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## **Breaking through the union glass ceiling in France: between organizational opportunities and individual resources**

Cécile Guillaume  
Sophie Pochic

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### ***Summary***

*In France, as in many other countries, women have great difficulties in achieving positional power within union structures, even when equality policies have been implemented, as in the case of CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail) since 1981. Following recent developments that put emphasis on women's agency in the union context, this paper explores the structural, organizational and individual factors that have allowed few women to become union leaders. More specifically we will examine the interrelationship between internal equality policies for enhancing women's representation and other less explored dimensions such as the impact of organizing strategies and internal political battles over union identity shift, the evolution of union work and the influence of women's own resources.*

In France, as in many other countries, women have great difficulties in achieving positional power within union structures. Although they now account for more than 40% of the membership in some major unions, the gap between the proportion of women who are trade union members and of those who are senior paid or elected officers remains wide (Contrepois, 2006; Silvera, 2006). Most of the “women and trade unions” literature has focused on explaining gendered barriers and constraints that prevent women from gaining higher representation in union structures (Briskin, 1990; Cockburn, 2001; Colgan and Ledwith, 1996, 2002; Dorgan and Grieco, 1993; Franzway, 2000; Kirton and Healy, 1999; Munro, 1999). However, for the last thirty years, a mix of radical and liberal measures (Jewson and Mason, 1986) has been implemented within some French unions, leading to the promotion of a few female leaders, including one female General Secretary, Nicole Notat, who was elected in 1992 by the 2<sup>nd</sup> major French general union confederation (600.000 members) – Confédération Démocratique Française du Travail (CFDT). In 2010, three women out of nine were part of the CFDT national executive committee. At first sight, it is possible to explain these exceptional trajectories by the gender equality policy put in place since 1982<sup>i</sup>. But reality is more complex. Following recent developments that put emphasis on women's agency in the union context (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Kirton, 2006b; Moore, 2011), this paper explores the structural, organizational and individual factors that have allowed a growing number of women to become union leaders. More specifically we will examine the interrelationship between internal equality policies for enhancing women's representation and other less explored dimensions such as the influence of organizing strategies and internal political battles over union identity shift, and the influence of women's own resources.

In the English literature the creation of women trade union leaders has been identified as a key issue for unions, both as a way of challenging the oligarchic nature of union leadership, of instigating organizational changes (Healy, Kirton, 2000), and as a lever to bring the necessary amount of equality and democracy for union renewal (Foley, Baker, 2009). The claim is that once in positions of influence and power, women will be able to use their agency to inject their own beliefs, values and concerns (Heery and Kelly, 1988; Kirton and Healy, 1999), to

act as a role model for the female membership (Dorgan, Grieco, 1993; Sayce and al, 2006) and to strive to alter the style and content of union activity (Heery and Kelly, 2001). It is indeed argued that women lead differently because of the material experiences of their lives and their “politicised views of empowerment and inclusivity” (Briskin, 2006: 370), but also as a result of their participation in women-only courses (Kirton, 2006a). In many countries with different industrial relations systems, they seem to promote (or to identify with) a “transformational” leadership style that focuses on members’ empowerment and participation (Briskin, 2006). Opposed to a traditional masculine “transactional” leadership style (bureaucratic and hierarchical, based on rewards and punishments), this style is acknowledged as critical for union survival by most researchers.

In the UK, Canada, Australia and the USA, where separate organizing and self-organization structures have been put in place, earlier research has demonstrated that leadership change is related to successful “insurgency” linked to the existence of gender caucuses, networks or structures, such as women’s committees or women’s groups (Cornfield, 1993). However, if radical measures are needed for under-represented groups to be engaged fully in democratic processes (Kirton and Greene, 2002), reserved seats and separate training courses are sometimes condemned as being tokenistic or patronizing gestures, marginalizing both the issues and the people involved (Cockburn, 1991; Briskin, 1993; Kirton and Green, 2002). Regarding the role of women-only education, a whole body of work has analysed its positive effect on women’s participation in terms of talent spotting, empowerment, confidence building and networking (Greene and Kirton, 2002; Kirton, 2006a), confirming the central role of enhancement of self esteem and the need for mentoring programs (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008).

Above all, these women-only measures are seen as pivotal to the construction of female activist identity (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Greene and Kirton, 2002). They help women to realise that they can be identified as a political category that is a significant arena for the development of women’s social gender identity and gender consciousness. This importance of feminist “conscientisation” (Ledwith, 2006) is highlighted by most research in the UK (Cockburn, 1991; Colgan, and Ledwith, 1996; Kirton and Healy, 1999; Healy and Kirton, 2000; Kirton 2006a). It is argued that feminist values and beliefs strengthen women’s desire to transform union structures and strategies, assuming that identification with feminism and identification with trade union values go hand in hand. The other assumption is that feminist women are more likely to seek upward union careers, or that as they climb women begin to espouse a stronger feminist orientation (Kirton, 2005). However, other studies reveal that women unionists are not always in favour of self-organising structures. In a country with strong feminist movements such as Sweden, women seem reluctant to organize separately for structural and ideological reasons. To understand why in France, and particularly within CFDT, the making of women union leaders cannot be explained by women-only structures and feminist values, we will need to retrace the long and discontinuous story of the CFDT gender equality policy.

In the Anglo-Saxon literature, other internal factors are identified as levers for women’s promotion, such as the size and the culture of the union (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Sayce et al., 2006), but more generally the organizational structures and informal practices that contribute to improve or by contrast reinforce gendered inequalities. Participation can be triggered in three main ways, by an injustice or by a certain change and above all by sponsorship (Ledwith et al, 2001). In the case of women, the role of “significant others” and “mentors” (Watson, 1988) is crucial and sensitive. As most union leaders are male, women’s

participation will be highly dependent on whether or not existing/male union leaders adopt a more or less participatory or inclusive approach. These informal and organisational processes are considered to be far more influential in increasing women's representation than formal equality rules, as the recruitment processes of unions are based on interpersonal co-opting and off the record appointment, both for paid officers or elected union positions (Guillaume, 2007). In this organisational context, some women may have more individual resources (including a supportive partner) and social capital to fight for their position, revealing one of the major issues for equality policies and feminist theories: the internal diversity and hierarchy of the women's category.

### **Research methods: career narratives and biographical matching**

This research utilizes qualitative interview data from a study of women trade unionists carried out over the period 2006-2010, involving one major French trade union confederation – CFDT<sup>ii</sup>. This case study was included in a cross-national research project on “women in trade unions” in France, the UK and Hungary, which was designed to address the constant under-representation of women in union government and the effects of internal equality policy measures (Guillaume and Pochic, 2011)<sup>iii</sup>. We wanted to explore the barriers and processes that facilitate women's participation, but also to examine women leaders' experience. The notion of “union leader” may cover a wide range of roles and status (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008; Ledwith et al, 1990) from local union leader to elite national level officer, some being full time paid officers, other (senior) lay activists or elected leaders. The notion may not necessarily include linear careers and vertical progression for everyone (Kirton, 2006), but it implies a certain level of union participation and responsibility, embracing various forms of activism (Briskin, 2006; Greene and Kirton, 2003). We acknowledge that only focusing on formal activism renders invisible the participation of women who find it difficult to take on formal positions, but for the purpose of this article we will put the emphasis on the progression of women within union structures.

Compared to other countries, the French legislative and welfare context is quite favourable to trade unions. If French unions have the lowest membership level (8%) among OECD countries apart from the US, they have a strong institutional influence, as 95% of workers are covered by a collective agreement<sup>iv</sup> (Visser, 2006). The other main characteristic of French unionism is the tradition of a pluralistic and politicised labour movement. Workers can choose to be affiliated to general or business trade unions with different ideological lines. Until recently, the amount of time off for different union roles was not linked to the number of members or election scores. It was given equally to five different general unions (CGT, CFDT, CFTC, FO, CFE-CGC) which were considered as legally “legitimate” social partners and which could designate employee representatives in any company with more than 10 employees for “*délégué du personnel*”; more than 50 for “*élu du comité d'entreprise*”. The French model of industrial relations provides many opportunities for unionists to be “full-time officers”, being either elected at the company or branch levels or in other bodies that are in charge of social security or pensions. Many trade unionists combine then different union mandates, working full-time for the union at the local/regional/national level, but still being paid by their previous employer.

Following the Chicago School of Sociology model (Becker, Strauss, 1962; Barley, 1989), we have concentrated on the organizational and individual factors that have allowed these women leaders to reach the intermediate and upper levels of the union hierarchy. Drawing on biographical matching and comparative analysis (Crompton, 2001), we have used career

narratives to explore the organizational processes and career norms implicitly required for the making of trade union leaders: the different sequences of a “union career”, the necessary steps, main tracks, atypical routes and turning points, and the role of significant others. This career approach emphasizes the articulation and interferences between different spheres (Kirton, 2006b), and the role of the identities of trade unions in the promotion of specific trade unionists’ profiles, depending on time periods. Finally, this methodological approach embedded in one specific union context analyzes both the influence of equality policies on women’s careers and the role of women’s agency in negotiating the barriers and constraints. As CFDT is a general confederation we have purposely selected different cases to emphasize a “contrast of contexts” between affiliated unions with different levels of feminisation and varied equality policies. 32 (white) women have been interviewed, 8 coming from male-dominated unions, 16 from female-dominated unions, and 8 from the confederation. In the text, we have chosen to draw on three career narratives that exemplify the respective role of structure, context and agency in the building of women trade unionists’ careers. See Table 1.

*Table 1. Profiles of the sample of trade unionists*

<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Responsibility level</b>	
National level (political) (*)	5
National level (technical)	9
Intermediary level (branch, <i>union départementale, syndicat</i> )	10
Local level (entreprise or administration)	8
<b>Location</b>	
Paris	29
Other regions	3
<b>Age category</b>	
Young (less than 35)	6
Middle (35-49)	14
Senior (more than 50)	12
<b>Membership seniority</b>	
New members (less than 10 years)	10
Middle-range members (10 to 19 years)	10
Senior members (more than 20 years)	12
<b>Education level</b>	
Graduates (degree or <i>bac+2</i> )	24
A level or under (A-level / <i>bac max.</i> )	8
<b>Family configuration</b>	
Children	23
No child	9

(\*) national level = *confédération* and *fédération*

### **Gender equality strategy in CFDT: a long and discontinuous story<sup>v</sup>**

Within CFDT, the campaign for gender equality has had a long history that is closely interrelated with the successive shifts of union identity that the confederation has known since the 1960s. Coming from a traditional Catholic background<sup>vi</sup>, CFDT has progressively

adopted a politicised analysis of “working conditions of women” based on the idea of their over-exploitation, thanks to the mobilisation of few female equality officers, who were also identified as being part of the “political minority” that led to the creation of CFDT in 1964. In the 1970s, following the events of May 1968, the union policy has developed towards a class-based orientation, articulating sex and class struggles and extending campaigns to include contraception and abortion rights. Significant strikes were led by CFDT union female leaders in the 1970s (Maruani, 1979), encouraging a wide range of new grievances (maternity, abortion, equality at work and domestic work), and strong links were built with feminist associations. However, during that 20 year period of time where CFDT took a leading role in the adoption of an equality agenda, the union was reluctant to adopt separate structures for women, replacing the women’s committee (*Commission Confédérale Femmes - CCF*) inherited from CFTC by a mixed committee in 1971, avoiding women’s groups at company level and opening women-only training to men (Le Brouster, 2010). That focus on “*mixité*” shown by its action to be in favour of internal and external equality, has led CFDT to avoid working with women-only feminist movements, and to promote a “mainstreaming approach”.

From 1978, CFDT redefined its union goals and doctrine and started to distance itself from political parties, social movements and societal issues. The elimination of class analysis and socialist values and the acceptance of economic liberalism (Defaud, 2009) led to the promotion of a *mass unionism* able to address issues for everyone, including women, and to stop the huge membership decline that started at the end of the 1970s. Specific campaigns were launched in different sectors to attract women members and specific training was designed to promote the new political line and to train future female leaders. In 1982, CFDT adopted a mix of liberal (dedicated financial resources, specific training course, one national equality officer and one annual women’s meeting each 8<sup>th</sup> march) and radical measures (reserved seats for the NEC, National Executive Committee, and minimum representation for congress delegations). These measures were quite controversial at the time because they were seen as a tool to promote a new leader profile, more in line with the reformist approach (Le Brouster, 2010). It is worth noting that the notion of “democratic deficit” has never been used as such in the union equality policy, even though the idea of “mass unionism” is also linked to members’ empowerment goals (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009b).

Compared to the UK, where the equality agenda has been constantly pushed by main unions and the TUC, with a progressive enlargement to include other minority groups, the CFDT case displays a more discontinuous story that is clearly linked to the weakening of “second wave” feminism in France in the 1980s, and to the increasing distance between unionists and feminists since then. The internal equality measures were quickly weakened by the development of “State Feminism” after the election of a socialist president, François Mitterrand in 1981 (Mazur, 1995). Several feminist union leaders, including Jeannette Laot who had been in charge of equality in the CFDT for 20 years (1961-1981), were absorbed by these structures and ceased to stimulate unions (Le Brouster, 2011). The targeting of ‘women’ and other under-represented groups (young, managers and professionals, SMEs workers) in the recruitment policy became rather instrumental and was not linked to ‘equity-seeking’ ambition. Since 1995, both the internal and external policies have seemed rather weak. The confederation remains quite reluctant towards any association with feminist movements, as a consequence of its “de-politicization”. Despite the promulgation of several equal opportunity laws (Roudy in 1983, Génisson in 2001, equal pay law in 2006) and a ‘parity law’ adopted in the political field in 2000 (Bereni, 2009), unions including CFDT rarely take the lead on equality bargaining. Since 2004 there has been an unusually high turnover of national equality officers at the confederation level, leading to a lack of equality

audits and the end of women’s training, research sessions and conferences. The women’s committee (CCF) still exists but is now open to men and women and has a secondary role in terms of decision-making (albeit having a direct organisational link with the NEC) and does not produce any “gendered factionalism”. Within each CFDT union, the situation is rather diverse, some have kept an active internal equality policy (particularly in male-dominated and industrial unions), including quotas and recommendations, while others have none (particularly in feminised sectors as health care, social care and education). Overall, equality measures and the feminisation of the membership have led to a certain level of feminisation at the upper levels of the confederation and the affiliated unions. Because the *Confédération* feared being unable to fill more reserved seats, complete parity for the *Bureau National* (equivalent of the NEC) was not decided on at the last 2010 congress, whereas the major general union CGT had adopted it since 1999<sup>vii</sup>. See Table 2.

Table 2. Equality policies

	% of women	Main aspects of equality policies
<b>CFDT</b> - 600,000 members - women comprise 45% in 2010 (42% in 2002) - General Secretary: François Chérèque (male)	<b>Local and regional levels</b> - 24% of local union secretaries ( <i>'syndicat'</i> ) <sup>viii</sup> in 2004 (22% in 2001) - 27% of regional executives in 2004 (24% in 2001)  <b>National Level</b> - 32 % of federation executives in 2004 (29% in 2001) - 40 % of Conseil National Confédéral (CNC) in 2004 - 37% for the Bureau National (BN) in 2010 - 33% of the Commission Executive (CE) in 2010 (same in 2002)	<b>Radical measures :</b> - quotas since 1982 : minimum of 10 female members out of 28 for the BN; minimum of 29% of women for the CNC; minimum 3 women for the CE  <b>Liberal measures :</b> - equality policies for each federation/region; national, regional and federal equality officers; - women’s committee since 1964, equality trainings since the 1970s, annual women’s conference since 1987

NB : access to statistics remains quite difficult, apart from the confederation level. Most of the figures we have obtained do not give details for each federation/region.

## Exceptional trajectories based on individual resources and workplace contexts

### *The role of employment characteristics in union activism*

In this evolving context, we may wonder how women have managed to break through the glass ceiling. Firstly, career narratives reveal the crucial issue of employment characteristics and workplace contexts in developing a union activist. In most cases, the women interviewed have started their union career at the workplace level, initially with an elected employee representation role within their company (*délégué du personnel* or *élu au Comité d’Entreprise*) or in their administration (*délégué en CAP*). While circumstances vary greatly across generations, the forms of their activism depend mainly on the workplace context. In unionised workplaces with a good social climate, particularly in the public sector, some women have become unionised thanks to the influence of their colleagues but have sometimes remained a passive member for many years. Elsewhere, they have quickly become involved in different forms of union actions and have taken on union responsibilities: strikes on pay and conditions in the 1970s, struggles against downsizing/restructuring or fights for enforcing labour law in the 1990s. As other studies have shown, workplace events appear to be the main socialization arena for union activism, whereas the influence of family background, and of

political, religious or youth movements has declined since the 1980s (Duriez and Sawicki, 2003; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009a).

The transmission of militant “basic skills” (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008) continues to rely on the goodwill of local union activists. In highly unionized sectors (banking, industry, public services), particularly in the 1970s, a vibrant local union allowed new entrants to learn on the job through informal discussions, and to gain confidence progressively. Strikes have also frequently been mentioned as moments of intense sociability and where identification of “good activists” by existing union representative and officials occurs. But since the 1990s, in the context of declining unionization, especially in France where union density is considered really low, women who have become activists in the context of a collective action against restructuring, particularly in small firms, have had to organize members and learn necessary skills by themselves. When participation is in short supply, some of them have experienced union careers in which union roles were rapidly accumulated at the workplace level, in union local, regional or national union structures. Many women have also benefited from the expansion of feminized sectors (health care, social care, local government) and from the CFDT union organizing campaigns targeted towards these sectors.

However, these expanding general opportunities for women favour stable employees in large companies or in public service, trade unions being almost absent from small companies (Dufour et al., 2007). Although women can benefit from their over-representation in the public sector, they are also concentrated in contingent employment (fixed-term contracts, temporary contracts), in SMEs and in the expanding non-organised service sector (hotel-restaurants, supermarkets). Working in public services or in large companies with a tradition of social dialogue facilitates the use of time-off for trade union duties and activities, and the negotiation of a secondment with a guaranteed return to work. In small companies, by contrast, although women have many reasons to unionize (Yates, 2006), union activism is professionally risky and the transition to full-time activism is difficult to finance as trade unions have only a few salaried positions to offer. In our sample, only a tiny minority of women activists has been fired or has resigned from their company (3 out of 35). Most of them remained paid by their former employer, indicating that stable employment integration is a key condition of union involvement (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009a), as in the case of Sylvie.

**Sylvie** considers that she had become involved in trade unionism “*by accident*” while trying to get funding for some training in 1995. Having travelled extensively as a choreographer, and as a laboratory technician for two NGOs (*Médecins du Monde* and *La Croix Rouge*), she learned that the non-governmental hospital in Paris where she worked was to be closed, and that was the reason why her employer refused to give her training paid leave. Given the lack of reaction by the work council dominated by another union (FO, Force Ouvrière), she was mandated by her colleagues to contact other unions, first CGT and then CFDT. As CFDT was more informed of her situation, she convinced her twenty colleagues to unionize to this union. CFDT mandated her as shop steward to negotiate the redundancy plan, and six months later she won an election to become the work council secretary. To protect her from pressures by her employer, she was appointed by the union as national shop steward (*délégué syndical central*) for the whole organisation, *La Croix Rouge*, and she negotiated a part-time secondment as union organizer. Two years later the female general secretary of her local branch (health and social care in Paris), at the end of her mandate, asked Sylvie to be her replacement, with a full time-off secondment. But as she hated the routine and was exhausted as she had twins and had divorced when they were two years old, she started training towards



a career change (administrator in social economy). Knowing this, the health and social care federation, a highly feminized and expanding one, offered her a position as federal secretary, in charge of the non-profit sector. She agreed, wanting to transfer her negotiating skills towards managing the federation since she had competencies especially in knowing “*how to interact with people, how to transform or influence them.*” But the workload at the federation level was heavy because there were only 8 national officers (4 women), with few assistants, and they had to be polyvalent in many tasks: “*I don’t pass the broom, but almost.*” Even if she had worked with a feminist choreographer when she was a young dancer, and represents a highly feminised membership she defines herself as being ‘*not feminist*’. She identifies with feminine qualities: ‘*quicker, more efficient, more democratic and less careerist*’ than men. She considers that the only difficulty for woman trade unionists is work-life balance and employers’ sexism. At the time of the interview we were anxious about her next professional move, because she was unable to imagine returning to handle pipettes. Two years later, at 46, she was elected general secretary of her federation, probably because of her union commitment and her competencies, but also thanks to the high level of feminisation of upper management of the federation.

### ***The strong influences of union structures on the making of trade union leaders***

Many women have also benefited from equality policies, particularly in predominantly male federations. Although the policy of “*mixité*” launched since 1982 makes local officials sensitive to the need to bring women into government bodies, this policy is used in a different manner across federations. In male-dominated unions where the pool of female activists is minute (utilities, transport, metallurgy), some women have benefited from a reserved seat or a nomination so that quotas are respected. Women have benefited also from the targeted recruitment strategy aimed at young people and managerial and professional staff - an expanding and stable population in large companies-. Several young women under 40 years old consider that they have been visible and selected because of their assets: being young, female and qualified<sup>ix</sup>. However, this rapid promotion to positions of leadership is often difficult to handle because those selected sometimes lack knowledge of the codes and rituals of the organization, and are not considered legitimate by grassroots activists.

Alongside formal policies, career narratives also reveal the prevalence of informal rules and processes in the making of trade unionists. Internal co-opting is a presiding factor in the organization of careers at all levels of the union hierarchy. Internal elections are often a formality in order to validate an informal selection by the existing leadership. All the women interviewed have mentioned the support of a male mentor, who has helped them to understand internal politics, and who has guided them onto the good tracks. Although such mentor support is a key factor in accessing positions of power in all types of organizations, it has a significant meaning in a union that has experienced episodes of internal crisis as had the CFDT in 1995 and in 2003. In the context of ideological conflicts and crises concerning the conversion of the CFDT to reformism and to a strategy of social partnership (Defaud, 2009), this mentoring has been linked to political factionalism and alleged support of the confederation’s line. During the 1990s, the CFDT support of governmental reforms on pension schemes crystallized those tensions with the left-wing militants that had arisen in the 1970s, and this support led to the departure of significant numbers of members in 1995 and 2003, particularly in traditionally unionized sectors (transport, utilities, education, research). Subsequently, some women discovered that they had been supported because they embodied this new reformist orientation, or at least had not been seen as too politicized (towards the left-wing). Their nomination or election had the backing of the national structures and was a

way of eliminating former militants (often senior men), stigmatised as “opponents” or “dissidents”. Taking responsibility in a time of crisis has been a cause of tension concerning personal conflicts with rank-and-file or former officials. After their election, these women have also had to struggle against the issue of tokenism, sometimes being sidelined to minor roles, as in the case of Rebecca.

**Rebecca** was meant to become a senior business executive. Coming from a middle class background, after gaining a Master in Psychology and a Master of Computer Science she joined an American IT company as a project manager with numerous periods of travel in Europe. When redundancy plans occurred between 1993 and 1995, she helped to develop the recently created CFDT union and took on several union duties at the workplace level. She was then rapidly elected by her local branch (mines and metallurgy in Paris) where she became assistant general secretary. She also entered the executive council of her federation, “*because they were looking for women*” and because she wanted also to feminize union structures. But after a merger in 2001, she could no longer keep her full time-off agreement and was obliged to re-enter her company as training manager, which was objectively a promotion for her. But two years later, when her boss refused to promote her on the grounds that she would in future be more expensive to lay-off, she decided to make herself available again to the union. The metalwork federation asked her to become national secretary in charge of training matters (thus fulfilling their only female reserved seat). She knew the leadership would support her since it was a move to prevent other leftist candidates from her union from standing. She was elected, and accepted a personal loss of 1,000 euros per month by her change of situation. Her husband, an engineer in a big industrial company, more family-oriented than career-oriented according to her, supported her in that choice and shares domestic responsibilities (they have three children). Three years later, she had to accept job termination because her secondment had ended. Service with the metalwork federation led to a full-time paid union officer role, at age 50. The role was as assistant general secretary of the national union of managerial and professional staff (‘*CFDT Cadres*’), that has an executive board composed of 4 women and 4 men. She is convinced by the ‘*mixité*’ policy of the confederation and the necessity to have women at all levels of the union hierarchy, with the help of quotas if necessary, but she also supports a more gender-neutral equality campaign on the extension of parental leave for men.

### ***The “qualification lever” in a male world***

The change of the CFDT political strategy based on collective bargaining and expertise tends to favour women graduates from white-collar professions. This professionalization of union activity obviously reinforces the “qualification lever” for educated women, who can use it to enter male-dominated union structures. Many technical skills (in law, in finance, in writing and public-speaking skills) are now required either for union roles at the workplace level to develop an argument on an issue or to understand the labour law and its complex jurisprudence, or for union structures, i.e. being a treasurer without diversion of union funds, organizing a recruitment strategy, or managing teams of volunteer activists. Although there is probably a generational effect, as young women are seemingly more educated than their older counterparts, this does not explain the huge gap in skill level between female and male officials. In our sample, almost all the women hold a university degree. Some of them have entered union positions through external recruitment as technical experts (recruitment, legal action, health and safety, communication, training, research). Other surveys have shown how external recruitment enhances the feminization of the full-time officer level, at the same time reinforcing the qualification gap between them and ordinary members (Kelly and Heery, 2001; Heery, 2006). Indeed, these new “expertise routes” have allowed the recruitment of

paid officers without activist experience, arriving directly at federation or confederation level. These women were private managers or professionals, aged between 30 and 40, without previous experience of militancy but none were activists originating from social or feminist movements<sup>x</sup>. Young qualified women have also benefited from the willingness of the former General Secretary (Nicole Notat, 1992-2002) to quickly rejuvenate and professionalize the confederation. However, these paid officers have often been criticized as lacking activism experience and many have encountered difficulties of integration, particularly with some political leaders derived from blue-collar sectors. Most of them have been disappointed with the narrow or limited career progression, and have then resigned or have been dismissed, as was the case for Flore.

**Flore**, 41 years old, was one of the experts recruited by Nicole Notat to “*change the face*” of the CFDT confederation. A graduate in international law, she was not a union member until her recruitment at the confederation, but she had been an activist in the Socialist Party since 1987 and a militant in civil movements sustaining the European construction. While she was a manager in an NGO working on European programmes of education, she learned by a friend that the CFDT was looking for a secretary to take charge of European Affairs in 1996. She was selected over another highly qualified candidate because “*I was filling quotas: young, woman and graduate.*” Her integration into a department comprising former steelworkers, the “*dinosaurs*” as she calls them, was rather difficult but gradually she acquired legitimacy thanks to her technical and bilingual skills but also by her previous commitment to the Socialist Party. Flore was aware of equality issues, as she had been to women’s sessions in the Socialist Party Summer Schools, and came to CFDT attracted by the image of its female General Secretary, but she soon discovered that the confederation “*was still a men’s world, particularly in my department, fulfilled with men, blue-collar, 50-55 years old*”. This period was very tiring as she went to Brussels almost every week, whilst living in Paris with her husband also involved in a demanding career (high civil servant and local politician in the West of France). She has no child. Paradoxically, it was a strongly career-minded woman, with an activist background, who managed to destabilize Flore, as the former took the lead of her European project, organizing public debates with activists, as a way to raise her profile and become elected as national secretary. As her position lost its core, after a small bout of depression, Flore began to look for another job, but in 2003, the economy was in recession and “*I am now labelled as a ‘a pain in the ass’.*” She finally managed to leave CFDT thanks to the intervention of a CFDT regional leader who sponsored her to become a research assistant in a State administrative department.

### ***Few feminist leaders but more feminine leaders?***

By contrast with what is learned from Anglo-Saxon literature, most female CFDT leaders do not display a strongly feminist orientation and will not identify themselves as “feminist”, with few exceptions. Most of them refuse to consider women as a specific category and promote egalitarian and mainstream measures. They reject acting as role models for other women and using gender factionalism, as they usually under-estimate how exceptional their own career has been. Some women have “neutralized” their gender identity or even take anti-feminist positions, particularly in male-dominated unions: “*I do not like old wives’ stuff*” says another women talking about a recently organised women’s meeting. Nicole Notat was emblematic of this “neutralised” position (Notat, 1996). However, many female CFDT leaders claim that they have a feminine career development in their defence of parallel career paths, more horizontal than vertical (Kirton, 2006b). Many women remain at lower levels, refusing national responsibilities and full time-off, in order to stay in touch with grassroots and the

realities of work: “*not to lose ground with the company*” says one, “*not to fall into meetingitis*” says another. Such refusal is based on implicit or explicit criticism of the union bureaucracy and a desire to preserve their freedom of action and speech. But this discourse can be seen as a self-limitation and a short-term strategy, as it is very hard to combine paid work and union activities. It is perhaps also a rationalisation of a constrained choice as they are unable to relocate to Paris, or to commute from Monday to Friday, whereas all national positions at federation or confederation level are based in Paris.

Many women leaders also encourage an alternative leadership style, promoting a more co-operative, consensual and professional approach, closer to members’ concerns, and seeking to stimulate greater participation in sections or in local unions. Female leaders often see themselves as agents of change and innovation, with an orientation focused primarily towards results (election results, number of members, number of signed collective agreements). However it is very difficult to say if this is a “feminine” trait or a “new entrant” strategy (Guillaume, 2007), as many young men develop also this discourse, in a context where competition exists between old and new legitimacies (servicing / organising, expertise / charisma...). In hierarchical, complex structures where leaders need to coordinate the work of autonomous shop stewards, many say they feel isolated while exercising power. When internal political crises arise, they sometimes have been obliged to use a direct, “*tough*”, even authoritarian style of leadership, in contradiction with what they normally wish to convey: “*bang your fist on the table*”, “*pass for a demanding bitch*” or “*a control freak*”. The nickname for Nicole Notat for example was “*Tzarina*”. The few women who hold national positions admit that they have had some appetite for power. One strategy was, by taking on an innovative and visible issue, they could build a complementary role alongside other male leaders. However, perhaps because they are still rather young, they consider their conversion has come rather quickly, and have enrolled in university programmes while still working for the union, hoping that this will grant recognition of their union experience. Because separate organizing structures do not yet exist within the union, and as they are few in number at that level, women belong to no formal networks that could compensate for a lack of informal networking, in contrast to the situation for men who have built strong and extensive relationships with other leaders while they were local and regional activists.

## **Discussion**

Many studies have argued that equality policies can be ignored by the union oligarchy, even for quotas and in radical measures. On the contrary this study, like the one led by Healy and Kirton (2000), argues that to understand the feminization of union leadership we need to take into consideration that unions are contested organizations from both a gender perspective and a political one (Hyman, 2001), generating conflicting views about their priorities and appropriate forms of action. Although factionalism and/or sponsorship are at the heart of the construction of union careers, there is a complex interplay between political factions/groups and the definition of union recruitment practices and equality policies. In the case of CFDT, the making of female leaders is due less to organized gendered factionalism than to the role of union identity shift in the 1980s, with its implications in terms of the detection of new activist profiles having reformist preferences. Although (young) women have been encouraged to participate it is not so much because their “participatory leadership style is wholly congruent with the view that union renewal is contingent upon increased member activism at the level of the workplace” (Kirton, Healy, 1999), but more because they have been seen as less politicized and less articulate and probably easier to control (Mc Bride, 2001). They are also seen as helpful in organizing more diverse groups and then recruited as organizers, like in the

UK The switch to an “organizing model” has indeed allowed the development of specialized positions (“*développeur*”) that have been offered to young officers, women and managerial and professional staff, in accordance with the ‘like recruiting like’ principle (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009b).

In addition to this membership dimension, several ‘expertise routes’ have been encouraged both by the evolution of union reformist doctrine and by employer-union relations. Because of its present moderate leadership, CFDT has been involved as a negotiating partner with government or advisor on pension issues, unemployment benefits, working time, minimum wages, health and safety, equality and redundancy. This growing union participation in socio-economic regulation at the national or local level has led to the promotion of officers and activists with new types of qualification. This need for more qualified officers has presented new opportunities to women with professional expertise or high qualification yet no activist background. As in other organizations, we may argue that women have used the “qualification lever” (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990) to enter male-dominated sectors. This account can be linked with other research led in the UK, where full-time women officers were found to be “more likely to have come from a background in professional and managerial work and to have higher education qualifications and to be younger” (Heery and Kelly, 2001).

Finally, our study leads to the issue of the influence that feminist identity has in the building of a union career for women. Most Anglo-Saxon studies strongly emphasize the fact that “most of the self-identified feminists participated formally, suggesting a stronger union orientation” (Kirton, 2005). Interestingly, we did not find such strong feminist orientation amongst our interviewees, especially not among the younger ones. Moreover, most of them refuse to consider women as a specific/political category, and they promote egalitarian and mainstreaming measures. The majority also decline to act as role models for other women, with few exceptions. This can be interpreted in different ways. First we can consider that there is a gap between having feminist beliefs and values and espousing the feminist label (Kirton, 2006a), because being labelled as “feminist” within CFDT could jeopardize the building of one’s legitimacy in a confederation, still male-dominated, that promotes general interest versus corporatist or community interest. Secondly, we can deduce that the CFDT doctrine of a general and apolitical union attracts (and retains) women who do not hold strong feminist views. Many women leaders, with feminist beliefs, who joined CFDT in the 1970s left in the 1990s and joined other more “radical” unions such as CGT or SUD (which implies that union values and feminist values do not necessary go hand in hand). Thirdly, we can argue that labour education in France has ceased to be politicized and does not offer the function that women-only courses in the UK still provide in raising feminist beliefs. This issue of raising feminist consciousness does reveal the transforming and diverse links and relationships that exist between feminist movements and unions, from alliance to indifference (like in the case of the CFDT in the 2000’s), depending on periods<sup>xi</sup> and countries.

Finally, this focus placed on feminism by other (non French) studies may reveal the implicit assumptions that researchers wish to validate through their empirical work, and sometimes through their direct participation in women’s training and mentoring programs, or commitment as union activists themselves. In France, very few researchers would admit undertaking feminist research, at least among the younger generation, to guard against forfeiting their legitimacy in their academic role. This does not prevent us helping unions in their thinking and actions, though from a relatively neutral standpoint<sup>xiii</sup> even if our interest in gender and trade unions originally stemmed from the experience of Cécile being a young

female research officer working for the CFDT confederation between 2001 and 2004, in a very (white and senior) male dominated world.

## Conclusion

In our study we have tried to articulate different levels of understanding that explain the ongoing, albeit still difficult, feminization of union government. Although the influence of equality and organizing policies is obvious at least in the identification of women as members and possible leaders, it does not explain why some women succeed while many others fail to get elected and promoted. Other factors such as employment characteristics, including time-off agreements and union rights are quite crucial for the building of a union career, for men and women. France is probably a rather specific case because the legal provisions for union activity are quite comprehensive, at least in big companies or in administrations. However, this more favourable context can produce side effects, as most of the senior union leaders have stopped regular work for so long that they are afraid of leaving their union role, and thus appear reluctant to promote a new generation of leaders. This can create strong inequalities between those (mostly male) who are groomed to become future leaders, being slowly trained to hold gradually more prestigious mandates, and others who are sidelined from taking senior roles. When we look at women CFDT leaders' experiences, it is evident that the influence of political orientations, not only in raising equality but also in promoting organizational and strategic changes, is even more crucial in understanding women's promotion than the role of equality policies towards this advancement. This relation between strategic goals and ideological beliefs is probably one of the aspects that should be carefully addressed when trying to understand how social identity (class, gender, race and ethnicity) and "class consciousness" interact in trade unionists' experience (Moore, 2011).

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<sup>i</sup> Nicole Notat herself denied that her rapid career was linked to quotas, although one historian made a link between her exceptional trajectory and the CFDT equality policy (Zancarini-Fournel, 1998).

<sup>ii</sup> CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail) is the second major representative French union confederation, with 600.000 members. It is structured in 18 industrial federations in the public and private sectors, bringing together 1321 local trade unions affiliated to CFDT. The confederation is also divided in 22 regions.

<sup>iii</sup> This research was funded by the European Social Fund.

<sup>iv</sup> which are routinely extended throughout industry to include firms with few if any union members.

<sup>v</sup> This chapter is based on the historical work of Pascale Le Brouster on equality policy within CFDT since the 1960s (Le Brouster, 2008; 2010; 2011).

<sup>vi</sup> CFDT was created in 1964, following the decision of a majority of union leaders to separate from the former Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC), that still exists, and to dismiss the reference to Catholic Church doctrine.

<sup>vii</sup> In comparison, the main general trade union, CGT had less female members than CFDT (34% compared to 44% in 2009) and had been reluctant to reserved seats until the 1990s. Under the pressure of its women's



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network (collectif Confédéral Femmes-Mixité), CGT adopted a radical measure, ‘quotas’ of 50% for its national levels (NEC and Executive Committee) in 1999 and a charter on internal and external equality in 2007 (Silvera, 2010).

<sup>viii</sup> A ‘*syndicat*’ in France is a local general union, affiliated to an industrial federation. In the CFDT, the “*syndicats*” have a strong political role, as their representatives are the ones who have a mandate to vote during the confederation congress, every 4 years.

<sup>ix</sup> The lack of representativeness of the CFDT membership on the race/ethnicity dimension has never been mentioned in our interviews, as France has a tradition of race-neutral citizenship and unions have not developed equity policies on that topic (even if CFDT had in the 1970s unionized and defended migrant workers).

<sup>x</sup> Only one woman in our sample had begun her working life as admin at the telephone switchboard of a union federation and later became a paid full-time officer in a male-dominated federation (energy) which had had difficulty in fulfilling its quotas (2 women out of 7 at the Executive Council).

<sup>xi</sup> In the 1970s, most of the CFDT equality officers and female union activists were also involved in feminist movements. All the same, although most UK studies on female union leaders reveal their feminist orientation, we can argue that most of them are 50 years old or over, whereas for younger activists this feminist orientation appears less obvious (Kirton, 2006a).

<sup>xii</sup> As Cécile Guillaume who has participated in several union education sessions and was asked to write a note on equality policies in 2008 for the CFDT National Equality Officer.