

# Female Part-time Workers and Trade Union Membership: A Case Study in the Retail Industry

Sally Walters

December 2000

Address for Correspondence:  
Sally Walters  
Centre for Labour Market Studies  
University of Leicester  
7-9 Salisbury Road  
Leicester LE1 7QR

Tel: (UK) 0116-252-5946  
Fax: (UK) 0116-252-5953  
email: sally.walters@le.ac.uk

## Abstract

This paper discusses the reasons which can be offered for the lower trade union membership rates of female part-time workers in the UK and focuses in particular on female part-timers' attitudes to trade unions. The findings are based on original research: 50 qualitative interviews with female part-time workers in the retail industry. The paper argues that female part-timers are supportive of the aims of the trade union movement and questions the extent to which their attitudes differ from the rest of the working population. It concludes that an integrated approach is necessary in order to understand part-timers' unionization rates, including structural factors, the approach which trade unions have taken towards part-time workers and attitudes towards trade unions.

## 1. Introduction

The decline of trade union membership in Britain is now well documented. From a peak of over 13 million members in 1979, union membership now stands at just under eight million members<sup>1</sup> (Hicks 2000:329). The reasons for this decline are also well documented and include the effects of legislation; employers' policies; business cycle explanations and the changes in the industrial and occupational composition of the labour force (Gallie *et al.* 1996; McIlroy 1995; Marsh 1992; Waddington and Whitson 1995). It is within the context of the last cause that this paper is situated. Since the late 1970s employment in the private service sector has flourished, accompanied by dramatic changes in the composition of the workforce: male full-time workers have declined while the employment of women, part-timers and temporary workers (all of whom have historically low levels of union organization) has increased. Many commentators now argue that if trade unions are to halt membership decline, they need to successfully recruit and retain 'non-standard' workers (Conley 2000; Simms *et al.* 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the trade union membership of one of these groups of 'non-standard' workers, namely part-time workers. In particular, the paper contributes to the debate on why union membership rates are lower for female part-time workers than for female full-time workers (Sinclair 1995). It is commonly argued that structural factors prevent part-timers from being trade union members: they have less opportunity to join a union than full-time workers as they are concentrated in industries and occupations with low levels of union organization. However, although structural explanations are valuable, they do not fully account for part-timers' lower union membership rates because even when they are employed in organized workplaces, part-timers are still less likely to be union members (Sinclair 1995; Tam 1997). Other possible reasons why union membership for female part-timers is lower than for female full-timers are the approach which unions have taken towards part-time workers and women's individual characteristics and attitudes towards trade unions. The main focus of the paper is on part-timers' attitudes towards trade unions with the special contribution being that previous to the research reported here, there is little existing qualitative data in this area.

Although there is little research on part-time workers and their attitudes towards trade unions, the area has attracted speculation. While some commentators argue that female part-timers are not interested in union membership as they are uncommitted to their work (Goldthorpe 1985:143), others conversely argue that part-timers' low unionization rates reflect the structural conditions in which part-timers work and the nature of trade union recruitment efforts, rather than anything distinctive about women's attitudes (Gallie *et al.* 1996:23). It is likely that a combination of all three of the above occurs but we do not have any qualitative research which addresses these issues in-depth. For the most part, surveys have been used as the tool of measurement in research on part-time workers and trade unions. Qualitative research is needed to assess female part-timers' attitudes and experiences more directly in order to give us a fuller understanding of what affects part-timers' propensity to join a trade union. In order to understand attitudes to trade unions, it is necessary to locate them in past and current experiences of trade unions. Qualitative interviews are a good way to uncover data of this kind, so interviews with female part-timers in retail were conducted. In addition, part-timers working in organized and unorganized workplaces were sampled, so that a range of members and non-members could be interviewed. The research allowed female part-timers' attitudes to be unpacked. How much experience do they have of trade unions? Why do they choose to join or not to join trade unions? Do they have favourable experiences of trade unions? What affects their attitudes? The paper begins by presenting trade union density rates for part-time workers and reviews the literature on the subject. Section three outlines the research methodology, section four presents the research findings and section five concludes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Two measures of union membership are used in the UK and are not directly comparable. The Certification Officer includes members who are retired and unemployed, while the Labour Force Survey (LFS) excludes them. However, the LFS question on union membership only dates back to 1989, while data from the Certification Officer has been recorded since the early 1970s (Corcoran 1995:191).

## 2. Part-time workers and trade union membership: the existing evidence

Table One shows that over the last decade, trade union membership has fallen nine percentage points for all employees from 39 per cent in 1989 to 30 per cent in 1999 (1999 is the first year since the LFS started recording data on union membership that the absolute number of union members has increased. See Hicks 2000). Union membership for part-timers has been much more stable than for full-time workers, falling by only two per cent over the same period. Part-time work in Britain has increased from 4 per cent of all employees in 1951 (12 per cent of the female workforce and 0.3 per cent of the male workforce) to 24 per cent in 1998 (44 per cent of the female workforce and eight per cent of the male workforce) (Rubery and Fagan 1995: 66, table 1; Thair and Risdon 1999: 104). Yet, despite their increased participation in the labour force, only 20 per cent of part-timers belong to a trade union compared to 30 per cent of full-time workers<sup>2</sup>.

TABLE 1: TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP BY SEX AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN GREAT BRITAIN 1989-1999, UNION DENSITY FOR EMPLOYEES (PER CENT).

Year	All Employees			Male Employees			Female Employees		
	All	FT	PT	All	FT	PT	All	FT	PT
1989	39	44	22	44	45	12	33	40	23
1990	38	43	22	43	44	11	32	39	23
1991	38	42	22	42	43	13	32	39	23
1992	36	40	22	39	41	12	32	38	23
1993	35	40	21	38	40	13	32	39	23
1994	34	38	21	37	38	13	30	37	22
1995	32	36	21	35	36	12	30	36	22
1996	31	35	20	33	35	12	29	35	22
1997	30	34	20	32	34	13	28	34	21
1998	30	33	20	31	32	13	28	34	22
1999	30	33	20	31	32	13	28	34	21

Source: Labour Force Survey

*Note:* These data are for employees only and exclude members of the armed forces. From 1989 to 1991 union membership questions were asked in the spring quarter. Since 1992 they have been asked in the autumn quarter.

Despite the lower union membership rates of part-time workers and the interesting case it poses, there is a dearth of literature in this area. Though highly valuable, the majority of literature which does exist either examines barriers to participation for part-time workers, such as the problems of attending meetings and lack of time-off for trade union activity (Cook *et al.* 1992; Frieze 1989) or focuses on unionization rates. This section will briefly outline the three explanations found in the literature for part-timers' lower unionization rates: structural explanations, the approach taken by trade unions and individual explanations (Schur and Kruse 1992; Sinclair 1995). Attitudes towards trade unions fall within this last category but to date there is little research in this area.

<sup>2</sup> Men who work part-time are the least likely of all employees (male and female, full- and part-time) to belong to a union. It is likely that this is due to the profile of men who are employed in these jobs: male part-timers are usually either students or older workers and are predominantly employed in sectors and occupations with low levels of union organization.

## Structural Explanations

Structural explanations argue that part-time workers are less likely to have the opportunity to join a trade union as the industries and occupations where the majority of part-timers are employed are less likely to be organized. Conversely, those industries and occupations which have high rates of union density only employ a tiny proportion of part-time workers. For example, data from the 1997 labour force survey shows that trade union density for female part-time employees in the wholesale, retail and motor trade is only 11 per cent, yet this sector employs nearly one quarter (24 per cent) of the female part-time workforce. Meanwhile in the public administration sector, union density for female part-timers is 44 per cent yet only four per cent of the female part-time workforce are employed here (Labour Force Survey Data 1997). The reasons why certain industries are less organized are historical: unions have traditionally organized male workers in the manufacturing industries, rather than women and part-timers in the service industries (Bain cited in Brown 1976; Booth 1986; Grint 1991).

Although some unions have recently attempted to 're-market' themselves by recruiting 'non-standard' workers, it must be acknowledged that this is a difficult, time consuming and costly task: occupations and industries where the majority of part-timers are employed do not have a strong tradition of union organization. Furthermore, part-timers are generally not at work for the whole of the working day and often work outside the core working hours of the firm (Frieze 1987, Labour Research Department 1996:13). Yet, structural explanations can only go so far in explaining part-timers' union membership rates - they do not explain why it is that even when female part-timers have a recognised union at their workplace, they are still less likely than female full-timers to be trade union members (69 per cent compared to 55 per cent. 1991 BHPS Data, Warren 1998; see also Sinclair 1995 and Tam 1997).

## Trade Unions' Approach to Part-time Workers

This body of literature has explained the low unionization of part-timers by centring on questions of whether or not unions have targeted part-time workers effectively. In the past, unions have been reluctant to recruit part-timers, and have not been sympathetic to their needs. Indeed, some unions directly refused to recruit part-timers as they were seen to undercut full-time jobs (Beechey and Perkins 1987:53; Delsen 1990; Hewitt 1993; Walby 1988). Management and shop stewards viewed part-time employment as marginal women's work and it has been suggested that some unions deliberately sought to disadvantage the position of these workers, in order to protect 'men's jobs' (for a discussion of trade unions as patriarchal institutions see Walby 1986).

The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) were the first union to see the potential of organizing part-timers by targeting school meals workers in the Midlands in the 1960s (Cunnison and Stageman 1993: 205), but it was not until the sharp decline of union membership in the early 1980s that unions began to look towards women in general and to part-time and atypical employees as their key to survival (Beale 1982; Beaumont and Harris 1990; Waddington and Whitson 1997). Even now, it seems that rather than simply viewing part-time workers as a group in the labour force who work shorter hours than full-timers, part-time workers are seen to be qualitatively different to full-time workers. Recent research on high level officers in 12 large trade unions revealed that one third of the interviewees thought part-time workers were more difficult to recruit because they are less committed to the workplace / union (TUC 1996:21).

In 1996, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) launched several campaigns, one of which focused on part-time workers (TUC 1996). The campaign sought to raise the general public's awareness regarding issues of part-time work in an attempt to gain support for part-timers and also lobbied Westminster and the European Parliament on part-timers' rights. The campaign also aimed to encourage unions to view part-time workers as central to their agenda, rather than marginalizing them or seeing part-timers as a threat to the core membership. The importance of the recruitment of part-timers was stressed and reduced subscription rates were recommended. Unions were advised that the successful recruitment of part-timers depended on prioritising issues of importance to them, such as holidays, over-time and training. Unions were also advised to make changes to their organizational structures to enable increased participation by part-timers (Heery 1998).

The campaign was successful as it raised the profile of part-time work in the labour movement and beyond: unions recognised the need to recruit part-timers and to encourage their representation within the union. A recent survey of TUC unions (and non-TUC unions with more than 3,000 affiliates), aimed to assess the level and nature of union recruitment activity. It found that unions at national level are beginning to recognise diversity within the workforce and are attempting to recruit accordingly: 85 per cent of the sample placed high or moderate priority on recruiting part-timers, 80 per cent of unions placed high or moderate priority on recruiting women, 72 per cent on recruiting ethnic minority workers and 69 per cent on fixed term or temporary workers (Cardiff Research Group 1998:5, table 3). It remains to be seen to what extent this enthusiasm for recruiting 'non-standard' workers will be translated into membership.

### Individual Explanations

Individual explanations for different propensities to join trade unions can be divided into those focusing on personal characteristics and those focusing on attitudes towards trade unions. Personal characteristics include factors such as gender, class, race, age, marital status, whether the woman is the head of household, number of dependent children and hours worked (Booth 1986; Hernández 1995). Booth's (1986) multivariate analysis of the 1975 National Training Survey found that the only personal characteristics which affected women's propensity to be in a union were age for female full- and part-timers and education for female full-time workers. Sinclair (1995) analysed a sub-group of the SCEL data<sup>3</sup> (those employees who had a trade union at their workplace) to determine the most important determinants of trade union membership. In order of importance, these included political preference, sex, self-assessed class membership and age. Sinclair found the most important determinants of union membership for female full-timers to be support for the aims of the trade union movement and whether the women had favourable experiences of unions. She found that although women have as strong a belief in the principles of trade unionism as men (see also Bradley 1994:50), they may be less satisfied with their experiences of unions, and indeed, may have negative perceptions of unions. Regarding female part-timers, two important determinants of union membership were identified: the presence of workplace representatives and whether women had favourable experiences of unions. It is this latter point that this paper discusses: do female part-timers have favourable experiences of and attitudes towards trade unions?

### 3. Data and methods

To research female part-timers attitudes towards and experiences of unions in detail, a single sector case study of the retail industry was chosen. There are several reasons why the retail industry provides a good case study for research on this area: it has low levels of union density; it is a high user of part-time employment and employs the largest absolute number of part-time workers; part-time work in retail is broadly characteristic of manual part-time work in general - it is highly feminised and the quality of the jobs are inferior to full-time jobs (see Walters 1999).

The research was based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 50 female part-time workers in the North West of England in 1996. The women were employed by three national retail companies (pseudonyms are used to disguise the companies). Two of these companies recognised a trade union while the third did not. Of the two organized companies, 'Alldays' was relatively pro-union, while 'Bradleys' was anti-union. Although Bradleys recognized a trade union, the union was no longer involved in pay bargaining and the chairman of the company had made a number of threats to derecognize the union. He had also introduced a range of measures which sought to marginalise the union: the shop stewards were prevented from participating in the induction for new employees, had facility time

---

<sup>3</sup> The Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) consisted of three representative surveys in six UK local labour markets in 1986 and 1987 (the work attitudes / histories survey; the household and community survey and the employer survey).

taken off them, were disallowed the right to inspect the scene of an accident, had notice boards taken down and were made to ask permission to use the telephone. Finally, the only time the full-time officer was allowed on site was to attend a disciplinary appeal. The unorganized company, 'Cheaper DIY' was also anti-union: injunctions had been served on union officers who tried to recruit at the store. Furthermore, several employees had been asked at their interview if they were union members, while another had been pressurised by the store manager to give up trade union membership.

A range of union members and non-members in the organized workplaces were interviewed in order to provide some insight into part-time workers' attitudes towards unions and to assess whether attitudes differ between members and non-members. In the unorganized workplaces, interviewees were asked whether given the opportunity, they would like to join a trade union at their workplace. By holding the sector constant and choosing companies with different union status, it is possible to suggest factors which may contribute to the women's attitudes.

All of the women worked in low-level jobs (as checkout operators or general assistants). Of the 50 women interviewed, 45 were married or cohabiting and five women were lone parents. Their partners were employed in a variety of jobs, but were mostly manual workers (31 men). The remaining men were employed in non-manual occupations, some of whom had high status jobs. The majority of interviewees were in their thirties and had children. All of the women in the sample were White and most had low level qualifications, having left school at the earliest opportunity.

#### 4. Female part-time workers' experiences of and attitudes towards trade unions

Even though part-time workers have low levels of union membership, it is not the case that they have little experience of trade unionism. Table Two summarises the previous and current union membership of the women in the sample and shows that the majority of women had some experience of trade unions. Only six women had no personal experience of unions from their past and current jobs: these women had never been union members or worked in an organized workplace.

TABLE 2: CURRENT AND PAST UNION MEMBERSHIP OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Current union status	Past union membership			Total
	Member in organized workplace	Non-member in organized workplace	Unorganized workplace	
Member in organized workplace	18	5	4	27
Non-member in organized workplace	5	1	2	8
Unorganized workplace	8	1	6	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>50</b>

## Past Experience of Trade Unions

Over three quarters of the women interviewed had some experience of unions from their previous employment, with just over half having been union members in one or more of their previous jobs (see table two). The women who had previously been union members had generally been in permanent employment in industries and sectors traditionally associated with high union density rates e.g. the public sector utilities or local authority (as home-helps, 'dinner ladies' and cleaners) or in private sector banks, insurance companies and factories. They were also likely to be older. For some women, union membership was more continuous than others: around one-third of the interviewees who had experienced union membership in their previous employment had belonged to a union in the majority of their jobs for the majority of their working life. The remaining two-thirds of those with past union membership had more discontinuous trade union histories, moving in and out of union membership as they changed jobs. These women were less likely to have spent the majority of their working lives in highly unionized occupations and industries.

A smaller number of interviewees (seven women) had been employed in an organized workplace in the past but had not been union members. The reason cited for this was that they had not been approached by the union in their respective workplaces. Four of these women were clerical workers in factories (the trade union had been for shop floor staff only), two were temporary workers and one woman was employed on a youth training scheme. Yet despite the fact that none of these women had belonged to a union, some were knowledgeable of the issues surrounding trade unionism as they had witnessed the shop floor workers on strike or suffering redundancies. The remaining interviewees (12 women) had no experience of trade unionism from their previous jobs at all. For the most part, these women had been employed in a variety of jobs in the service sector e.g. in shop work, hotels and restaurants, which have especially low levels of unionization.

Many of the women who had been employed in organized workplaces had experienced industrial action or other workplace disputes first hand and a small number of the interviewees who were union members had been actively involved, for example by taking (successful) strike action;

There was a strike in [Company] when I was there. I think it was only like a three day strike and then things got sorted through the union and they got what they wanted so we went back to work

(former factory worker)

On the whole, the majority of women who had belonged to a union in a previous job had positive recollections of their experiences. They spoke of union gains and triumphs, and how the union 'got things done';

...Once, the girls felt a bit of a chill and that was it, they [the union] shut the factory down... Gave us all hot cups of tea in the canteen for an hour, got hot blowers to warm up the factory and then let us all back in again

(former factory worker)

An important point to note here is that in the main, these women had been union members at a time when unions were strong and able to bargain successfully for their members' claims. This is likely to affect their attitudes with regard to the effectiveness of the trade union in their current workplace, which may not have as much influence as did unions in the past.

A small number of women were critical of the unions in their former workplace(s). One told how new terms and conditions were introduced to the detriment of the part-time workforce, while another told how she was ignored by her fellow workmates for refusing to sign up for the union (she was a temporary worker on a four month contract). The main criticism of trade unions from their previous workplaces was that of union militancy over trivial issues. This point will be developed below.

## Current Experiences of Trade Unions

In their current jobs, of the 35 women employed by the two organized companies, 27 belonged to a trade union, while the remaining eight did not. Most of the women who currently belonged to a union had been members in a previous job, or had worked in an organized workplace. The reasons given by the union members in the sample for joining their workplace union echo those found in the SCELL research (Gallie 1996:145). The main reason was that the union was seen as 'back up' or a form of insurance, with the expertise to resolve any legal problems. Another frequently cited reason was because the majority of employees at their workplace were members.

The women in the two organized workplaces were equally split as to whether they were favourable towards the union in their workplace: half thought their workplace union represented their interests while the other half were more critical. Those women who were favourable perceived the workplace union to be effective. The union was seen to perform a useful role by negotiating the pay deal, winning claims and dealing with problems at work;

Well, I think so far each time we've been with a grievance, they've sorted it out. Pay - they've sorted all that. ...They've been pretty good.

One of the women I know, she fell off a stool and damaged her wrist, and she couldn't work. I mean, it was them [the union] that suggested 'Yea, right, we'll put a claim in for this', and they do pay all the expenses, USDAW pay all the expenses, so you're not actually... It's not actually coming out of your pocket.

Some of the more critical interviewees felt that the union representatives failed to act on their complaints and that the union did not adequately represent the members or 'fight' their case;

I complained about these chairs that we sit on to the union rep and nothing has been done. All she said to me was 'Well, the chairs have been on order for months now, they should be coming in soon', but that's not good enough is it? ...I think they should take up things when you go... There's a lot of things that the union could do, and they don't.

The only thing I've ever seen when the union get involved is when there's a pay rise. And whether we agree to it or not, the union always seem to accept it, and that's it. ...you know damn well what the outcome's going to be, whether you voted or not, and the unions shouldn't be like that... ...You know, they don't say 'Well we'll fight it for you'. They just say 'Well, you're going to take, accept it, 'cos that's all you're gonna get'. I mean, any other one'd fight it for you, wouldn't they? They'd say 'Well, you don't want that'.

However, not all of the women blamed the actual union representatives, but pointed out instead that the union had little influence within the company and as a consequence was unable to 'fight' for the members.

The eight non-union members in the organized workplaces gave three reasons for their non-membership: the workplace union was ineffective, they had not been asked to join, or they were opposed to trade unions. Of the (four) women who perceived the union to be ineffective, three had belonged to the union in their current workplace at one time but had opted out, saying it was 'a waste of time'. All but one of these women had been union members in their previous jobs and therefore knew what membership involved. They told how the union had no bargaining power within the company and compared the union in their current workplace to unions they had experienced in previous jobs. Noticeably, the women who had experienced stronger unions in their past employment had been employed in more 'male-like' jobs e.g. in factories or distribution depots;



Well, it's completely different to where I used to work, where the union was very very strong and the union and [company] were always dealing with queries

(former distribution depot worker)

There's no resources there, not for the union. ...I've never seen anything. We had our own office and everything in [company], but I've never seen anything in Bradleys

(former distribution depot worker)

It was not the case that these women were against unions in general. They all said they would join if it was a different union or if everyone at the workplace joined.

The two women who had not been asked to join the union were both employed by Bradleys and both had less than two years service. Thus, when they started work in Bradleys the closed shop was no longer in operation. As mentioned above, Bradleys was an anti-union company and no longer permitted the union to recruit new employees as part of the induction programme. The remaining two women said they had not joined the union as they did not agree with trade unions. Their reasons will be discussed below.

Regarding those women who worked in the unorganized workplace, nearly half (6 out of 15) said they would definitely join if there was a trade union at their workplace. They gave the same reasons for desiring membership as the union members mentioned above i.e. union membership as a form of 'backing'. Indeed, some women felt vulnerable that they did not have trade union representation at their workplace. All but one of the women who said they would definitely join a union had been union members in their previous jobs and several mentioned this as part of the reason for desiring union membership at their current workplace. For example, when asked if she would like to join a union in her current workplace, one woman replied;

I would, yea. I think with being in one before, and knowing what they can do for you...

(former mill worker)

The remaining women had less past experience of trade unionism so while some said they would join a union if everyone else in their workplace did, another group (four interviewees) did not know whether they would join a union or not, saying they did not know much about trade unions. Interestingly, only two of these women made reference to their status as a part-time worker;

At the end of the day I don't work that many hours for it to affect me.

...'cos I'm only there part-time, I don't really know if it could do anything anyway really.

Clearly though, for an overwhelming majority, working part-time is not seen as a reason to refuse union membership.

This section has shown that on the whole, the female part-timers who were non-members were actually quite open to the idea of joining a trade union. Apart from the small proportion who were opposed to unions in principle, it seems non-membership of trade unions is related to several factors and differs between organized and non-organized workplaces. In the organized workplaces, the main reasons for non-membership were because the workplace union was perceived to be ineffective and because the interviewees had not been asked to join the union. One inference could be that both of these are attributable to the political situation within which trade unions have operated. Under the Conservative government, unions' power decreased: some employers derecognized unions and / or refused to allow unions to openly recruit employees. It is possible that the implementation of the 1999 Employment

Relations Act will slowly impact upon the role which unions are able to play at workplace level. Coupled with the attempts which unions are making to encourage union membership among the 'non-standard' work force, this may be one reason why trade union membership has started to increase.

In the unorganized workplace, women's attitudes to joining a union were particularly illuminating: a substantial number of women said they were unaware of what unions could do for them as they had no experience of trade unions. In particular, this group were unsure of the benefits which union membership could have for them as part-time workers. The implications of these findings may therefore be that unions would profit from approaching this type of worker and explaining the benefits of trade union membership to workers in their position. However, in order to be successful in recruiting such part-timers, unions also have to be able to make membership worthwhile, for example, by offering reduced or pro rata subscription rates (Heery 1998).

This section focused on women's own experiences of and attitudes towards unions. The next section moves on to examine the women's attitudes to trade unionism more generally, by exploring their support for and criticisms of unions in a wider context.

### Favourable Attitudes towards Trade Unions

An overwhelming majority of the sample of part-time workers (41 out of 50 interviewees) had favourable attitudes towards unions in general. They regarded unions as important, useful and necessary in order to protect employees. The women who were favourable can be divided into two groups. The first group (28 interviewees) had no criticisms to make of the union movement but they did comment on the decline of trade union power during their time in the labour market and felt that unions should have more power. These women recalled positive experiences of unions in their current and / or previous jobs. An important influence on these women's attitudes was the favourable experiences or attitudes of their family members and their husbands specifically. Several women reported that they had learned about the benefits of trade unions via their husbands' experiences;

...Stuart has always been in a union ...and like when they had been out on strike, they'd always, the union had always resolved it.

At Martin's place you just go to your shop steward: 'We're not happy with this. We should be having double time - sort it out'. It saves you getting upset.

He's never been a union official, but he would... he thoroughly agrees with the union, and you know [Company] is very very union minded, and it's only through him that I've got any... [pauses] You know, he says to me 'Well, they wouldn't get away with that in [Company]'. I said 'Yea, you're right'.

A second group of women were favourable towards trade unions but had some criticisms to make. The main criticism reported was over union militancy, with several women recalling examples of this from their previous employment. It was not the case that they were opposed to trade unions or to industrial action but what they considered to be trivial, 'petty' matters;

...when we first got married [Company] were on strike at the drop of a hat... And it was always over... what seemed to be quite petty things. ...Some of it with [Company] was so militant, it was... you know 'Your tea break's gonna be 10 minutes late'. 'Right, let's down tools' type of thing. You know, some of it was silly.

From past experience, like when I worked at Central Station, the engineers I worked for said they would never come to Liverpool again because the unions were so militant. I remember they went on strike because they got the wrong worktops on the tables in the canteen... They were really really militant. I mean you're talking... I mean, it was unbelievable, some of the things that they, you know, came out for.

Apart from their own and / or their husbands' / other family members' experiences, a second factor which seemed to influence the women's attitudes towards trade unions was the media. Several interviewees described industrial disputes which had been reported on the television (for example, the 1984-5 miners' strike) saying they found these images particularly disturbing (for a critical discussion of the way industrial disputes are reported in the media see Glasgow University Media Group 1976). A further factor which seemed to add to these women's criticisms of unions was the role of unions in the local labour market. These women were all too aware of the high levels of unemployment in their region and were concerned that unions' excessive and unrealistic demands may drive employers from their locality. Several women talked about the Liverpool Dock workers who had been on strike and the Ford workers in Halewood;

Sometimes I think maybe Fords and that type really push it to the edge, I mean, at the moment, this dispute that's going on, I can see Ford's closing down in Halewood, because I think they're just pushing for so much, you know, a shorter working week, fair enough, but a nine per cent or ten per cent wage rise? I don't know, I really don't know...

In our place [Bradleys] they haven't got any power but the likes of Fords and that, I think they've got too much power because they're running the business aren't they? 'Cos they're just gonna end up taking Fords out of Liverpool and it'll be all the unions fault in the end.

Despite their critical attitudes, this group of women were favourable towards trade unions. They felt it important that unions should have some power, but that they should not abuse this power. Only a tiny proportion of part-timers were totally opposed to trade unions. Their attitudes will now be discussed.

### Hostile Attitudes towards Trade Unions

Of the 50 interviewees, only five were strongly 'anti-union'. These women did not think that unions were useful nor that union membership is important. Just as the women who were favourable to trade unions had husbands or other family members with positive experiences and / or attitudes towards trade unions, one factor which the 'anti-union' women had in common was that their husband's and / or other family members had negative experiences or attitudes towards trade unionism. For example, one woman who had previously been employed in a bank did not make any criticisms of the trade unions' effectiveness when reflecting on her previous job. Thus, it would seem that her negativity towards unions was not influenced by any past union membership or direct personal experience of unions. What does seem to have influenced her views is her father's experience of trade unionism (i.e. indirect personal experience). He had recently been made redundant by his employer and duly accepted the redundancy package only to find that a month later the package was doubled. Although the union were attempting to resolve this matter, it was still ongoing at the time of the interview. Similarly, the other women who had hostile attitudes towards trade unions were not critical of their own personal experiences of unions, but seemed to have been influenced by the experiences and / or attitudes of their husbands;

His opinion, why he doesn't agree with them is because he said in the building trade (which he's only ever known since he left school) there's blokes who've been in unions and he says they've been on less money than him. Do you know what I mean? Things like that. So they've never done them any good, so he said he's never been in one...

It's like with Alan in the Ambulance Service - they were on strike a couple of years ago and I mean, the union didn't do very much for them. And it was all 'erm, getting them to stand outside shops for money and things like that, where the union should have been helping them. And at the end of the day they got nothing. I think they're hopeless.

My husband, he's not in favour of unions. He said 'You're wasting your money, they're not gonna do anything for you'.

An important point to make here is that the influence of these men's attitudes on those of their wives is unlikely to be a one way process. On the contrary, it is logical to assume that husbands' experiences and attitudes affect their wives attitudes and vice versa. However, while it may be pretty common within the industrial relations literature to ask women about their families / husbands influence on their working lives (e.g. what hours would your husband prefer you to work?), men are rarely canvassed for their wives views. Another reason why the interviewees in this research talked so much about their husbands' experiences of trade unionism may be that their own experience of trade unionism was limited, as (especially in the past) men had more experience of unions than women.

#### A Note on Indifferent Attitudes towards Trade Unions

A small group of four women felt unable to make a decision on whether they were generally supportive or not of trade unions. This was because they had no experience of unions on which to base their judgement. All four were employed in Cheaper DIY (the unorganized workplace) and had not belonged to a union or worked in an organized workplace in any of their previous jobs. Additionally, none reported that their husbands / other family members had any significant experience of unions. Although these women only accounted for a small proportion of the total number interviewed, it is possible that this lack of knowledge about unions will increase in the future. Due to high levels of unemployment, a substantial minority of the adult population of working age have never had a job, while those young workers who do enter the labour market have very low levels of union membership. Furthermore, due to the sharp decline of union membership since 1979, these young workers may have parents who are non-union members and will therefore not have a 'union background' where they hear issues of trade unionism being discussed at home. A policy recommendation made by Lowe and Rastin (2000) is that trade unions need to recognise the importance of educating young people about trade unions before they make the transition into the labour market.

## 5. Conclusion

From the research presented in this paper, we are now more informed about the attitudes of female part-time workers to trade unions and their motivations with regard to joining a trade union. Several key findings are reported in the paper. Firstly, that the reasons for non-membership of trade unions differ for female part-timers in organized and unorganized workplaces. Apart from the women who were opposed to trade unions in principle, non-membership in the organized workplaces was attributed to the women feeling that the workplace union was ineffective or they had not been asked to join. In the unorganized company a finding of some consequence to trade unions was that a minority of women felt they did not know enough about trade unions to say whether they would join one or not.

Secondly, the research highlighted just how favourable female part-timers are towards trade unionism. Even the interviewees who were critical of union militancy over what they perceived to be 'trivial' reasons were supportive of unions in the main. They valued the protection which union membership offers and demonstrated strong support for the ideals of trade unionism. This is in spite of the fact that commentators such as Hakim (see especially 1991 and 1995) have argued that female part-time workers are one of the least work committed groups in the labour force and therefore may be less interested in trade unionism.

Thirdly, the paper provided new data with regard to the influences on female part-timers' attitudes towards unions. The empirical findings demonstrate that female part-timers' attitudes towards trade unions are formed in relation to several factors. These include the effectiveness of the workplace union and both direct and indirect experiences of unions. For example, supporting Sinclair's (1995) analysis, women with positive experiences (whether in their current or previous jobs) were supportive of unions and vice versa.

The paper set out to examine female part-time workers' attitudes towards trade unions, to establish whether attitudes can offer an explanation of why union membership rates are lower for part-time workers than for full-time workers. Clearly, attitudes towards and experiences of unions do influence the union membership of female part-time workers, but all this leads one to question to what extent the attitudes of female part-timers are any different to those held by female full-timers and men. Women's part-time / full-time employment status may have little or no effect on their attitudes towards unions and part-timers' attitudes may be no different to the attitudes of the rest of the working population. It may well be that male and female full-timers' union membership is also affected by whether or not they have favourable experiences of unions and so on. Further research with male and female full- and part-time workers is necessary to explore these suggestions further.

The research reported here suggests that an integrated approach is needed to fully understand part-time workers' union membership rates. It would seem that part-timers' lower union membership is due to a combination of structural factors, attitudes towards trade unions and the approach which unions have taken towards part-time workers. Although the findings provide strong evidence that unions are seen as highly relevant and desirable by female part-time workers, interesting questions are raised concerning why female part-timers believe in the principles of unions but do not feel committed to supporting them in their work environment. Why isn't support for unions translated into membership? One answer to this question may lie in the way unions have (or have not) approached women and part-time workers in particular. Trade unions have now realised that they need to attract 'non-standard' workers in order to stem the tide of decreasing membership levels. This has coincided with the end of nearly 20 years of hostility towards unions by the state so the task of recruiting 'non-standard' workers may become easier. Unions still have lots of work to do in educating the existing and future workforce about the benefits of trade union organization and with regard to successfully targeting part-timers in recruitment drives and campaigns. Unions need to improve women's perceptions of the union movement and part of this must be by recognising that a cultural change within unions has to take place to ensure that women are not 'put off' by unions (Wajcman 2000). Given that union membership for part-timers has been more stable over the last decade than for full-time workers it may be that these efforts are beginning to pay off.

## References

- Beale, J. (1982) *Getting it Together: Women as Trade Unionists*, London: Pluto.
- Beaumont, P. B. and Harris, R. I. D. (1990) 'Union Recruitment and Organising Attempts in Britain in the 1980s' *Industrial Relations Journal*, 21(3), pp 274-286.
- Beechey, V and Perkins, T. (1987) *A Matter of Hours: Women, Part-Time Work and the Labour Market*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Booth, A. (1986) 'Estimating the Probability of Trade Union Membership: A Study of Men and Women in Britain' *Economica*, 53, pp. 41-61.
- Bradley, H. (1994) 'Divided We Fall: Unions and their Members' *Employee Relations*, 16(2), pp. 41-52.
- Brown, R. K. (1976) 'Women as Employees: Some Comments on Research in Industrial Sociology' in D. L Barker and S. Allen (eds) *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage*, London: Longman.
- Cardiff Research Group (1998) *New Unionism Research Project*, Research Bulletin, No. 3, September: Cardiff University.
- Conley, H (2000) Temporary Work and Temporary Members: Representing the Insecure Workforce in the Public Sector, Paper presented at the 50<sup>th</sup> BUIRA Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 7-9 July 2000.
- Cook, A. H., Lorwin, V. R. and Daniels, A. K. (1992) *The Most Difficult Revolution: Women and Trade Unions*, London: Cornell University Press.
- Corcoran, L. (1995) 'Trade Union Membership and Recognition: 1994 Labour Force Survey Data' *Employment Gazette*, 103(5), pp. 191-203.
- Cunnison, S. and Stageman, J. (1993) *Feminizing the Unions: Challenging the culture of Masculinity*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- Delsen, L. (1990) 'European Trade Unions and the Flexible Workforce' *Industrial Relations Journal*, 21(4), pp 260-273.
- Frieze, J. (1987) *Part-Time Workers: Conditions, Rights and Unions*, London: WEA.
- Gallie, D. (1996) 'Trade Union Allegiance and Decline in British Labour Markets' in D. Gallie, R. Penn and M. Rose (eds) *Trade Unionism in Recession*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gallie, D., Penn, R. and M. Rose (1996) (eds) *Trade Unionism in Recession*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glasgow University Media Group (1976) *Bad News*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Goldthorpe, J. H. (1985) 'The End of Convergence: Corporatist and Dualist Tendencies in Modern Western Societies' in B. Roberts, R. Finnegan and D. Gallie (eds), *New Approaches to Economic Life*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Grint, K. (1991) *The Sociology of Work*, Cambridge: Polity
- Hakim, C. (1991) 'Grateful Slaves and Self-Made Women: Fact and Fantasy in Women's Work Orientations' *European Sociological Review*, 7(2), pp. 101-121.
- Hakim, C. (1995) 'Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment' *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(3), pp. 429-455.
- Heery, E. (1998) 'Campaigning for Part-Time Workers' *Work, Employment and Society* 12(2), pp. 351-366.
- Hernandez, A. (1995) 'The impact of Part-Time employment on union density' *Journal of Labour Research*, 16(4), pp. 485-491.
- Hewitt, P. (1993) *About Time: The Revolution in work and Family Life*, London: Rivers Oram Press.

- Hicks, S. (2000) Trade Union Membership 1998-99: An Analysis of Data from the Certification Officer and the Labour Force Survey. *Labour Market Trends*, 108(7), pp329-340.
- Labour Force Survey Data (2000) Figures extracted by the Department of Trade and Industry.
- Labour Force Survey Data (1998) Figures extracted by the Department of Trade and Industry.
- Labour Research Department (1996) *Part-Time Workers: A Guide to Negotiation and Recruitment*, London: Labour Research Department.
- Lowe, G.S. and Rastin, S. (2000) Organizing the Next Generation: Influences on Young Workers' Willingness to Join Unions in Canada. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38: 203-222.
- McIlroy, J. (1995) *Trade Unions in Britain Today* (2nd ed) Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marsh, D. (1992) *The New Politics of British Trade Unionism: Union Power and the Thatcher Legacy*, London: Macmillan.
- Rubery, J. and Fagan, C. (1995) 'Le Temps Partiel en Grande-Bretagne' Le Cahiers du Mage (special issue): Differences de sexe sur le marche du travail, no. 2.
- Schur, L. A. and Kruse, D. (1992) 'Gender Differences in Attitudes Towards Unions' *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 46(1), pp. 89-102.
- Simms, M., Heery, E., Delbridge, R., Salmon, J. and D. Simpson. (2000) Organising Women, Paper presented at the 50<sup>th</sup> BUIRA Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 7-9 July 2000.
- Sinclair, D. (1995) 'The Importance of Sex for the Propensity to Unionize' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 33(2), pp. 173-190.
- Thair, T. and Risdon, A. (1999) 'Women in the Labour Market: Results from the Spring 1998 LFS', *Labour Market Trends*, 107(3), pp. 103-128.
- Tam, M. (1997) *Part-Time Employment: A Bridge or a Trap?*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- TUC (1996) *Part of the Union? The Challenge of Recruiting and Organising the Part-Time Workers*, London: TUC.
- Waddington, J. and Whitson, C. (1997) 'Why Do People Join Unions in a Period of Membership Decline?' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35(4), pp. 515-546.
- Waddington, J. and Whitson, C. (1995) 'Trade Unions: Growth, Structure and Policy' in P. Edwards (ed) *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice in Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wajcman, J. (2000). 'Feminism facing industrial relations in Britain' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38: 183-201.
- Walby, S. (1986) *Patriarchy at Work*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Walby, S. (1988) (ed) *Gender Segregation at Work*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Walters, S. (1999) *Female Part-Time Workers: Attitudes to Work and Trade Unions*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: The University of Liverpool.
- Warren, T. (1998) *Women's Part-Time Employment: A Comparison of Britain and Denmark*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: The University of Liverpool.