

Revitalization through gender equality: a challenge for trade unions

Anja Kirsch
University of Sydney

Introduction

For many trade unions in Europe, the decline in their membership numbers presents a major challenge. Decreasing membership threatens unions' position as influential political and economic actors, and ultimately, their viability as organizations. As more and more women join the labour force, it is frequently argued that in order to meet this challenge, to reverse their decline and to enter into a new phase of "revitalization" or "renewal", unions have to find ways to recruit and integrate more women into their organizations (Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Foley and Baker 2009; Kirton and Healy 1999; Yates 2006).

In Germany, union membership density has fallen from a high point of 33 per cent in 1991 to 19.8 per cent in 2005 (Keller 2008). In recent years, unions have begun to feel the effects of this prolonged membership decline. Their organizational resource base has shrunk with falling dues income, and ultimately, their diminished financial strength and their declining representativeness have had a negative impact on their economic and political influence. However, despite a rise in women's labour force participation from 60.9 per cent in 1994 to 69.7 per cent in 2008 (OECD 2009), the percentage of women among the members of the DGB unions has only risen slightly – from 30.9 per cent in 1994 to 32.4 per cent in 2009 (DGB 2010), and the unions continue to predominantly be a men's domain. Hence, it appears that if German unions were able to find ways of organizing more women, this would be a feasible path to revitalization.

Indeed, in the literature on union revitalization, changes to union structures and governance systems that allow unions to more effectively represent an increasingly heterogeneous membership, and particularly to improve the representation of women, have been identified as key factors for achieving membership growth and strengthening political and economic influence (Behrens et al. 2004b). For some writers, equity is even the "central prerequisite" for union renewal (Foley 2009: 1).

Many unions aim to improve the representation of women through various gender equality initiatives, for example reserving seats for women in decision-making bodies and in leadership positions, establishing women's committees, introducing equality officers and departments, providing women-only training, supporting women's networks and mentoring, and implementing gender mainstreaming. Taken together, such measures can amount to substantial organizational reform.

Unions hope that such reforms will encourage the emergence of women union leaders, officials and activists, contribute to the development of a new, more gender-balanced image of unions, and will ensure the better representation of women's interests in collective bargaining and policy-making. Ultimately, this is thought to lead to greater success in organizing new female members.

In this paper I analyse gender equality initiatives in the German service sector union *ver.di* to uncover whether and how strategies to improve gender equality in unions contribute to union revitalization. This paper is structured as follows. The next section examines the existing research on gender equality strategies in unions. This is followed by sections introducing the case study union *ver.di* and examining its gender equality strategies and their impact on revitalization. Finally the implications of this

research and ways of strengthening the link between gender equality strategies and revitalization are discussed.

Union strategies to promote gender equality

Cross-nationally, there are salient differences in how unions are structured and how decision-making takes place within them. Nevertheless, there are many similarities in the internal strategies that unions employ to increase gender equality. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: the first category includes measures to increase the involvement and activism of female members in the union's decision-making bodies; the second category contains policies that affect the roles and positions of female union employees; and finally, the third category consists of measures to improve the representation of issues that are of particular interest to women in collective bargaining and in wider policy-making forums. In this section I provide an overview of these three types of strategies and discuss what contribution they can make to union revitalization.

The formal representation of female members in a union's structure can be increased by reserving seats for women at committees and conferences and ensuring their representation according to a specific quota or their proportion in the membership. In addition, introducing separate women's structures, such as women's committees, conferences and working groups, can serve to increase women's involvement in the union and enables them to develop their group interests and concerns. Experiences in several unions have shown that while changes to union constitutions that guarantee the proportional representation of women in mainstream structures and the establishment of separate women's structures certainly contribute to gender equality, there are a number of problems associated with this strategy. First, women in reserved seats may not be treated as equal members of a particular decision-making body, and may be marginalized because they lack a geographical or industrial constituency. On the other hand, women who are elected by a mixed-gender constituency may not feel comfortable pursuing women's interests. Second, if women's structures are not well linked with the mainstream structures, they may be marginalized and women may find it difficult to feed their group interests and concerns into the mainstream agenda. Furthermore, if the need for separate women's structures is not adequately recognized in the union, women activists may find that their autonomy and resources are repeatedly called into question (Blaschke 2008; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2000; Parker 2002; 2009).

It has been found that such structural changes are not sufficient to achieve gender equality in unions. Changes to what is oftentimes a masculine union culture are needed to ensure that gender equality is actually delivered through daily practice. As Pocock (1997) argues, such change means overcoming male resistance to the advancement of women in unions. One way of changing organizational culture is through education and training. Several researchers have shown that women-only trade union education can contribute to greater identification and participation of female activist members (Greene and Kirton 2002; Kirton and Healy 2004), and that women's networks can support women's activism (Dempsey 2000; Hansen 2004; Koch-Baumgarten 2002).

The second group of strategies seek to increase gender equality among union employees, particularly by ensuring greater representation of women among the full-time elected or appointed officer positions through quotas and other affirmative action policies.

Various studies point to the scarcity of women among union officials and leaders and emphasize the difficulties women face in this traditionally male dominated occupation. Women encounter barriers including gender discrimination, prejudice and sexual stereotyping where union work is conceptualized as men's work. It is portrayed as confrontational and aggressive, requiring endurance and toughness – and women are seen as too 'soft' and 'emotional' for the job. Furthermore, masculine union culture that conceptualizes the work of union officials as requiring heroic, self-sacrificing commitment and extremely heavy workloads makes it particularly difficult for women with family responsibilities to take up such work. In addition, women officials have less access to support networks and female role models. Such studies call for affirmative action in officer recruitment and promotion, for better training, mentoring and more preparation for women seeking leadership positions, and for greater efforts in sensitizing men and women to the gendered nature of union work and in reinterpreting the role of the union leader to be more gender inclusive (Cockburn 1994; Cook 1984; Franzway 2000; Gray 1993; Heery and Kelly 1989; Sudano 1997).

Other studies examine what effect the presence of women officials has on union activity. It is found that women in officer positions not only contribute to gender equality in terms of numbers, but that their presence also has positive effects on the representation of women's interests and the development of women's participation in the future. Female union officers attach greater priority to women's issues in collective bargaining and are more committed to recruiting women and promoting their participation in union affairs than are men (Heery and Kelly 1988). It is also argued that senior union women act as role models for other women in the union movement (Kirton and Healy 1999) and that the presence of women officials has a positive effect on the recruitment of women and the nature of union policy (Pocock 1997).

The third group of strategies to increase gender equality in unions is concerned with how of issues that are of particular interest to women can be better represented in unions' decision making bodies. A novel way of doing this is through gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming has been defined as "the promotion of gender equality through its systematic integration into all systems and structures, into all policies, processes and procedures, into the organisation and its culture, into ways of seeing and doing" (Rees 2005: 560). Several unions in Europe have begun to implement this strategy, which aims to make women and men in all parts of the organization aware of the consequences of all their actions for both sexes and to prompt them to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Gender mainstreaming means integrating gender policy into the daily tasks of mainstream union officers. All union work, including bargaining topics, policies, decisions and processes, is analysed from a gender perspective to discover whether it creates inequalities (Dean 2006). Gender mainstreaming is a long-term strategy that can create a transformational change in organizations. However, it requires sufficient resources over a long period of time, and there is a danger that gender mainstreaming can be used as an excuse for dismantling women's structures and effectively doing nothing at all to promote gender equality (Rees 2005). A second danger is that the transformational goals of gender mainstreaming can be lost. Gender mainstreaming can be reduced to the mere application of techniques and tools, such as the use of equality indicators and gender impact assessments, and can thereby "degenerate into a 'gender proofing' system of 'tick box' mechanisms" (Rees 2005: 562-563; Walby 2005).

Studies have also found that the work of equality officers and departments supports the inclusion of women's interests in collective bargaining and in particular bargaining on equal pay. Training for officers and negotiation committees in equality bargaining

and the use of gender mainstreaming methods help to identify and remedy gender discrimination in collective agreements (Heery 2006; Tondorf 2001).

Most of the research on gender equality in unions does not discuss how strategies to increase gender equality can ultimately lead to an increase in female membership and contribute to union revitalization. Rather, the realization of gender equality tends to be seen either as a goal in itself, or the link to revitalization is seen as unproblematic – the idea being that gender equality within the union will quasi-automatically lead to revitalization. While equality is undoubtedly an important goal, it is not self-evident that equality within a union will make it more attractive to potential members and cause more women to join. Despite this, many unions justify the introduction of gender equality strategies with reference to the need to attract more female members. Therefore, the focus here is to identify the link between gender equality strategies and revitalization outcomes. The next section examines gender equality strategies in the German service sector union ver.di, and assesses whether revitalization outcomes have been achieved.

The ver.di case

The case study approach is most useful for examining the link between gender equality strategies and union revitalization, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of the strategies themselves and of the link between the strategies and revitalization outcomes. The case study chosen in this research is the German service sector union ver.di. Ver.di is one of the world's largest unions and has put one of the most extensive gender equality strategies in place. It was formed by a merger of five unions in 2001 and represents workers in the public sector and in the private services sector, including banking, insurance, retail, wholesale, the postal service, telecommunications, printing and media. The proportion of female members is around 50 per cent. However, the gender distribution of members varied greatly among the five founding unions. The media union *IG Medien* was the most male-dominated merger partner with only 32.5 per cent female members in 1999, a fact that stemmed from its history as a printers' union. The largest merger partner, the public sector union *ÖTV*, and the postal and telecommunications union *DPG* also represented considerably more men than women. In contrast, in the white-collar union *DAG* 55.6 per cent of members were women, and in the retail and finance sector union *HBV* two thirds of members (66.4 per cent) were women (DAG et al. 2000a). When ver.di was established, the opportunity was taken to incorporate far-reaching gender equality policies in the new rulebook.

Data was gathered from 2008 to 2010 through interviews with union leaders in charge of women's policy, gender policy, collective bargaining principles, membership development and human resources within the organization. Interviews were conducted in German. Where they are quoted in this paper they have been translated by the author. In addition, policy documents and data on the numbers of women union leaders, officials, activists and members over time were examined.

Gender equality initiatives and revitalization in ver.di

The establishment of ver.di was seen as a key opportunity to realize greater gender equality within the union. Union leaders and particularly women's groups in the founding unions were convinced that a new union could not neglect this issue. As a senior official for women's policy explained:

The goal [of gender equality] was uncontentious [...]. One reason was the view that we cannot fall behind the standards of this day and age when

founding a new union, we don't want that and we see it as unacceptable. There is a difference between a union rulebook that is 20, 30 or 60 years old and does not specifically deal with [gender equality] and writing a rulebook in 2001 in the public eye.

Besides this view that promoting gender equality was the politically correct thing to do, leaders of the founding unions anticipated that the promotion of gender equality would allow women to identify more strongly with the union and that this would ultimately boost female membership. They outlined this view in ver.di's founding documents (DAG et al. 2000a). An official elaborated:

We have come to realize that nowadays we have to portray an image with which women can identify if we want them to join us. And then that has to be nominated as a key task, and then equality must be set down in the rulebook.

Consequently, ver.di introduced various measures for increasing the involvement and activism of female members, increasing the number of female union officials and leaders, and changing the gender culture.

Increasing the involvement and activism of female members in ver.di

One of the main thrusts of ver.di's gender equality initiatives were rules and programs designed to increase the involvement and activism of female ver.di members. Ver.di's rulebook (Ver.di 2003c) includes a women's quota that prescribes the representation of women in all decision-making bodies and committees and in all delegate elections at least according to their proportion in the membership (or the section of the membership that a specific body represents). It also mandates the establishment of women's committees and the organization of women's conferences at the district, regional district and national level, and it requires the industry departments to implement binding structures for the representation of women. The role of the women's committees and conferences is to develop policies and campaigns concerning women's issues and equal rights, and to represent women's interests in the mainstream committees and conferences. In addition, the industry departments can conduct women's collective bargaining forums to discuss and decide on demands and pass them on to the bargaining committees. Regardless of the existence of such forums or otherwise, two women from the women's representative bodies are to participate in the bargaining committees in an advisory capacity (DAG et al. 2000b). Overall, in McBride's (2000) terms, ver.di's rules and guidelines provide for the proportional representation *by* women in the mainstream structures, and for the representation *of* women as a social group in specific women's structures at all levels and in all departments of the union. Importantly, the rules also provide the women's structures with the power to influence decision-making in the mainstream union.

The formal rules on gender equality in ver.di's structure are extensive and they have largely been put into practice in the committees and conferences. For example, by 2003, the proportion of women in collective bargaining committees in ver.di was 57 per cent, and in negotiation committees it was 51 per cent (Tondorf et al. 2004). The proportion of female delegates at the national congresses in 2001, 2003 and 2007 was also 50 per cent or more (Ver.di 2001; 2003b; 2007e). The members of ver.di's highest decision-making committee between congresses, the Union Council (*Gewerkschaftsrat*), are elected at the national congresses. At each election, women were elected in over 50 per cent of seats (Projektbüro Gründungskongress ver.di 2001; ver.di 2003a; 2007c). Generally, the gender composition of the committees and conferences at regional and local levels also complies with the women's quota, although data on this is not collected centrally.

A further instrument for increasing the involvement and activism of women within the union is women-only education. Ver.di offers a wide range of women's only seminars. Some are specifically for female works and staff councillors or women's and equal opportunity representatives. Many focus on labour law, but some also deal with communication, negotiation, and representing women's issues in these committees. Others are for rank-and-file members and concern general issues such as harassment and discrimination, stress management, knowledge management, managing conflict, women in leadership positions, and work-life balance, or they are geared towards women who work in particular occupations or industries (Ver.di 2007a).

Ver.di's gender policy department offers gender mainstreaming seminars for activists, and they are highly sought after, particularly by works councillors. The gender policy department also publishes extensive materials for activists to use in their workplaces, for example on gender mainstreaming, work-life balance, in particular for fathers, and flexible working time. Through the seminars and publications, ver.di has promoted an awareness of gender issues not only within the union but also in the workplaces in which its activists are employed.

Two small mentoring programs for female lay activists were carried out with the purpose of increasing the involvement of women members in ver.di. In 2006/07 and 2008/09 delegates from ver.di's women's committees served as mentors for younger women new to union activism. As the final report of the first mentoring program states, after the conclusion of the mentoring program, many mentees became members of ver.di's women's committees or mainstream committees, or took up positions such as works councillor or union workplace representative (Ver.di 2007b; 2010).

Despite widespread support for the women's quota and recognition of the need to increase women's involvement in ver.di, dissent and resistance to gender equality initiatives surface time and again, as three officials from the women's and gender policy departments elaborated:

Wonders will never cease. At the last national congress there were motions to remove the quota!

Everyone has the right to put forward a motion. Even the most obscure district can put a motion to the national congress. And then the motion must be dealt with. You don't know what kind of freaks are out there, and accordingly, we sometimes get motions that are not politically desirable in general, but we do have to deal with them.

Since we have achieved 50%, the discussion has begun whether we still need women's policy at all. Every chance is used to do away with us.

Increasing the number of female union officials and leaders

A key aspect of gender equality in a union concerns the number of women among union officials and leaders. When ver.di was established in 2001, the Regional District Executive Committees were made up of thirteen women and 53 men, and only seven of the nineteen National Executive Committee members were women (Müller et al. 2002: 200). By 2007, the gender imbalances had not been adequately addressed. Although 65 per cent of all ver.di employees were women, women made up close to all administrative employees (94 per cent), but only 37 per cent of union officials were women (see Table 1). The proportion of women in leadership positions was even lower, and was only 26.8 per cent in 2003 (Tondorf et al. 2004).

Table 1: Ver.di Employees by Gender, June 2007

	Women	Men	Total
All employees	2,691 (65%)	1,470 (35%)	4,161
Union officials	728 (37%)	1,248 (63%)	1,976
Administrative employees	1,644 (94%)	107 (6%)	1,751

Source: Ver.di (2007d).

Despite rules stipulating that the National Executive Committee must take measures such as staff development programs to increase the number of female union officials and leaders, not much happened, according to senior officials from the HR and women's policy departments, until delegates took further steps to enforce the women's quota among union officials:

In the first four years there was a voluntary commitment in ver.di to make sure that enough women reach leadership positions. In the first four years nothing happened. Zero. Nothing at all. Nada. Consequently our activists decided at a national congress: Enough! If the full-time officials don't do it voluntarily, then we have to introduce a quota there as well. And that's what was decided and that has now been carried out.

In the last elections we succeeded in getting the quota for the leadership positions. That was difficult. [...] Regulations were needed – it had to be specified exactly what must be done in such an election. Controlling mechanisms were needed and the firm intention had to be stated “we are doing this, there is no way out anymore”. Otherwise it was always: paper is patient, and it is written there, but people didn't look for women candidates and then afterwards they said “unfortunately we don't have anyone”.

Today, if a man is nominated for a leadership position, an order by the Union Council requires a formal and written justification explaining what steps were taken to find a woman to fill the position and why that did not succeed.

The stringent application of the women's quota among union officials and leaders has been a great challenge for ver.di. It turned out that in 2007, when the women's quota became mandatory for officials, two other major organizational changes also took place. Firstly, the size of the union committees was significantly reduced. In the 2001 merger agreement, decisions about their size were based on the necessity to represent members from all founding unions, and this turned out to be cumbersome and impractical. The Union Council decided to reduce the size of committees, including the executive committees comprised of full-time officers. It determined that all Regional District Executive Committees would be reduced from five to three members, that the District Executive Committees would be reduced from five to two members, and that the National Executive Committee would be reduced from 19 to eleven members in 2007. Secondly, three mergers among seven Regional Districts were scheduled to be implemented in 2007. This meant that the number of elected officer positions in those Regional Districts would be significantly reduced. Due to vehement opposition to these mergers by those affected, two of the mergers were called off.

In combination, the women's quota, the reductions in committee sizes and the planned mergers among Regional Districts generated a lot of pressure and

uncertainty in the organization. These simultaneous changes meant that the number of leadership positions in ver.di was significantly reduced. They also meant that a number of men who had leadership positions could not keep them and that the hopes of some men who thought they were next in line for such positions were dashed. An official from the HR department highlighted the significance of this problem:

The quota and the programs we have for women have an effect on men. And not a good one. Because for middle-aged men who have progressed some way in their working lives, the message is: "I can't get anywhere here" and that has a negative effect. We need to watch out that they don't get the impression that "every woman, regardless of how stupid or how unqualified she is, is getting somewhere, but I'm not". That would be very bad for the success of our organization. It has already happened that high potentials have left us because it was totally clear to them that they were not going to get anywhere in the foreseeable future. Those were real losses.

At the same time, women, who were sometimes not given the amount of training and support necessary, were brought in from other parts of ver.di or even from other organizations to fill the positions (Annesley 2006). At one point, the opinion that such a stringent application of the women's quota was not legally tenable circulated in ver.di and found the support of many employees.

A second measure to increase the number of female union officials is a training and mentoring program that prepares women for leadership positions. As a large number of the current leaders are close to retirement, this mentoring program is seen as an opportunity to increase the number of women who are well-informed about the requirements and prepared to candidate for the positions as they become available (Ver.di 2008).

A third measure is a program to recruit young trainee union officials. An official from the women's policy department explained that many of the women currently working for ver.di who are interested in and suitable for leadership positions have now been promoted, and correspondingly the number of women in the middle levels of the organization has decreased. An official from the HR department concurs that the challenge now is to recruit women into the trainee program in order to have enough women available for leadership positions in the future.

Changing the gender culture in ver.di

Perhaps the most difficult changes towards greater gender equality are changes to organizational culture. Parallel to the quotas and mentoring programs to promote gender equality among activist members and union employees, ver.di implemented a gender mainstreaming strategy. Its key aim is the integration of gender policy into daily union work in all industry departments and at all levels of the organization. As such, a successful gender mainstreaming strategy would see gender policy implemented by mainstream union officers during their daily tasks of bargaining, servicing, policy-making and so forth. Such a strategy amounts to an encompassing cultural change. In order to achieve this, ver.di ordered the nomination of gender representatives (*Genderbeauftragte*) in all departments at the national office and in all regional districts. It also established a gender policy department which provides consultation and advice to union leaders, holds gender training and information sessions and workshops, and writes manuals on how to implement gender mainstreaming and how to conduct "gender checks" (*Genderprüfung*).

In 2006, the gender policy department conducted a review of ver.di's gender mainstreaming strategy. It found that ver.di had made considerable progress in the integration of gender policy both in its internal structures as well as in bargaining and

policy-making. Nevertheless, the gender policy department's overall assessment was that gender mainstreaming had not become an established part of daily union work. Rather, it was seen as an additional task that was often neglected. The department identified several key problems: First, there were no established transport routes for gender policy into the structures and committees, and gender mainstreaming was therefore not well-anchored in the organization. In particular, it was not well-anchored in ver.di's core operative areas such as collective bargaining. Second, gender mainstreaming was not seen as an obligation and union officials did not treat it as a priority. Whether they dealt with it at all was arbitrary – there were no sanctions for not doing so, and doing so was not supported or rewarded. For example, although there was an agreement that all proposals brought to the national executive committee would pass through a “gender check”, there were no consequences if this was not done or only done cursorily. Third, union leaders did not sufficiently support and promote the implementation of gender mainstreaming in their areas of responsibility. For example, posts for gender representatives were frequently not filled. An official from the gender policy department explained:

In some cases they were just alibi nominations, similar to the nomination of a fire warden. Then it was just a position that the person held but did not fill with life. [...] I'd say the commitment decreased after about 2 or 3 years. Firstly it was due to the fact that the workloads for gender mainstreaming tasks were reduced, secondly it was due to staff turnover – gender representatives left and no one new was nominated – and thirdly it was surely due to the fact that our colleagues in the districts are generally overworked and have always seen this as something that they have to do in addition to their daily work.

Also, when obligatory leadership training was introduced for all union officials with leadership roles, the training program did not include any gender aspects. This weakened the two-pronged gender mainstreaming strategy of combining top-down role modeling behaviour from union leaders with bottom-up qualification and participation of all officials and activists (Ver.di 2006).

This weak support for gender mainstreaming meant that the gender policy department had to invest considerable resources in information and training. Consequently, it had few resources with which to support the integration of gender policy into daily union work and to document, control and evaluate the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Nevertheless, the gender policy department regarded gender mainstreaming as a long-term organizational learning process that would take considerable time to implement.

Since then, officials from the gender policy department say that most union officials have completed a gender training session and the focus of the department is on providing training to activists, such as works councillors interested in promoting gender equality in their own workplaces, and on finding ways of linking gender mainstreaming with ‘hard’ topics such as collective bargaining. This involves, for example, providing gender training to negotiation committees. Summarizing, the gender mainstreaming strategy has served to create greater awareness of gender issues among union staff and activists but their integration into daily union work remain a work in progress.

Several interviewees were very conscious of the fact that union culture is traditionally male-dominated, and that remains the case even in ver.di. For example, an official commented:

Union culture is still male dominated [...] it is a political organization, it's about power, and men know the game well. They have the power to define the rules of the game. For example: hardly anyone here stops working after 35 or 37 hours, we're very demanding of ourselves [...] That means that you often

have to be flexible with working hours and that's not easy with children. And in terms of leadership – at the moment if you want to have a career and children and work part time, it just doesn't fit together. [...] We have this joke: when I see someone leaving at 5pm I look at the clock and say "have you taken half a day off?" It's a joke that makes a lot clear. The culture and the expectation is that everyone works a lot. It is difficult to change that and it takes a long time. And the women who organize themselves so that it's possible with children don't have it easy. They simply have to work against the culture.

The male culture is embodied in the omnipotent male union leader who is on duty 24/7. Nevertheless, they identified several areas in which this traditional culture is changing – interestingly, they did not see the changes as a consequence of gender equality initiatives, but as a result of factors such as generational and societal change and occupational health and safety concerns. The following quotes illustrate this:

It's an attitude of "I know everything, I can do everything and I do do everything 24 hours a day". It's about availability, but also omnipotence – "I'll do that for you" – the leader who goes on ahead. I don't think this image of the union official works anymore. Today we need someone like an advisor, a coach, who can provide input and who can listen. I think the job requirements are changing in modern unions.

Young men – women too but mainly young men – are careful to ensure that their work-life balance is more even than was the case in the past. At least the union officials that I have recruited – men – say: "I have small children and I want to spend some time with them." That is a novelty. Until now, the union official was only regarded as being important if he was on duty 24 hours, didn't have a private life and just lived for his work. This traditional image still exists – even in ver.di. And those people who say "It's time for me to call it a day, I have a private life" are still in the minority and often have to justify themselves. Women haven't been doing that as offensively as the young men do. They say "when I'm on leave I'm on leave and I don't work".

We try to ensure that the contractual working hours are adhered to most of the time, or at least working hours that are not harmful to people's health [...] But in this area the culture has not changed, there is little flexibility. We can't really initiate change here with a women's policy argument, but more with an occupational health and safety and cost-based argument by saying "when they get sick long-term, they're too expensive for us. We can't afford that".

Revitalization outcomes

Union revitalization is frequently reduced to meaning membership growth, but the concept is more encompassing. A revitalized union can be seen not just as a union that reverses a trend of decreasing membership, but also as a union that re-establishes power, in collective bargaining as well as in the political sphere (Behrens et al. 2004a). However, in practical terms it is difficult to gauge whether a union has increased its power – for example, bargaining power may increase but not manifest itself in better bargaining outcomes if other adverse factors are at play. In the context of this research, we expect ver.di's gender equality initiatives to make unionization more appealing to women, and this should become observable in increasing membership among women. It must be noted that women may not take up union membership even if they find the idea of membership increasingly appealing. Nevertheless, examining trends in female membership can provide us with a rough

idea of whether gender equality initiatives in ver.di have had any discernible impact on union revitalization.

Table 2 shows that within the context of overall membership decline that ver.di experienced since its establishment in 2001, the absolute number of female members in ver.di dropped as well.

Table 2: Members and Female Members in Ver.di, 2001-2009

	Members	Female members	Percentage of female members
December 2001	2,806,496	1,385,697	49.4
December 2002	2,740,123	1,355,888	49.5
December 2003	2,614,094	1,299,360	49.7
December 2004	2,464,510	1,225,984	49.8
December 2005	2,359,392	1,172,140	49.7
December 2006	2,274,731	1,132,963	49.8
December 2007	2,205,145	1,100,057	49.9
December 2008	2,180,229	1,089,529	50.0
December 2009	2,138,200	1,077,285	50.4

Source: ver.di's internal membership statistics.

This data can be interpreted in both a positive or negative light – on the positive side, the proportion of women is increasing despite membership decline, and now the majority of ver.di members are women. However, an overall loss of more than 300,000 women members and a rather modest increase in the proportion of women members of merely one per cent bear little relation to the far-reaching organizational reforms that have taken place within ver.di to improve gender equality. The next section draws on the views of ver.di officials to explain why the link between gender equality strategies and union revitalization is tenuous.

Discussion

The ver.di case shows that the link between strategies to increase gender equality in unions and union revitalization is not as straightforward as is frequently suggested both in academic literature and by unions themselves. Rather, there are several roadblocks on the path from gender equality to union revitalization. The most salient of these are the enduring public image of unions as men's organizations and internally, the separation of gender equality strategies from membership development strategies.

As Blaschke (2008: 260-263) explains in her analysis of women in German and Austrian unions, in the public sphere unions continue to be seen as organizations that primarily represent skilled male workers. Even where this is no longer the case, this image persists and unions are not doing enough to publicly position themselves

as organizations that represent women's interests. Interviewees in ver.di thought that its gender equality policies have the potential to transform the public image of ver.di into that of a modern organization that represents a heterogeneous workforce. However, the gender equality policies were not part of an organizational strategy to recruit more members and were not central to ver.di's communication strategy. In fact, when something was done to improve gender equality, it was not always recognized and communicated to the public as such. One example are ver.di's efforts in equality bargaining, as an official explained:

I don't think it is really perceptible that ver.di is doing so much equality bargaining. Sure, we always talk about non-discriminatory collective agreements, the evaluation of men's and women's work and so on. But it's a difficult subject area and even women sometimes don't understand it. They don't even understand that they are being paid less and that their work is undervalued. And we don't publicize it properly either, as in "here, this is explicitly equality bargaining [...] so that's why you women should join, because we have recognized this and we're working whole-heartedly on this because 50 per cent of our members are women so it's a key theme for us". No, I haven't heard that being said.

Furthermore, no data is collected on whether the gender pay gap has been reduced in ver.di's coverage area or by how much ver.di has increased the inclusion of women's interests in collective agreements – so such data cannot be used to advertise what ver.di has achieved for women.

Officials from various departments say that women's and equality policy is not always "as well connected with other areas as it should be", that the women's policy area has "a bit of a life of its own" and that women in ver.di have "let themselves be pushed aside". There is no organizing strategy specifically for women and ver.di has not collected information on why women join or leave the union. For the main part, gender equality within ver.di is pursued as a goal in itself and there are few efforts to use gender equality achievements to increase membership among women. As an official succinctly summarized, gender equality within ver.di is simply a must: "the union council requests it, the activists request it – and we have to implement it. Period."

Overall, the top leadership has not effectively harnessed the work done for equality and used it to change the way ver.di is perceived in public, and leaders on the ground have not used it to convince women to join.

Conclusion

This case study has illustrated the various strategies that unions can employ to increase the involvement and activism of female members, to increase the number of female union officials and leaders, and to change the gender culture. It has also highlighted that even the most encompassing gender equality strategies may not translate into increased membership among women or revitalization more broadly if those strategies do not feed into the way a union portrays itself in the public and communicates with current and potential members. Perhaps a useful way of conceptualizing this is to draw on the distinction made between internal and external strategies for revitalization (Fletcher and Hurd 2001; Hurd et al. 2003; Turner 2005). Internal organizational reform such as the gender equality strategies discussed in this paper may be an important first step before external strategies such as organizing women can be tackled effectively.

References

- Annesley, Claire. 2006. Ver.di and Trade Union Revitalisation in Germany. *Industrial Relations Journal* 37 (2): 164-179.
- Behrens, Martin, Kerstin Hamann, and Richard W. Hurd. 2004a. Conceptualizing Labour Union Revitalization. In *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy*, edited by Carola M. Frege and John Kelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 11-29.
- Behrens, Martin, Richard W. Hurd, and Jeremy Waddington. 2004b. How Does Restructuring Contribute to Union Revitalization? In *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy*, edited by Carola M. Frege and John Kelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 117-136.
- Blaschke, Sabine. 2008. *Frauen in Gewerkschaften: Zur Situation in Österreich und Deutschland aus organisationssoziologischer Perspektive*. München: Rainer Hampp.
- Cockburn, Cynthia. 1994. Play of Power: Women, men and equality initiatives in a trade union. In *Anthropology of Organizations*, edited by Susan Wright. London: Routledge: 95-114.
- Colgan, Fiona, and Sue Ledwith. 2002. Gender and diversity: Reshaping union democracy. *Employee Relations* 24 (2): 167-189.
- Cook, Alice H. 1984. Introduction. In *Women and Trade Unions in Eleven Industrialized Countries*, edited by Alice H. Cook, Val R. Lorwin and Arlene Kaplan Daniels. Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 3-36.
- DAG, DPG, HBV, IG Medien, ÖTV, and Gründungsorganisation ver.di e.V. 2000a. Gemeinsamer Verschmelzungsbericht der Vorstände. In *Verschmelzung ver.di, Dokumentenband*, edited by DAG, DPG, HBV, IG Medien, ÖTV and Gründungsorganisation ver.di e.V. Hamburg.
- DAG, DPG, HBV, IG Medien, ÖTV, and Gründungsorganisation ver.di e.V. 2000b. Richtlinie zur Frauen- und Gleichstellungspolitik. In *Verschmelzung ver.di: Richtlinienband*, edited by DAG, DPG, HBV, IG Medien, ÖTV and Gründungsorganisation ver.di e.V. Frankfurt.
- Dean, Homa. 2006. *Women in trade unions: Methods and good practices for gender mainstreaming*. Brussels: ETUI-REHS.
- Dempsey, Michael. 2000. UNISON's Management of the Merger and Beyond. In *Redefining Public Sector Unionism: UNISON and the Future of Trade Unions*, edited by Michael Terry. London: Routledge: 49-66.
- DGB. 2010. *Mitglieder in den DGB-Gewerkschaften*. Available from <http://www.dgb.de/dgb/mitgliederzahlen/mitglieder.htm> [accessed 31 March 2010].
- Fletcher, Bill Jr., and Richard W. Hurd. 2001. Overcoming Obstacles to Transformation: Challenges on the Way to a New Unionism. In *Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the 21st Century*, edited by Lowell Turner, Harry C. Katz and Richard W. Hurd. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 182-208.
- Foley, Janice. 2009. Introduction. In *Unions, equity, and the path to renewal*, edited by Janice Foley and Patricia Baker. Vancouver: UBC Press: 1-12.
- Foley, Janice, and Patricia Baker, eds. 2009. *Unions, equity, and the path to renewal*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Franzway, Susanne. 2000. Women Working in a Greedy Institution: Commitment and Emotional Labour in the Union Movement. *Gender, Work and Organization* 7 (4): 258-268.
- Gray, Lois S. 1993. The Route to the Top: Female Union Leaders and Union Policy. In *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble. Ithaca: ILR Press: 378-393.

- Greene, Anne-Marie, and Gill Kirton. 2002. Advancing Gender Equality: The Role of Women-Only Trade Union Education. *Gender, Work and Organization* 9 (1): 39-59.
- Hansen, Lise Lotte. 2004. Does the Future of Unions Depend on the Integration of Diversity? *Industrielle Beziehungen* 11 (1+2): 129-142.
- Healy, Geraldine, and Gill Kirton. 2000. Women, Power and Trade Union Government in the UK. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 38 (3): 343-360.
- Heery, Edmund. 2006. Equality Bargaining: Where, Who, Why? *Gender, Work and Organization* 13 (6): 522-542.
- Heery, Edmund, and John Kelly. 1988. Do Female Representatives Make a Difference? Women Full-Time Officials and Trade Union Work. *Work, Employment and Society* 2 (4): 487-505.
- Heery, Edmund, and John Kelly. 1989. 'A cracking job for a woman' - a profile of women trade union officers. *Industrial Relations Journal* 20 (3): 192-202.
- Hurd, Richard, Ruth Milkman, and Lowell Turner. 2003. Reviving the American Labour Movement: Institutions and Mobilization. *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9 (1): 99-117.
- Keller, Berndt. 2008. *Einführung in die Arbeitspolitik. Arbeitsbeziehungen und Arbeitsmarkt in sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*. 7th ed. München; Wien: Oldenbourg.
- Kirton, Gill, and Geraldine Healy. 1999. Transforming Union Women: The Role of Women Trade Union Officials in Union Renewal. *Industrial Relations Journal* 30 (1): 31-45.
- Kirton, Gill, and Geraldine Healy. 2004. Shaping Union and Gender Identities: A Case Study of Women-Only Trade Union Courses. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 42 (2): 303-323.
- Koch-Baumgarten, Sigrid. 2002. Changing gender relations in German trade unions: From 'Worker's Patriarchy' to gender democracy? In *Gender, diversity and trade unions: international perspectives*, edited by Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith. London: Routledge: 132-153.
- McBride, Anne. 2000. Promoting Representation of Women Within UNISON. In *Redefining Public Sector Unionism: UNISON and the Future of Trade Unions*, edited by Michael Terry. London: Routledge: 100-118.
- Müller, Hans-Peter, Horst-Udo Niedenhoff, and Manfred Wilke. 2002. *ver.di: Porträt und Positionen*. Köln: Deutscher Instituts-Verlag.
- OECD. 2009. *Employment Outlook: Tackling the Jobs Crisis*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development.
- Parker, Jane. 2002. Women's Groups in British Unions. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40 (1): 23-48.
- Parker, Jane. 2009. Women's collectivism in context: women's groups in UK trade unions. *Industrial Relations Journal* 40 (1): 78-97.
- Pocock, Barbara. 1997. Gender, Strife and Unions. In *Strife: Sex and Politics in Labour Unions*, edited by Barbara Pocock. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin: 9-25.
- Projektbüro Gründungskongress ver.di. 2001. *Kongressunterlagen (Wahlvorschläge), Gründungskongress 19.-21.3.2001*. Berlin: ver.di.
- Rees, Teresa. 2005. Reflections on the Uneven Development of Gender Mainstreaming in Europe. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (4): 555-574.
- Sudano, Leena. 1997. Women Union Leaders: Mongrels, Martyrs, Misfits, or Models for the Future? In *Strife: Sex and Politics in Labour Unions*, edited by Barbara Pocock. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin: 149-171.
- Tondorf, Karin. 2001. Gender Mainstreaming in der Tarifpolitik. *WSI Mitteilungen* 54 (7): 434-441.

- Tondorf, Karin, Andrea Jochmann-Döll, and Anne Jenter. 2004. Repräsentanz und Beteiligung von Frauen und Männern in Gewerkschaften. In *Positionen + Hintergründe* 4/04, edited by DGB-Bundesvorstand Abteilung Gleichstellungs- und Frauenpolitik. Berlin.
- Turner, Lowell. 2005. From Transformation to Revitalization: A New Research Agenda for a Contested Global Economy. *Work and Occupations* 32 (4): 383-399.
- Ver.di. 2001. *Protokoll des Gründungskongresses*. Berlin: ver.di.
- ver.di. 2003a. *Kongressunterlagen (Wahlvorschläge), Bundeskongress 19.-25.10.2003*. Berlin: ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2003b. *Protokoll des Bundeskongresses*. Berlin: ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2003c. *Satzung ver.di - Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft*. Berlin.
- Ver.di. 2006. *Gender Mainstreaming in der Praxis von ver.di: Bestandsaufnahme - Analyse - Erfahrungen - Einschätzungen - Perspektiven*. Berlin.
- Ver.di. 2007a. *Bildung und Seminare*. Available from <http://frauen.verdi.de/seminare> [accessed 27 November 2007].
- Ver.di. 2007b. *Das ehrenamtliche Mentoring-Projekt des Bundesfrauenrates – Ein Erfolgsmodell*. Berlin: ver.di.
- ver.di. 2007c. *Kongressunterlagen (Wahlvorschläge), Bundeskongress 30.9.-6.10.2007*. Berlin: ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2007d. *Personalbericht 2007*. Berlin: Ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2007e. *Protokoll des Bundeskongresses*. Berlin: ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2008. *Personalbericht 2008*. Berlin: Ver.di.
- Ver.di. 2010. *Mehr bewegen – das Tandem zum Erfolg. 2. Mentoring Projekt des Bundesfrauenrates*. Available from <http://frauen.verdi.de/themen/mentoringprojekt/#1-mentoring-projekt-des-bundesfrauenrates> [accessed 21 March 2010].
- Walby, Sylvia. 2005. Gender Mainstreaming: Productive Tensions in Theory and Practice. *Social Politics* 12 (3): 321-343.
- Yates, Charlotte. 2006. Women are Key to Union Renewal: Lessons from the Canadian Labour Movement. In *Paths to Union Renewal: Canadian Experiences*, edited by Pradeep Kumar and Christopher Schenk. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press: 103-112.