected sociological constructs: union commitment and collective identity. The

next section develops these concepts, after which the fieldwork is outlined followed by a discussion of findings.

Conceptual background

SM theory has increasingly influenced IR research in the sociological tradition. This is particularly the case with respect to the union revitalization and mobilization debates (e.g. Baccaro et al. 2003; Kelly 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000). Arguably SM theory lent IR the conceptual tools for interrogating social processes where actors are central, especially to meaning making, rather than the main focus being on the IR system (Kelly 1998). For example, authors have explored collective identity, solidarity and union commitment, asking questions such as why people join unions, why some become active, etc, (Kelly 1998). For feminist authors the focus is often specifically women (Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Bradley et al. 2005; Kirton 2005; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Foley 2003; Kirton and Healy 2004). However, the dynamics that underlie *long-term commitment* to union participation and women's participation specifically are less researched. While it is important to attract 'new blood' (especially younger people) to 'old' movements, long-term participants remain valuable as they provide continuity, experience, memory, stability in unstable times.

Commitment and union participation

Women's long-term commitment to union participation is perhaps something of an enigma. Unions in the UK and USA now have less power than formerly and after some twenty-five years of decline women and men still union active are swimming against the tide of popular opinion. Further for women, the union movement has long been and still is criticized by feminists for failing to represent women effectively and for excluding women from power and decision-making (Boston 1980; Beale 1982; Cook et al. 1992; Healy and Kirton 2000; Colgan and Ledwith 2002).

Gordon et al.'s¹ (1980) definition of union commitment provides a starting point for exploring long-term participation. It emphasises ideological beliefs as distinct from instrumental incentives: a desire to remain a member of the union, a willingness to take part in the union and a belief in and acceptance of the goals of the union. At this juncture it is important to note the considerable variation in the underpinning political ideology of unionism in the UK and the USA that influence the character of the union movement of each country. Historically in both countries from the 1940s through to the 1980s, there was an anti-Communist current inside the union movement with Communist 'penetrators' frequently accused of orchestrating industrial unrest. Nevertheless, by the 1970s Communist Party members in the UK had become a considerable force among union shop stewards and within higher levels of the union hierarchy and left-leaning general secretaries are prominent today (Darlington 2002). In contrast during the 1940s/50s in the USA, leftist unionists faced charges of 'criminal conspiracy' and 'anti-Americanism' and the unions often attempted to establish their patriotism by rejecting any hint of radicalism. Unions associated with the Communist Party were expelled from the peak body CIO (now merged with AFL) and every union officer had to sign an affidavit declaring that he or she was not a member of the Communist Party (Phelan 2009). By the 1960s, many young American left-liberal activists, disillusioned by union support for the Vietnam War and by stories of union corruption, had ceased viewing the union movement as a vehicle for social change (Eaton 1992). Turner (2003) argues that in the 1960s and 1970s the US

union movement, unlike the UK, was firmly in the grip of anti-Communist fervour and missed the opportunity to forge new alliances with progressive social movements, including the civil rights, antiwar, women's and environmental movements. The consequence of these different unfolding histories is that in UK unions, a broader spectrum of leftist politics has more legitimacy than in the USA where the narrow instrumental objectives of 'business unionism' are more apparent. This perhaps explains the widely held view that leftist political ideology has less of an influence on unions and union leadership in the USA when compared with the UK. In the context of decline, these different dominant union political ideologies necessarily intersect with leaders' union commitment and identity.

Gordon et al.'s (ibid) commitment construct seeks to describe union commitment, whereas SM theorists offer a more multi-dimensional and dynamic approach. For example, Klandermans (2003) explains long-term commitment to SM participation despite decline because of strong initial commitment combined with *positive and gratifying experiences within the movement* strengthening commitment. Thus, the participation process becomes a central aspect of commitment. Klandermans' discussion is gender neutral, but the women and unions literature amply demonstrates that women often experience unions negatively as masculinized organizations that do not cater for their specific needs or listen to their voices (e.g. Sinclair 1996; Tomlinson 2005; Kirton 2006).

Klandermans acknowledges the tensions and risks of participation/leadership that might potentially weaken commitment, but suggests that participants generally accept these as part of the job. Nevertheless, he concedes that 'burnout' due to overload and role conflict (particularly lack of work-life-balance) can cause people to step down. Again, the women and unions literature highlights the particular difficulties women experience in balancing participation with other areas of life (Watson 1988; Franzway 2000; Bradley et al. 2005; Bradley and Healy 2008; Kirton 2006). Finally, the women and unions literature tends to concur with SM theory that commitment and instrumentality are not oppositional (Della Porta and Diani 1999) and that women unionists are motivated by a multiplicity of factors that have both ideological and instrumental dimensions (e.g. Healy et al. 2004). Thus, union commitment emerges as contested, dynamic, fragile and gendered.

Collective identity and union participation

The concept of collective identity has multiple antecedents in classical sociology, in social constructionism, the Chicago School and in studies of SMs (Hunt and Benford 2007). The emphasis and focus of different approaches has implications for our understanding of the concept. Hunt and Benford (2007) consider solidarity and commitment to be part of collective identity and they argue that a consistent finding in the literature is that collective identities facilitate commitment by enhancing the bonding to leadership, belief systems, organizations, rituals, cohorts, networks and localities (Hunt and Benford: 448). Polletta and Jasper (2001:285) define collective identity as: 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution'. For Hunt and Benford, collective identity is both a precursor and product of movement collective action. To some extent this links the ideological and identity aspects framed by Klandermans on movement participation (2007). Our concern is with long-term union participation and therefore Polletta and Jasper's (2001:296) point that SM participation generated

biographical transformations among ‘people whose active participation was of long duration or high intensity’ⁱⁱ is apposite.

The inter-relationship between identities and the influences on union joining and on becoming active have been explored in relation to women unionists (Bradley and Healy 2004; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Kirton and Healy 2004; Kirton 2005; Sinclair 1996). Collective identity is critical because as is pointed out collective action cannot occur without identification of a ‘we’ characterized by shared traits and a specific solidarity, and a ‘they’ responsible for ‘our’ negative condition (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 87; Kelly 1998). In summary, identity helps actors to identify their allies and their adversaries. Here, we are interested in the potentiality of gender as a ‘mobilizing identity’ (Polletta and Jasper 2001) that might contribute to sustaining women’s union participation in the long-term. However, this is far from straightforward because traditionally class identity is privileged in union discourses, strategies and practices, when ‘they’ are employers and ‘we’ are the workers. This class-based ‘them and us’ union discourse remains prominent even though it is articulated in different ways (some more explicit and adversarial than others) in different union and national locations (Kelly 1998).

However, class inevitably has gendered dimensions and collective gender identity is also significant for women’s union participation (Bradley 1999). By the 1970s, feminist activism was visible in the UK and US union movements. Women unionists demanded separate spaces and structures (where the ‘we’ were women and the ‘they’ men) as well as greater representation in the male dominated mainstream structures (Colgan and Ledwith 2000; McBride 2001; Briskin 2002; Cobble and Michal 2002; Kirton 2006). In many countries women’s groups in unions remain a significant domain of participation for many female unionists (McBride 2001; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Parker 2002). At the same time, it is now widely acknowledged that women often have multiple identity affiliations (e.g. class, race/ethnicity, sexuality) which can create ambiguity about who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are and which leads some women to query the salience of gender as a mobilizing identity (Bradley and Healy 2008; Colgan and Ledwith 2000). Previous research has found that not all women are comfortable with participating in structures that exclude men, believing that the main goal should be to unite all unionists with a collective class identity (e.g. McBride 2001). Such groups are also critiqued for neglecting ethnicised and working-class interests (McBride 2001, Bradley and Healy 2008). Nevertheless, feminist researchers have shown that politicized class and gender identities can coexist not necessarily and always competing in a hierarchy of salience (e.g. Kirton and Healy 2004).

The study

This article draws on data from a two-year (2008-2010) cross-national (UK/USA) research project on women’s union leadership involving 134 women union leaders in interviews and small focus groups. The literature on women and unions tends to be nationally focused and insular in nature. We believe that our cross-national research contributes by highlighting both similarities and differences in women’s leadership in two countries that sit within the same variety of capitalism and unionism (Frege and Kelly 2004) and simultaneously exhibit many differences at the level of welfare, employment and gender regimes (Tomlinson 2007). This co-existence of similarity

and difference is as intriguing as it is instructive for what it can tell us about women's union leadership.

We used standard, semi-structured interview and focus group schedules that allowed for some flexibility according to individuals' and groups' narratives situated within their national contexts. The interviews covered a wide range of themes that encouraged reflection on personal histories of union participation: (i) the nature of union work; (ii) attitudes towards unions and their policies and practices; (iii) perceptions about union work – costs and opportunities; (iv) impact of union involvement on home life and vice versa; (v) being a woman participant/leader; (vi) views on unions' gender equality strategies; (vii) views on union leadership in both an everyday and conceptual sense. The focus groups concentrated on two main themes: (i) being a woman union participant/leader; (ii) views on unions' gender equality strategies. These themes combined elicited rich insights into the core question of this paper – what sustains women leaders' union participation in the longer term – and the underpinning concepts of union commitment and collective identity.

The interviewees were recruited to the study initially via union channels (e.g. selected key informants put us in touch with women leaders) and then via snow-balling. Selected interviewee characteristics relevant for the discussion are shown in Table 1. Special conscious effort was made to reach black and minority ethnic women, women in different age groups, women at different levels of union leadership, women in a variety of types of union (sector, size, gender composition, occupations represented). We regard the diversity of participants as a major strength of the study. However, although the sample size as a whole is relatively large for qualitative research, the size of each separate sub-category is relatively small; in this paper space constraints do not allow us to disaggregate the sample by these different demographic/biographical characteristics and this is addressed in Kirton and Healy (forthcoming). Rather our objective is to reveal the cross-national similarities and differences within this diverse group of women union leaders.

For the purposes of the study, we defined a union leader as anyone holding a formal recognised union position (paid or lay) whether at workplace, branch/local, regional or national level. We included both lay officers and paid union officials as our focus was on the multiple dimensions and levels of women's leadership; both types of office-holders labour on behalf of their unions and both can be regarded as social movement participants. The interviewees' roles included responsibility for equality (UK only), women (UK only), education and learning, health and safety, industrial relations, negotiating and bargaining, representing individual members, union political activities. Interviewees came from a mix of female and male dominated unions, which organize and represent workers in a range of industries and white collar and manual occupations in the private and public sectors including: communications, construction, education, government, healthcare, hotels and catering, transport, light manufacturing, retail, entertainment. Over 70 per cent of interviewees had been union active for five or more years and around two-thirds for more than ten years; therefore the study is able to provide rich insights into the dynamics of long-term participation.

Table 1: Selected interviewee characteristics

	UK % (N = 62)	USA % (N = 72)	Total % (N = 134)
Ethnicity			
BME/of colour	29% (18)	47% (34)	39% (52)
White	71% (44)	53% (38)	60% (80)
Unknown	0% (0)	0% (0)	1% (2)
Age			
18-25	0% (0)	1% (1)	1% (1)
26-35	10% (6)	13% (9)	11% (15)
36-45	26% (16)	17% (12)	21% (28)
46-55	35% (22)	39% (28)	37% (50)
56-65	23% (14)	24% (17)	23% (31)
65+	5% (3)	6% (4)	5% (7)
Unknown	2% (1)	1% (1)	1% (2)
Dependent children (<16 years)			
Yes	23% (14)	25% (18)	24% (32)
No	73% (45)	75% (54)	74% (99)
Unknown	5% (3)	0% (0)	2% (3)
'Marital' status			
Single	21% (13)	22% (16)	22% (29)
Married/partnered	50% (31)	57% (41)	54% (72)
Divorced/widowed	23% (14)	2% (14)	21% (28)
Unknown	6% (4)	3% (2)	4% (6)

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded and analysed using the qualitative research software NVivo as a tool to organize and interrogate the interview transcripts and to identify emergent themes and response patterns.

Research findings

Women union leaders and commitment

Rewards and costs emerged as important in the SM literature on commitment and we discuss these in relation to women union leaders. This section discusses: (i) the expressive and intrinsic rewards of being a union leader; and (ii) the psychosocial costs of being a union leader.

(i) Expressive and intrinsic rewards of being a union leader

Influenced by the SM literature claim that people find expressive meaning and intrinsic rewards that can strengthen union commitment and sustain participation in the long-term, we asked interviewees what they found gratifying about their

leadership role. Their responses suggested that union participation was an expression of core identity. Some women explained their commitment simply as: 'it's what I do' or 'it's who I am'. A small number of these women struggled to identify tangible rewards, often because they experienced union work as physically and emotionally 'draining' or 'thankless'. This was particularly the case where the role largely involved endlessly servicing members individually. Whereas for other interviewees there was enough reward in knowing that they had worked with others to try to change things; they did not need or expect external gratitude or recognition as one woman who described union work as a 'thankless task' explained:

75 per cent of it I find extraordinarily rewarding. In fact I came to this union job late ... I was one of these women who has tremendous energy and creativity and skills that weren't being used . . . This is the job I was always supposed to be doing. (US2, white, age 56-65, Local Vice President)

This notion of 'it's who I am' was more prevalent among the British interviewees, probably because British trade unionism is more ideological and politicized than American. Feeling part of 'something bigger', part of a collective working for progressive social change was important to some women, especially those whose leadership was at a higher level than the immediate workplace, as captured by the following quote:

What's rewarding? Well if you are motivated to do things for an ethical or for political end and you achieve it, the compensation is the camaraderie, and you are excited about achieving things and being part of a collective to change things. (UK31, white, age 46-55, Branch Vice Chair)

The above quotation illustrates how personal identity is bound up with collective identity and reinforced and strengthened by union participation. A small number of women (more American than British) indicated the importance of individual intrinsic rewards in the form of personal growth (e.g. finding their union work intellectually stimulating; getting opportunities for interesting trips and encounters with interesting people, etc). Altruistic, expressive rewards were commonly cited by both American and British. For many there was a feeling that as a union leader 'you are making a difference' and 'working to put things right' whether through personal case work or bargaining activities:

I think rewarding is when you negotiate a good contract on behalf of your members with good health care, pay, working conditions, just being sure that people can take care of their families. It's good . . . you help them [people] out of trouble ... (US9, BME, age 46-55, Local President)

I suppose the reason that I got into this in the first place was to try and make a difference and that sounds terribly worthy, but I am still trying to make a difference, whether it's to an individual who is being bullied or to a collective, industrial [group], improving people's working lives ... (UK20, white, age 46-55, Regional Officer)

The above discussion indicates a concurrence of belief systems between the self and the union thereby facilitating union commitment; nevertheless, such accord is not without costs and it is to these that we now turn.

(ii) Psychosocial costs of being a union leader

It is axiomatic that union work demands considerable time and energy. One American woman crystallized the views of many others when she described it as a 'calling':

I have always thought that trade unionism [is] one of these careers that is a calling, like being called to the priesthood or the military. If you agree to do that, you do it fully aware of the fact that you have to give up everything else in your life for it ... when you read biographies of different trade unionists ... they were dedicated to it, and their families and everything else came second. (US07, BME, age 56-65, Local President)

The above quote suggests an expectation of considerable personal sacrifice. We were particularly interested in the impact on relationships with significant others outside of work and union. The issue of 'role conflict', particularly union-family, so prominent in the contemporary women and unions literature is by no means a new discussion or one related solely to women (e.g. see Gouldner 1947; Watson 1988). Nevertheless, it is an issue that has particular salience for women given their propensity for taking primary responsibility for the home and family in the widest possible sense (i.e. not just childcare). We found only a few cases where there was a gender role reversal with the male partner taking primary responsibility for home and family, releasing the woman to concentrate on her union work. In contrast, many interviewees believed that male union colleagues often had 'wives' (laden with traditional meaning). Our interviewees demonstrated the full spectrum of family relationships but in most cases, interviewees talked about needing to juggle family and home demands (cooking, shopping, cleaning, childcare, eldercare), sometimes with *some* help from a partner or other family members. There were many stories of relationship breakdown, particularly once the woman had taken a heavy time demanding leadership role and was no longer able to fulfil the social expectations of a wife and mother or even of a woman. One American interviewee who had experienced the breakdown of more than one relationship as a consequence, she felt, of her lifestyle as a union leader, explained to her new partner that 'this is my life and you have to accept it or not'. The idea of the incompatibility of being a strong union leader and having romantic relationships with men recurred in the interviews. One younger British interviewee (26-35) remarked that the more successful she had become as a union leader, the less successful her relationships with men had become. She put this down to being perceived as unfeminine (in character rather than appearance) – assertive, outspoken, demanding equal treatment in relationships, etc., in other words she was not conforming to gendered expectations.

Unsurprisingly, many interviewees stated that they had delayed putting themselves forward for a leadership role until their children were older. However, although the majority of interviewees (74%) did not have dependent children (below 16) at the time of interview (see Table 1), the narratives revealed that many of these women had adult children whom they had raised whilst union active and in some cases whilst holding leadership roles. This often carried a high cost with feelings of guilt:

If I had known as a young woman, what I know now, I probably would have made a better choice about career or family. I think I short changed my family and myself, I missed my kid's childhood. I think it did a great deal of damage to my family. I didn't pay enough attention to the things outside because work was so consuming and it was so stimulating intellectually I don't know that I would do it differently, because I enjoyed it and I love my family . . . I say I would have made a different choice, but I don't know that I would have chosen not to have my kids, but I think I put my job first and that was not always an appropriate thing to do. (US11, white, age 56-65, Local Executive Director)

The contradictory remarks in the above quotation convey the gendered difficulties and contestations faced by some interviewees in thinking and talking about their union activist history and how it had impacted on their family life.

Finding time for a balanced life is not something that is an issue only for women in traditional heterosexual relationships. This was represented as a considerable challenge by the majority of interviewees with relations with both male and female partners frequently described as 'rocky', 'strained' and difficult to maintain. Similar to previous studies (Kirton 2006; Bradley and Healy 2008), interviewees saw a supportive partner (whether male or female), but equally understanding family and friends, as critical for achieving a balanced life. A small number of interviewees had union active partners who reportedly understood the lifestyle of a union leader, but even here there could be a high personal cost:

We've cancelled vacations because of issues going on with work, it's most likely our fault, we are not like some who can shut down and walk away, we are workaholics and if there is something going on and the timing is off, we would put aside our personal life for the greater good. (US3, white, age 36-45, Political Director)

However, many interviewees did not see relationship breakdown (in the widest possible sense) as inevitable. Some talked about the delicate, but important balancing act of maintaining relationships with partners, family and friends, for example:

I think the other thing that is key . . . is to maintain some kind of mental health and I do that by taking time off, so the fact that I work a whole weekend doesn't worry me because I will then say, I won't be in on Thursday because I am going to a spa with a good mate or we are going to have a good time knocking around or go out for a meal or go away for the weekend. (UK19, BME, age 56-65, Regional Official)

A small number of women were less successful at the balancing act, reporting that they had no partner, few friends, little connection with family members and no personal or social life. However, they saw this as a choice and in line with the notion of union participation being a calling they stressed the necessity for personal sacrifice. Other women in this category simply said: 'the union is my life'. A less common interpretation of the tensions between home and union work was illustrated by another small group of women whose different perspective links back to the intrinsic rewards of participation, seeing the union as a 'life saver' where domestic gender identities

could be temporarily laid aside, which resonates with Kirton's (2006) research. As a stay-at-home mother returning to the workplace, one woman explained that her early union participation had been an outlet for her need to do something beyond care for her children. Another woman with a complex personal life (involving a mentally ill adult son, a terminally ill husband and elderly parents) said that her totally absorbing union work provided a much needed escape from her domestic circumstances.

In summary, the majority of UK and US interviewees experienced at least some degree of role conflict putting them at risk of the burnout that long-term participants are susceptible to (Klandermans 2003). One American interviewee described a recent executive board meeting where all the members (including two women) were aged 32-52, unmarried/unpartnered, often divorced and childless. She felt this 'said it all' about the costs of union participation. However, for the interviewees in our study while the often gendered costs of long-term (particularly high level) participation/leadership could be huge, costs were outweighed by the intrinsic and expressive rewards which served to strengthen their union commitment.

Women union leaders and collective gender identity

We wanted to explore the extent to which and ways in which collective gender identity nourishes and sustains women union leaders in a context that could be described as typically less than woman-friendly. Interviewees with more than 20 years participation (around 25 per cent) had witnessed the 1970s struggles common to the UK and USA of feminist union women to get women's issues onto the union agenda and to get women represented in union decision-making structures (Beale 1982; Cook et al. 1992; Cobble and Michal 2002). This is captured in the following quote:

When I started to be active in the late 70s, [my union] was beginning to think about the role of women in the union and there was quite a demand for a female voice at the time and there was encouragement from my male colleagues ... so I got involved on that basis. (UK19, BME, age 56-65; Regional Official).

The ideological shift of the times, evidenced by for example changes to the British TUC's policy on women, the founding of CLUW (Coalition of Labor Union Women) in the USA (Beale 1982; Cook et al. 1992), led to women's increased participation. This was often spurred by the perception that the unions were now listening to women and by seeing more women themselves being prepared to get involved. Feminism remains important for many individual union women and also for unions' gender equality strategiesⁱⁱⁱ (McBride 2001; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Kirton 2006; Cobble and Michal 2002). However, despite the influence of feminism, unions are as stated earlier essentially class based organizations and not all union women identify with or support a feminist agenda for gender based action, leading to a contested collective gender identity. We detected stronger support for feminist beliefs and values among the British women. The class-based discourse of 'equality and justice for all' is very powerful in unions in both countries, even if in the USA it is not named as such and is articulated more in terms of interest differences between workers and managers. Identifying other identity-based interests as a priority often meets disapproval from male *and* female unionists (McBride 2001; Munro 2001). But this is not just a question of which identity takes precedence as a basis for action, the crisis context of

union decline also strongly influences women's support for the mainstream (class-based) agenda. Most interviewees articulated a strong feeling that the very survival of unions was at stake, and against this they supported the privileging of what we might classify as class-based union priorities: fighting temporary layoffs, redundancies, erosion of pay and benefits; maintaining union recognition; tackling health and safety problems, etc. Arguably, the context of decline forces a collective focus on reactive 'bread and butter' (read class) issues, particularly when participants are in short supply and existing office-holders are overburdened as most of our interviewees reported.

Nevertheless, a strong collective gender identity was also evident, but not necessarily a particularly radical, progressive or feminist one. The majority of interviewees agreed that it was in the interests of natural justice for women to be equally or at least proportionally represented in union leadership and decision-making roles. Further, there was a strong perception of gender difference which underpinned a belief that women take a different (more democratic) approach to leadership roles and emphasise different union issues. Women union leaders were described as typically more compassionate, emotional, caring, sensitive, approachable, conscientious, reliable, efficient, etc; the list of highly gender stereotypical characteristics associated with women leaders went on. Further, as well as the many workplace issues that women share with men (e.g. pay; health and safety), all interviewees identified distinctive women's issues, the most frequently cited of which was unsurprisingly family caregiving (elder and childcare). But also other women's issues were raised such as the lack of female toilets on construction sites; sexual, racial and lesbian harassment. On the one hand, these issues, often neglected by unions, are potentially far reaching and encompassing enough to unite and mobilize women on the basis of collective gender identity. On the other hand, for tactical reasons in the context of a class-based movement in decline, interviewees were opposed to highlighting or giving priority to a specific set of women's issues:

I think this thing of bracketing women's issues, I think it tends to trivialise them in a way and I would rather they were seen as issues for everyone... Calling them women's issues, well it almost invites men to think well it doesn't concern me. I don't think the branch wouldn't take on women's issues, it's an issue of priorities and if it doesn't affect everyone, it won't get priority. (UK4, white, age 56-65, Regional Chair)

Belief in the liberal democratic principle of proportional representation of women and in women's difference does not guarantee that women will support feminist strategies for working towards gender transformation, for example the enabling mechanisms of women's groups, training, or the more formal women's committees. Women-only groups and forums are commonplace in unions in both countries and are a potential vehicle for mobilising union women on the basis of gender identity (Briskin 2002; Cobble and Michal 2002; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Parker 2002). Although the British interviewees had more experience of participation in women's committees, the majority of interviewees had experienced some form of women-only setting (e.g. training, conferences, networking events).

We found mixed views on women-only settings, ranging from unequivocal to qualified support for certain types (developmental, rather than decision-making),

through to a belief that women-only settings are ineffective or divisive (with respect to class solidarity). Supporting arguments were that women's groups are a necessary means of countering male domination in unions; an important equality seeking strategy; valuable support and social networks within male dominated contexts. Arguments against women's groups included that they marginalize and tokenize women; separatism as a strategy is philosophically wrong; they do not achieve the aim of enhancing women's inclusion and empowerment as they often have no status or articulation with the mainstream. The criticism was harsher from American women and the support stronger, but not wholehearted or universal, from British:

I think they hurt women, I think organizations like CLUW, while they have good intent, they are like the ladies' auxiliary of the union movement and to me it's like I want to be a union leader, I don't want to be a woman union leader. (US11, white, age 56-65, Local Executive Director)

Prior to the 80s before you started having these committees the union movement was largely a movement for men and mainly dealt with issues that men thought were issues so that the value of them, especially women's committees, cannot be overestimated. (UK45, BME, age 36-45, Shop Steward).

However, for some women, particularly American, the question was not so much about the theoretical merits of women's committees, but about what they actually accomplish. Resonant with previous research (Parker 2002; Healy and Kirton 2000; Briskin 2002), the underlying question for some interviewees was how women's groups influence and engage with the mainstream goals, agenda and committees that interviewees typically prioritized. One American woman, supportive in theory of women's committees, related this experience:

We have a women's committee, they don't do shit, they sell cupcakes, they have a cake sale. I have never seen anything like it; they have not taken up any women's issues. They don't support the women's summer school that has been around this country for a long time – cupcakes! They had a fashion show last year, they do things for father's day, that's not a women's committee. That is not pushing women's issues. (US02, BME, age 56-65, Local Safety and Health Director)

The above woman, like many other US *and* UK women, preferred to put her efforts into 'mainstream' issues/structures. Many women, especially American, were quite happy with women's groups simply being 'talking shops', or put less cynically, support groups for women activists and leaders. For example, there was considerable US support for women's schools and conferences – institutionalized opportunities for women to network, share experiences and learn from one another – but less for women's (decision-making) committees. The British women were more critical of the 'talking shop' model of women's groups, but their support for women's committees was also qualified with expressions such as, 'they shouldn't be necessary, but ...'. Thus, even the British interviewees revealed some uneasiness with identity-based subgroups or caucuses, but they generally accepted their strategic role in maintaining women's representation:

I do sit on [a] women's committee. I am not sure it does a great deal. I chair the NEC [executive] women's committee I wish we didn't need to have them, but until women are equally represented on the higher level on the committees, then we probably still need women's committees to push forward women's issues. (UK17, white, age 65+, Branch Secretary)

As suggested in the last quote, even the more supportive British women tended to see women's groups as a pragmatic strategy – a necessary, possibly temporary, means to an end, rather than as a long-term mobilising strategy based on collective gender identity in the conceptual, feminist sense, for which purpose women's groups received the support of only a minority.

Conclusion

Long-term social movement participation is an important, but under-researched area and perhaps particularly pertinent is long-term participation in movements in decline (Klandermans 2003). Our study explored the long-term participation of women union leaders; over half of whom had become involved *during* the period of decline. We have focused on the concepts of commitment and collective identity seen not as static individual psychological properties, but as dynamic social processes responsive to external contexts and to experiences within movements (Della Porta and Diani 1999). While we have treated them as analytically distinct, it is evident from the above discussion that in practice they interrelate.

We found that many American and British women seemed to privilege class or union identity over gender identity. Circumstances hostile to workers/unionism at their individual workplaces had increased the sense of unequal power relations between employers and employees and the importance of union members standing together. However, on the US side at least this was expressed in non-Marxist language and without drawing on the Marxist narrative of class struggle. Nevertheless, the general crisis conditions facing unions that can serve to intensify union commitment and class-based collective identity were relevant for many of our interviewees (see Imonen and Jokivuori 2000). Against a context of *overall* decline, most of our interviewees worked in high density workplaces/occupations, meaning that for them unions remain influential if contested actors. Some (particularly on the American side) derived significant instrumental benefits from membership and participation. This has to be salient for the evolution of a union identity and for sustaining long-term participation.

However, people often have co-existing multiple identity affiliations even though these can create tensions (Della Porta and Diani 1999). We found evidence of a strong gender identity among union women, but not necessarily a progressive, feminist one, rather for many women (especially American) their gender identity was rooted in fairly essentialist notions of women's difference. Thus, most women met Della Porta and Diani's (1999) precondition for collective action (here based on gender) – the identification of a 'we' characterized by common traits and a specific solidarity (women), but not always the second – identification of 'the other' (men). Yet we also question binary oppositions common in the SM literature particularly as relating to established SMs such as unions where there are multiple and often competing interests. Many women were not prepared to identify union men as 'the adversary'.

Thus, although the feminist literature argues that gender identity can be shaped and strengthened by engagement with women's groups (e.g. Foley 2003; Kirton and Healy 2004), without an active and politicized gender identity, women are likely at best to give qualified support to separate women's groups and at worst they are likely to see them as unnecessary, even undesirable. All these views on women's groups were represented in our study. There were many women, especially British self-identified feminists, who had had extensive experience of women-only union groups that over time seemingly had shaped or strengthened a collective gender identity. They were conscious of gender difference and women's issues and at the same time these women also wanted to put their efforts into a class-based movement, but an inclusive one, hence the preparedness to participate in women's groups (the decision-making kind) that aim to challenge and transform the gender culture (McBride 2001; Parker 2002).

Earlier research on decision-making women's groups in the UK union context has recognised that not all women support them (e.g. McBride 2001; Parker 2002; Kirton 2006). This study builds understanding by highlighting cross-national differences in the level of women's support for separate organizing. The American women had less experience of women's groups, particularly committees, and were more sceptical about their purposes and benefits. Overall their espoused commitment to feminist goals was weaker than the British women's. Secondly, it is significant that interviewees were recruited from a broad spectrum of industries, occupations and unions, rather than only from the larger unions (the site of most research on women's groups, certainly in the UK) where women's groups are perhaps more visible, vibrant and connected to the mainstream (e.g. Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2001; Parker 2002). So, if we widen the lens nationally and cross-nationally, there seems to be less ideological support for (decision-making) women's groups and they seem to contribute less to sustaining women's participation.

When exploring the dynamics and politics of women union leaders' long-term participation in the UK and USA, what is striking is that despite significant differences in the structure and character of the two countries' union movements we found many similarities including Polletta and Jasper's point that participation transforms participants' subsequent biographies (2001:296). In different ways, it was evident that the participative process binds leaders to the union and its values and in so doing turns them into long-term movement participants. Over time, the union movement becomes more a way of life or a vocation than a job or a spare time activity and it is passion and commitment to 'the cause' that motivates women to stay involved even in a hostile internal and external climate.

The expressive and intrinsic rewards that women leaders perceive are many and long-term participation is often an expression of a core identity reinforced by sustained participation which only the phrase 'it's who I am' can adequately capture. Long-term union commitment, despite significant psychosocial costs, many of which as discussed are gendered, emerges as interrelated with and reciprocally shaped and reproduced by collective identity. Women leaders also demonstrated a liberal form of collective gender identity, partially influenced by their differential experiences of unions' women-only structures. Yet we conclude that while collective gender identity may inform collective union identity, it is on balance the collective union identity and

associated solidarity that remains more dominant among contemporary British and American women union leaders.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Gordon et al. (1980) are widely credited in the US literature with first defining union commitment.

ⁱⁱ But also among 'many casual participants'

ⁱⁱⁱ Following discussions with our American academic colleagues and with key American union informants, the decision was taken not to ask interviewees whether or not they self-identified as feminist as it was felt that American union women would find this question alienating. However, in many interviews orientations to feminism – ranging from supportive to hostile – were revealed in the course of the conversation.