

SYNTHESIS OF THE FIRST THREE MSU REPORTS
(Mainstreaming and Unions)

**THE CHALLENGE OF MAINSTREAMING FOR TRADE UNIONS
IN EUROPE:**
how can trade unions foster gender equality in the workplace and in daily life?

Austria – Belgium – Denmark – France – Italy – the Netherlands

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INTRODUCTION

In a context of great changes in family structures (reduction in fertility and marriages, growth in single parent families, etc.), mass participation of women in the labour market is one of the major challenges of European development. All European countries are experiencing – to differing degrees – a big increase in women’s economic activity, especially amongst adults. Moreover, as far as European policies are concerned, equality between men and women is a major theme, as shown by the presence of this “pillar” amongst employment guidelines, that were launched at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997.

In spite of some progress (increasing women’s economic activity, higher level of qualifications and greater access to skilled jobs, etc.), various indicators show that gender inequality persists, including in countries, which are most advanced in this area: employment rates, that are lower than those of men, above-average unemployment in most countries, occupational segregation, unequal pay, status and working time and unequal sharing of domestic chores within families, etc.

In recent years, one of the solutions to inequality promoted by the European Commission is the dissemination of the concept of mainstreaming¹, i.e., incorporating equality in all policies and by all actors involved. But, amongst the policies and actors most often referred to by the European Commission in the implementation of mainstreaming, one is less well-known, namely, trade unions (c.f. Council of Europe, 1998 and also the Joint Report on Employment, 1999). As a lever of action envisaged for disseminating gender mainstreaming, trade union confederations can, indeed, play a positive role. Conversely, the concept is essential for improving the place of women and equality inside trade unions.

The aim of this research programme is precisely to apply this concept to the trade union field – to activities that have already been carried out or started, by crossing conceptual analysis and respective national situations.

Box N° 1 – Gender mainstreaming: definitions and issues

The “concept” of mainstreaming first appeared in 1985 during the third United Nations World Women’s Conference in Nairobi. Then, it was a matter of promoting the role of women and including “*women’s values in work on development*” (Council of Europe, 1998). After years of formulating a strategy for developing such an approach, the platform that was adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) was more explicit: “*governments and other actors should promote active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes, so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively*”. (Beijing, 1995).

At the same time, within the European Commission, the third and fourth action programmes promoted a new more explicit will regarding mainstreaming. A text was adopted on this in 1996 (European Commission, 1996).

According to the Council of Europe, mainstreaming is “*the (re)organisation, improvement, development and assessment of decision-making processes in order to incorporate the prospect of gender equality in all fields and at all levels by actors who are generally involved in drawing up policy*” (Council of Europe, 1998).

In other words, gender mainstreaming proposes a new conception of gender equality, which is not dealt with apart and separately from decision-making, but in an integrated and permanent way. Given such rationale, there are no longer economic policies, negotiations and action on the one hand; and on the other, the issue of occupational equality, which is seen independently and is aimed at correcting earlier inequality.

There are therefore two essential dimensions to this approach: it is firstly a matter of conceiving equality permanently and upstream at the very moment when policy is being drawn up. Secondly, it is a matter of

¹ In French this term is translated by « integrated approach to equality »

involving all actors, who have a decision-making role, i.e., obviously public actors, but also social and local actors (companies, unions, local councillors, etc.).

It should be recalled that mainstreaming should not be an alibi for slowing down or removing specific actions and budgets for equality, but, on the contrary, should adjust to the development of an integrated approach. Thus, most research does not emphasise giving up a specific approach in favour of mainstreaming, but rather combining both policies: *“Mainstreaming is generally presented as a new strategy towards gender equality and its supporters emphasise that, in no case, should it replace “traditional” policies. (...) It is, in fact, complementary”*. (Council of Europe, 1998).

This research programme is based on a comparative approach between European countries, which are rarely brought together in this way – namely Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy and the Netherlands. This approach is interesting, because it makes it possible to observe mechanisms, that have been adopted in various countries, where gender mainstreaming is taken into account in different ways – or almost ignored – by trade union actors, depending on specific societal and social configurations, which should be highlighted (different economic and social systems, different roles of the welfare state and different industrial relations systems, etc.). How has the issue of mainstreaming been introduced – or not – in these countries? What is the relationship between, specific types of policy, aimed at equality, and the methodological innovation introduced by mainstreaming? What role do trade unions play in processes, that foster equality, and what is their attitude to mainstreaming? Our research focuses on these kinds of questions.

The aim of this presentation is to provide a synthesis of the main results – concerning the first phase of the programme - that have been collected by each partner in the six countries covered by the study,. It is made up of three parts: the situation of women in the different labour markets and national equality policies, a comparison of industrial relations systems and, finally, an initial appraisal of the issue of gender mainstreaming in the various trade unions. Indeed, all three aspects are closely linked: it is not possible to understand the place given to equality in trade unions, without referring to the position of women in the labour market and the place of gender equality in public policies, nor without analysing the nature of industrial relations.

1 – SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET AND NATIONAL POLICIES

Data on women's employment

The situation of women in the labour market varies significantly from country to country in Europe and, notably, in the countries covered by our study, even if our analysis shows that there are points of convergence.

In all European countries, but to varying degrees, the traditional model of temporary or definitive withdrawal of women from the labour market because of the presence of children, is tending to diminish. But, given the economic crisis, women's right to employment is regularly threatened – this is notably the case for mothers. They more frequently come up against obstacles than men do in relation to incorporating the labour market (difficulties of access to a real career; greater vulnerability regarding unemployment, etc.). They also face contradictions more frequently (declared policies favourable to women's employment, but absence of adequate childcare, etc.).

Certainly, such elements of convergence between the countries covered by this study need to be refined: firstly, Denmark, France and, to a lesser extent, Austria experienced earlier development of women's economic activity and full-time work is the norm in these countries (part-time work accounts for under a third of women's employment). The Netherlands – and partly Belgium - have experienced increasing women's economic activity more recently and it is based, especially in the former country, on the growth of part-time work (women's employment in the Netherlands is mainly part-time; it is also more than 40% in Belgium). Finally, Italy is still marked by limited participation of women in the labour market (the rate of women's employment is only 39%); part-time work, which is on the increase, remains very significantly below the European average (16% for women, compared with 33% in Europe).

Table 1: Principle indicators of employment and unemployment in 2000

	A	B	DK	F	I	Neth.	EU15
Total employment rate	68,3	60,5	76,3	62,2	53,5	73,2	63,3
Men	77	69,5	80,8	69,3	67,5	82,4	72,5
Women	59,4	51,5	71,6	55,3	39,6	63,7	54
15-24	53,1	29,1	66	29	25,9	69,2	40,3
25-54	82,2	77,4	84	78,8	67,9	81,8	76,6
55-64	28,9	26,3	55,7	29,7	27,8	38,3	37,7
Full-time equivalent employment rate	63,5	60,5	69,3	58,7	51,7	57,2	57,9
Men	76,2	74,4	76,9	69,2	67	74,6	71
Women	51	46,6	62,2	48,7	36,7	40,1	45,3
Total unemployment rate	3,7	7	4,7	9,5	10,5	2,7	8,2
Men	3,2	5,7	4,2	7,8	8	2	7
Women	4,3	8,8	5,3	11,5	14,4	3,7	9,7
Long-term unemployment rate	1	3,8	1	5,9	6,4	0,8	3,6
Men	1	3,1	0,9	3,5	4,9	0,7	3
Women	1	4,8	1,2	9,5	8,8	1,1	4,4
Total part-time rate	16,3	20,8	21,3	16,9	8,4	41,1	17,7
Men	4,1	5,8	10,2	5,4	3,7	19,2	6,2
Women	32,2	40,5	34,1	31	16,5	70,5	33,3

Source : Eurostat

In all, three forms of discrimination remain problematic in all of the countries studied:

- Occupational segregation, in which it is difficult for public authorities to intervene, as there are sometimes contradictory debates (Denmark). Moreover, vertical segregation is not only the responsibility of the authorities, but also the result of barriers within private companies, which it is also difficult to intervene in (France and Austria). Finally, individual and family choices concerning the courses of study and training chosen are marked by internalisation of social and cultural standards and perceptions.
- Pay gaps are largely explained by persisting occupational segregation. Besides isolated experiences (Belgium and Denmark), it seems extremely difficult to reduce them.
- Job insecurity and difficulties of accessing stable jobs and careers are another feature of women's employment in Europe, that take different forms (involuntary part-time work, fixed-term contracts, "para-subordinate" jobs and undeclared jobs).

Equality policies and the place of gender mainstreaming in the countries covered by the study

On 15 December 1997, the extraordinary European Council meeting in Luxembourg on employment adopted the first employment guidelines, that were to be implemented in 1998. Each member State committed itself to adopting a common structure in annual national action plans. This structure is based on four "pillars", which aim at improving the functioning of labour markets: firstly, reinforcing ability to integrate the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed, around the theme of employability; secondly, developing an entrepreneurial spirit, by reducing administrative and tax constraints on the setting up of new companies; thirdly, improving companies' ability to adapt, in order to modernise work organisation, notably via agreements on working time and flexible work contracts; finally, the will to reinforce equal opportunities is the subject of a whole pillar – the fourth one: "*Member States must deal with gender discrimination and take appropriate measures to enable men and women to reconcile working life and family life and facilitate the reintegration of men and women in economically active life*" (Council of Europe Resolution, 1997).

After the first national action plans in 1998, the Commission made a rather lukewarm assessment of the place given to the fourth pillar by the majority of member States. In order to reinforce this aspect, the idea of mainstreaming was introduced during the preparation of the 1999 plans, as the new 19th guideline emphasises that member States "*will adopt an approach that aims at gender mainstreaming when implementing the guidelines of the four pillars*" (OJ, EC, 1999).

When one examines the implementation of this concept in the countries of our study, the first dimension concerns the way in which Ministries function and the kind of political impetus that is chosen. Thus, in **Denmark** - where the way in which the labour market is regulated is quoted as an example (tripartite system, which gives a central role to agreements) – in the name of mainstreaming, there is a particular Minister in charge of these issues (the Minister of Social Affairs and Equality, but at the same time all 20 Government Ministers are considered responsible for equality in their particular field. However, a "double approach" (specific and transversal action) is used via the activities of a Ministry in charge of these issues. Since June 2000, mainstreaming is written into the law on equality, guided by the Ministry for equality and relayed into each Ministry. This approach implies that the Minister of Employment is responsible for mainstreaming ex. by monitoring each law and measure from a gender point

of view and assess their impact in terms of equality related to employment matters. But at the same time, with the purpose of monitoring the implementation of mainstreaming in the central administration, a steering committee with high rank representatives of all Ministries has been formed, partly to inspire, exchange experiences and test ideas through pilot projects, partly to overlook the progress of projects initiated in each Ministry.

The **French** ministerial approach to introducing gender mainstreaming was chosen by the European Commission as an example: in 2000, an inter-ministerial committee devoted to equality really introduced a mainstreaming approach, committing each ministry to equality conventions (procedures for equal access of women to all levels of training...). For example, an agreement between the equality and education ministries led to internal training on equality and developing tools for raising pupils' awareness, at all levels.

Also, in **Austria**, efforts were firstly made with a view to fostering a transversal approach to equality. But women's associations and the opposition are doubtful as to the future of equality policy since the change of government. Indeed, one of the first measures was to abolish the equality ministry, whose activities have been transferred to the ministry of social security and generations and an inter-ministerial committee that is responsible for mainstreaming... There is, therefore, a big risk of diluting this issue, which is far from being a priority.

In the **Netherlands**, in the 1980s, the government decided that coordination of "emancipation" measures should be carried out by the ministry of labour (and no longer the ministry of culture). This corresponds with a change in the role attributed to labour issues in emancipation and the end of the male breadwinner model. Since then, different structures have been created in line with a certain degree of mainstreaming – an inter-departmental commission for emancipation (responsible notably for producing reports on the effects of measures retained for each department) and an "emancipation monitor", who is responsible for assessing results on a two-yearly basis.

In **Belgium**, the ministry of employment and labour is also responsible for equal opportunities. Policy, therefore, focuses greatly on women's working conditions and on reinforcing their position in the labour market. In order to attract the attention of all ministries to the gender perspective of policy, the ministry of employment and labour initiated a step in the direction of gender mainstreaming in 2001. The project aims at helping all ministries, regarding the implementation of strategic objectives, that are related to improving equal opportunities for women and men. Even if there are few results, the importance of such an process has been confirmed by the majority of public services staff.

Finally, in **Italy**, from 2000-2001 onwards, new resources have been promoted, that are aimed, for example, at reinforcing "equality advisors", who are responsible for monitoring the implementation of law on equality, creating a national network for exchanging good practices and introducing new criteria for promoting women in sectors, where they are under-represented...

For the great majority of countries, mainstreaming involves developing a statistical tool, which systematically incorporates gender data. "*In order to mainstream, it is necessary to have statistics broken down by gender*" (Belgian Action Plan, 1999). Indeed, to varying degrees, most statistical tables on employment, unemployment and employment policy measures are broken down by gender. Some countries even propose involving statistical

services in a structural approach of including gender in all employment data (as in France, for example).

But, such progress does not mean that we have not identified significant differences between the various countries. If one looks closer at the content of the plans and uses, in a simplified way, studies of women's employment in Europe (Fagan, 1998 and Fouquet et al., 1999)², one can identify the use of three very different concepts of mainstreaming:

- In one group of countries, notably Nordic countries, mainstreaming is used in its broadest meaning – it is a matter of integrating equality in all economic policies and actions – upstream of measures. This approach, therefore, intervenes directly in the way the labour market functions – kinds of jobs, pay gaps, recruitment and promotion criteria, working conditions and time, etc. and also regarding reconciliation of working life and family life. **Denmark** is an example of this situation. The **Netherlands** only partly implements this approach.
- In a second, bigger group of countries (**Austria, France and Belgium**), there is an intermediate situation – without totally adopting a real integrated approach to mainstreaming, there are some interesting elements, which could change the traditional place given to equality within their national configurations.
- At the other extreme, in a third group of countries (including in Europe, the Southern and so-called “insular” countries, namely the **United Kingdom and Ireland**), mainstreaming exists, but seems to still be interpreted in a limited way – it concerns precise areas of equality, but generally dimensions, that are outside the labour market, for example, action on the educational system, in order to promote women's education and training or improve childcare facilities. **Italy** illustrates this situation, even if there are major efforts now.

Overall, this analysis of the way gender mainstreaming is incorporated in policy highlights two contradictions regarding equality policy:

- Firstly, all the reports emphasised the desire of each country to reinforce women's employment, in line with the recommendations of the employment summits in Lisbon (March 2000) and Stockholm (March 2001). But, there is a particularly big contradiction regarding women's employment between quantitative objectives and more qualitative objectives, concerning improving the quality of employment. Indeed, how can one promote women's employment, without raising the issue of the kind of employment on offer (low level of qualifications and little recognition of “informal” skills) and employment status proposed (fixed term contracts and part-time work)? Few countries have really succeeded in resolving this contradiction. Thus, the issue of the increase in part-time work (in all the countries studied, except for Denmark) exposes the ambiguity of these policies – in the Netherlands, notably, few measures aim at limiting short part-time work, of which women are the majority of the victims.

² Partly using C. Fagan and J. O'Reilly's approach, A. Fouquet et al. incorporate various areas in the definition of gender social contract, which varies depending on the country: «*a political dimension whose values are expressed in national social protection systems, a domestic dimension, which considers differences in family models, and finally an occupational dimension*» (Fouquet et al., p. 106). This study is interesting because it defines four typical kinds of configuration: Nordic, continental, meridional and “insular” models. France is in an intermediate position between the Nordic and continental models.

- Secondly, the problem of reconciling family life and working life are now written into the programmes of all European countries. But, here again, there is a gap between announced principles and actual results – children are still often looked after by mothers, via leave, which is sometimes long, but without there being any real alternative in the form of childcare structures (Austria, Italy and the Netherlands). So long as the right to childcare does not really exist, the existence of real careers for mothers will remain problematic. Access to the right to leave with sufficient allowances is, of course, an aim that should be pursued, notably to encourage more fathers to take advantage of it. But it does not mean that it is not necessary to develop various childcare structures, which correspond with families’ needs (high quality care, proximity, flexible hours, cost, etc.) But, in three of the countries studied, provision is way below needs (Austria, the Netherlands and Italy).

II – INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEMS IN THE COUNTRIES COVERED BY THE STUDY

The diversity of industrial relations in Europe renders our task difficult – each country in the study has adopted its own legal and industrial principles. It is, therefore, possible to identify two typical models – in broad outline, as internal developments are very complex:

- On the one hand, “integrated” industrial relations systems, that are based on a model, which is most often tripartite (State, companies and employees’ trade unions), such as in Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria. Moreover, these systems are marked by various forms of “neo-corporatism”, i.e., a form of strong social partnership, aimed at both economic and social stability³. Thus, *LO* in Denmark, played up until now a very institutionalised role and influenced societal debates, legislation and social development. In Austria, *OeGB* – the only trade union confederation, which is a position of monopoly regarding bargaining – has the informal right to nominate the minister of social affairs and a major direct impact on legislation concerning economic issues, social investment, regulation and development. In the Netherlands, the biggest trade union confederation was *NVV*, which originated from socialist and social-democratic traditions, and the second was *NKV*, which was related to catholic traditions. They merged to become *FNV*. *CNV* comes from protestant traditions. Unions are part of a strong tripartite relationship, in which intensive consultations between government and social partners on all essential socio-economic issues are a feature.
- On the other hand, industrial relations systems, that are historically marked by non-cooperation between the State and social partners and a trade union movement that is termed “revolutionary” or based on “class struggle” (France and Italy⁴). In France, trade union divisions are strongly marked by different ideological concepts of the role of trade unions. On the one hand, the development of the *CFDT* towards “realistic trade unionism”, which is ready to incorporate new economic situations, has found a political echo, since the 1980s in left-wing governments, in which the Communist party played a minority role. On the other hand, the *CGT* – and, perhaps above all, *CGT-FO* –

³ For a more detailed and precise view of industrial relations, c.f. notably H. Slomp, *Les relations professionnelles en Europe*, 2000, pub. *l’Atelier*

⁴ This classification has to be updated to the last two decades, when Italy – although lacking of some of the structural ingredients of the neo-corporatism model – led a new season of Social Pacts in Europe.

maintained the principles of more radical oppositional trade unionism, even in relation to left-wing governments. In Italy, political traditions have always been strong in trade union confederations. The main confederation, *CGIL*, was created by political parties. For decades, this confederation was the union of communist (*PCI*) and socialist (*PSI*) employees, and also some leftist minorities after the mid-sixties. During the last twenty years, Italy came closer to the first model through via social pacts, but the recent period has been marked by a return to practices of strong trade union opposition and mobilisation.

- Belgium seems like a transition between the above models and is marked, notably, by the distinction between Christian and Social Democratic trade union movements and by a desire for strong social partnership. *FGTB*, the biggest trade union confederation, claims to represent democratic socialism and its union practice is influenced by this ideological approach. *CSC's* constitution (Christian) states the denominational nature of the union. *CGSLB* says it is seeking a freer and more equitable society on liberal industrial bases, as reiterated in its congresses. *CGSLB* claims to be independent of all political parties.

Box N° 2 Representative national trade union confederations

Austria: Austrian Trade Union Federation (*OeGB*) has 13 affiliated union based on economic sectors and a Union of monthly paid white collar employees (*GPA*).

Belgium: Belgian General Federation of Labour (*FGTB/ABVV*), Confederation of Christian Unions (*CSC/ACV*) and Belgian General Centre of Liberal Unions (*CGSLB/ACLVB and VSOA/SLFP*)

Denmark: Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (*LO*), Salaried Employees' and Civil Servants' Confederation (*FTF*) and Danish Confederation of Professional Associations (*AC*)

France: General Confederation of Labour (*CGT*); French Confederation of Christian Workers (*CFTC*; French Democratic Confederation of Labour (*CFDT*), following the development of the majority non-religious trend in the *CFTC*, which changed its name); *CGT-Force Ouvrière* (*CGT-FO*), and General Confederation of Executives (*CFE-CGC*),.

Italy: Italian General Confederation of Labour (*CGIL*), Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (*CISL*) – Christian democratic confederation, and Italian Union of Labour (*UIL*) – social democratic union.

Netherlands: Dutch Trade Union Federation (*FNV*) is the most powerful trade union national confederation (merger of *NVV* and *NKV*); National Federation of Christian Unions (*CNV*) with a protestant tradition and Executives Federation (*UNIE-MHP*)

Trade union configurations

The industrial and political history of each country has led to different kinds of trade unions in Europe. It is impossible to take into account all differences here, but, on analysis, two factors stand out in particular:

1. Firstly, in countries with revolutionary traditions, **pluralism – and sometimes even trade union division – reigns**. France has 5 trade union confederations, which are representative at national level, plus various autonomous, category-specific and / or radical unions, which have emerged recently. Belgium and Italy have 3 main trade union confederations. In all three countries, there are inter-sector and sector-level (i.e. horizontal and vertical) union structures. However, in the “cooperation” type model, unions are mainly united and one major confederation predominates. Divisions appear, however, along occupational lines, as, for example, between white and blue collar workers (in Denmark, Austria and Belgium). In the Netherlands, divisions between occupations no longer exist and there only remains possible separation between employees and executives, as the latter can join either *FNV* or a specific executives’ union. Unlike Denmark and Austria, there is more choice for employees to join different confederations, notably for executives. In Belgium, - where a distinction is made between private sector and public sector unions – there is also the issue of linguistic communities, which is reflected in union structures (community-based bodies, which are called “inter-regionals” within inter-sector organisations; there are also unions for the education sector and white collar workers (*CSC*)).

2. Secondly, the **number of union members and the principles of membership** differ from country to country. Paradoxically, the number of members is not directly correlated with the degree of real union influence.

* In **Denmark**, the rate of unionisation (more than 80%) is the highest in Europe, because labour rights are linked to membership. Union branches are grouped together in national unions, which are affiliated to a small number of national trade union confederations. Employers’ organisations are organised according to the same model. Employees are union members, mainly in line with their qualifications and their occupations, not according to their sector. In an industrial company, employees can thus be represented by several unions. Skilled manual workers in the metal industry are members of a union called “Metal”, unskilled manual workers are members of the General Danish Union (*SiD*) and women are members of the Danish Women Workers Union (*KAD*). Office employees are members of the Union of Office and Retail workers (*HK*). Professional engineers, designers, cleaners are members of their own unions. In order for the bargaining system to work, the unions concerned co-operate in the framework of a cartel, which for this example, is “*CO*-industry”. *LO*, the big national trade union confederation has 23 affiliated unions with 1.4 million members in private industry, retail and services and the public sector. *FTF* (civil servants) has a more complex structure with 106 affiliated unions and 450,000 members, 75% of whom are in the public sector. Thirdly, *AC* (academics) has 22 affiliated unions with 240,000 members.

* In **Austria**, the world of work is organised in both a highly centralised and unified way. The Austrian national trade union confederation (*OeGB*) was recognised in 1947, as the only legitimate employees’ union, in partnership with *AK*⁵ (*Arbeitskammer*: chamber of labour), which all employees are automatically part of and *BR* (*Betriebsrat*: workers councils that are elected in big companies). The tradition of guaranteeing rights of representatives and works councils by law goes back to the post-first world war period and the break-up of the Empire. Many rights in the sphere of codetermination are guaranteed to employee representatives at the level of the workplace or company. Generally speaking, the specific Austrian system

⁵ Chambers of labour are principally in charge of research, training, information and consumer protection, as well as the drawing up of draft laws within the Austrian system of social partnership. *AK* also play an important role in representing employees in disputes inside companies

ensures a high level of cohesion and cooperation beyond ideological divisions. The level of unionisation is near the European average (around 40%)

* In the **Netherlands**, we have referred to the essential role played by unions in the bargaining model, and the essential role of unions as consultation partner for the government in crucial socio-economic issues. Paradoxically, if one takes the rate of unionisation as the only indicator, one could think that overestimation is involved – only 27% of employees think it useful to join a union. But, this, in fact, shows that membership is not the only criteria that should be taken into account when one judges the strength of a union. However, this influence does not directly translate itself in trade union membership. This frequently leads to public debates on trade union legitimacy, but, because of the interwovenness of trade unions in the social-economic structure, this until now does not lead to great shifts in labour relations. As work on industrial relations in the Netherlands shows, trade unions are apparently hardly contested⁶.

* In **Belgium** no official institution is in charge of collecting data regarding trade union membership. Even the trade unions themselves are scarce in publishing differentiated absolute numbers of membership. According to a recent study, the two main trade unions (*CSC* and *FGTB*) are marked by a growing number of members after a loss of members in the 1980s. In 2000 the *FGTB* can count on 39 % of the total trade union membership and the *CSC* 53,8 %. But the liberal trade union registers a decrease from 7,8 % in 1990 to 7,2 in 2000. As for occupational categories, there is an increase in the membership of the employees' trade unions (white collar).

* **Italy** has a unionisation rate of 36-37%, which is relatively high, given the model of industrial relations and the development of the labour market in Italy (job insecurity and unemployment), unlike France where the economic crisis accentuated the drop in union membership. National trade union confederations have, in absolute terms, increased membership (including pensioners), but it has declined relatively in relation to the whole of the economically active population. Between 1980 and 1998, membership decreased by 28% for all national trade union confederations (including autonomous unions, which are powerful in the civil service). For the main confederation, *CGIL*, it has decreased by 34%.

* **France** has the lowest unionisation rate in Europe (less than 9% today, taking all national trade union confederations together). in spite of – or because of – the existence of many trade union confederations. Unlike some neighbouring countries, the French trade union movement is based on activists - it is not a service-based union movement: no social rights are linked to being a union member. Moreover, the place of unions in French society does not depend only on them: the employment situation, job insecurity, unemployment, etc., are not without consequences; government and employers are also responsible; trade union repression still exists in France and should not be forgotten.

⁶ C.f. notably references analysed in Wierenk (2000).

Table 2 - Rate of unionisation in the countries covered by the study (%), 2000

Country	Rate of unionisation
Denmark	87.5
Belgium	69.2
European average	43.8
Austria	39.8
Italy*	35.4
The Netherlands	27.0
France	9.1

* 1998 figure

Source: EIRO and national figures

Ongoing changes - towards trade union convergence regarding risks of drop in membership?

For 20 years, trade union representativeness in most industrialised countries has significantly dropped. No model seems to really avoid negative figures published by various comparative studies. Many reasons are put forward to explain this decline. Four groups of factors are decisive in relation to the new social composition of labour:

- a) *The political context*: tripartite models, represented notably by Denmark and Austria, and partly by the Netherlands, have undergone major political changes, which tend to jeopardise this kind of social compromise. Thus, in Denmark, the liberal-conservative government has decided to “*set people free*” by various measures (liberalising part-time work and above all dismantling the tripartite model in a large number of works councils). Likewise, in Austria the recent government clearly showed its desire “*to break definitively with social compromise and Austrian ‘neocorporatism’*”. (Dufour, 2000).
- b) *Economic factors*: for all the countries of the study, the economic context plays against unions – developments of sectors of activity (industrial restructuring, development of the service sector and collective services); development of small economic units and dispersal of traditional groups; globalisation, relocation and sub-contracting... exclusion of that section of employees, who were the “hard core” of unions (effects of early retirement and unemployment...).
- c) *Socio-demographic factors*: growth of “new” groups in the labour market with weak union traditions (ethnic minorities, young people and part-timers); changes in the labour market with a relatively high proportion of employees, who have higher education (and a relatively stronger position in the labour market, which does not encourage them to join unions very much). These factors are greatly emphasised in the case of the Netherlands, France and Belgium.
- d) *Organisational factors*: development of flexibility and job insecurity in working relations; new forms of participation in work organisation (stronger involvement in their work and identification with their company for some employees; more distant relationship with work for others) and greater labour market mobility.
- e) *Cultural and ideological factors*: rise of individualism; distancing from political and social life, rise in support for extreme right-wing parties (in all the countries covered by the study).

Collective bargaining system

Collective bargaining structures and the way they function partly reflect industrial models that have been presented above: in the cooperation model, there are many wide-ranging collective agreements, which generally cover all employees (85% in Denmark⁷; 80% in the Netherlands and almost 100% in Austria). But, this is also increasingly the case in the other countries (in France, almost 90% of employees, given the principle of extending agreements by the State and partly only in Italy), where “**cold negotiations**”⁸ are becoming widespread. However, the role of the State is still essential in both of these countries.

In all countries, collective agreements are tending to be decentralised down to company level. But decentralisation does not always mean the same thing, depending on the bargaining model. In countries, where there is strong centralised bargaining, this decentralisation process does not, however, mean that the role of centralised collective agreements declines. This level of bargaining increasingly becomes a general framework, leaving more space to company-level bargaining (Denmark and the Netherlands). In the Danish case, it is called “centralised decentralisation”, as the central agreements are a strong framework for decentralisation (Andersen, 2000). However, when central bargaining is weaker, the decentralisation process at local level can run the risk of individualising situations, depending on the balance of forces and trade union involvement (as in France).

Moreover, some sectors (notably services) and categories of employees (with insecure jobs, part-time work, immigrants...) are not always well-covered by agreements, even in countries where agreements are strong (Austria, Belgium and France).

Indicator of conflictuality

Finally, analysis of industrial relations systems implies taking into account the level of labour conflicts. Despite ILO’s efforts to harmonise data (Yearbook of Labour Statistics, 2001), statistical comparisons remains difficult, as national definitions vary or are incomplete (whether public employment is taken into account or not and calculation methods, etc.). Following on from M. Aligisakis (1997)’s work, we have attempted to compare some data on the number of days of strikes – and with every reservation that implies.

Generally, we observe a reduction of labour conflicts in the last two decades. But recent data show a certain increase in the number of days of strikes and sharp increases some years (in France in 1995, in Denmark in 1998 and recently in Italy). There seem to be more conflicts in southern European countries (Italy and France) – in line with the “opposition” social model, even though trade unions are not always very big. In “cooperation” models, it is logical for there to be few or no conflicts (Austria and the Netherlands). Only Denmark has a higher rate, because in 1998, there was a big strike movement on working time with a high level of participation (1317 days for 1000 employees).

⁷ C.f. S.K. Andersen (2000).

⁸ A distinction is made between « hot » and « cold » negotiations: in the former case – which occurs frequently in models that are not very « corporatist » - negotiations take place at the end of a conflict ; whereas, generally, in co-determination models, negotiations are « cold » and regular – conflict only arises if negotiations fail.

Tableau 3 : Indicateurs de la conflictualité dans les pays étudiés

	Total number of days on strike 1991*	Total number of days on strike 2000	Days on strike /1000 employees Average 1990-1999**	Days on strike /1000 employees 1999**
	Austria	58 341	2 947	4
Belgium***	66 500	87 100 (1998)	29	8
Denmark	70 000	124 800	173	38
France****	497 300	807 758	77	72
Italy	2 985 000	884 100	159	62
Netherlands	96356	9432	22	11

* ILO, 2001.

**Davies (2001)

*** not including the public sector

**** not including agriculture and public administration

To summarise and conclude this first part, it would appear that the interpretation of industrial relations, adopted here, remains valid: on the one hand the so-called “tripartite” model, that is related to various complex forms of “neo-corporatism”, still predominates in Denmark, Austria and partly in the Netherlands and Belgium. On the other hand, there is a more hybrid model, that we have called “opposition” model with little cooperation between the State and in the industrial and social field, because of the lack of strong social partnership.

The development of these models and the trade unions involved is, however, more complex. Firstly, we have observed very varied unionisation rates, even within each “pole”. Thus, Italy has a higher unionisation rate than the Netherlands, given that in the latter, membership is no longer –as in Denmark – a necessary condition for defending rights and obtaining social advantages. It is, therefore, not possible to identify a direct link between trade union membership and industrial relations systems. Though, at both extremes (Denmark and France), we know that trade union membership is totally different: social cover in the first case and “militant” action in the second.

Given similar developments of the labour market in these countries, converging elements can be emphasised: sometimes hard conflicts appear in countries, where cooperation is the general rule; there is a process of institutionalisation of industrial relations (consultations and signing agreements with a view to social peace, etc.) in countries, where there is a tradition of opposition, notably in Italy during the past two decades, except for the current period, when mobilisation has come back into force. Moreover, in countries of the second group, such as France, where laws seem still to be decisive, they often encourage social partners to negotiate (as is the case of the law on the 35 hour week).

In all the countries covered by this study, trade union’s audience is challenged to varying degrees – this is notably reflected in a drop or stagnation of membership. There are many different socio-economic reasons for this decline (development of service jobs, decline in male working class jobs that were the “king pin” of trade union membership, aspirations of new categories of employees, break-up of labour statuses, etc.). This loss of legitimacy can also be identified via political changes in Denmark and Austria, where there is a

determination to limit the institutional power of unions by liberalising bargaining procedures to a greater degree.

Thus, in all of these countries, decentralised bargaining has developed to varying degrees and in various forms. In fact, in all of these countries, it means that roles between the State and social partners and between different bargaining levels (central, sector and local...) are being restructured.

Finally, bargaining themes are very similar in the different countries covered by the study. We should emphasise that, everywhere, the issue of working time and leave is developing, which is not unrelated to our study.

III – PLACE OF EQUALITY AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN TRADE UNION STRUCTURES: APPRAISAL AND PROSPECTS

It is usually emphasised that at the beginning, the trade union movement ignored women on the whole – or, at least, feminist movements. The working class movement stemmed from trade guilds, the first resistance societies and mutual_aid societies, which were structures created by an exclusively male world. In all the countries covered by the study, the point of reference is the skilled craft worker, the miner, the metal industry worker with no recognition or visibility of working women. Given the fact that in the 19th century, it was thought that one could count less on women during conflicts with employers, they were long denied access to the labour market and *a fortiori* to trade union membership

Then, gradually, women's work and their place in unions developed. An essential question – in particular from the point of view of our research- then emerged: should specific women-only unions be set up or on the contrary should women be integrated into the existing male structures? The choice between “ autonomy or gender-balanced structures » is a crucial one and is far from being straight forward. At *CFTC*, men's and women's unions existed simultaneously until 1944. At *CGT*, women's unions were created (“women shop assistants” or «seamstresses»). Then, in France, women's unions disappeared and besides some movements, notably of primary school teachers, the union movement was based on specific demands, in order to enable women to maintain their traditional condition (as mothers and wives)...

Only Denmark always kept a women's union, *KAD*, which is a union of women workers, that was founded in 1901 and still organises only women and represents women's interests in almost all union cartels during collective bargaining.

Another interesting special case is that of the Netherlands, where an important change occurred more recently: at the congress in 1981, namely the congress where *NVV* and *NKV* merged, and where the "Action for Women » programme was adopted, which set out points of view on equality. After many debates, the congress decided to accept within the confederation a new women's union bringing together women who carry out non-paid work (mothers without jobs or voluntary workers working for associations...). This union became open to all women and no longer only to the partners of male trade union members, and thus became a very interesting and attractive organisation which made original proposals in the area of

emancipation. This trade union has a voting right within the confederation but can nevertheless not bargain with employers on all the aspects of salaried employment.

Besides these exceptions, unions finally chose gender balance, rather than autonomy. Thus, in Austria, where women were both employees and union members very early on, policy was to promote “women’s” sections or departments, rather than women’s unions. But results regarding equality and women’s presence in union leaderships show the existence of resistance inside unions in all cases, even though such departments did have a real influence on union strategies.

Moreover, relations between feminist movements and the union movement have historically been complex in most countries. In the beginning, in some trade union confederations (in France, Belgium and Italy), there was defiance against such movements, that were considered to be bourgeois. Later, feminist movements were gradually accepted and have even greatly contributed to this dimension being more taken into account, as in the Netherlands.

Unionisation of women and their participation in union leaderships

According to data provided by one of the rare studies on this theme, the ETUC estimates that the share of women union members is 40% and observes major differences between countries, ranging from one to seven.

Our MSU survey confirms this general trend. We have gathered details on rates of feminisation for each trade union confederation in each country. These data reveal greater diversity regarding women’s participation depending on the unions and the occupations concerned. Thus, the rate of feminisation in *FTF* (civil servants) in Denmark is very high, whereas, for example, that of *CGT* (France) is much lower (28%) in a union, whose base is still highly working class.

Overall, in Denmark, Belgium (*FGTB*), Italy (*CGIL*) and France (*CFDT*), the share of women members is high and close to parity. But there are different reasons for these similar results – in Denmark, the socio-economic environment encourages women to join a union (general high level of unionisation, that is linked to access to social rights and high rate of women’s economic activity); in Belgium, the general high rate of unionisation is certainly the decisive factor, because women’s economic activity is relatively low. As for the *CFDT* (France), the rate of feminisation is explained by its trade union base, which is more centred on the service sector than that of the *CGT*. However, in Italy, neither the rate of unionisation (average), nor, above all, the share of economically active women can explain this dynamism...

For the other countries (Austria, the Netherlands and *CGT*, France), low unionisation of women can be explained by a generally lower rate of unionisation and the nature of jobs occupied by women. Indeed, trade union membership is still marked by the predominance of traditionally male-dominated sectors (industry and big companies...), while women’s employment is developing throughout Europe in services (retailing, health and public services...). Unions have difficulty in recruiting in these sectors, especially as the jobs, that are created there, are often atypical (fixed-term contracts, undeclared work and part-time work...). Moreover, unions are traditionally present in big industrial companies, where union rights are greatest (as in France). The majority of women work precisely in areas, where unions are weak (less structured sectors union-wise and those with weaker collective bargaining).

Finally, it should also be recalled that women are also more often excluded from the labour market than men – either because they are economically inactive or unemployed.

All studies emphasise persisting discrepancies between women's rate of unionisation and their participation in leadership bodies. No country escapes this observation – even in unions, where women's rate of unionisation is higher than that of men, women are under-represented in the leadership. Our study confirms this result – whatever the national context (nature of industrial relations and place of equality in policies) and whatever the share of women union members and the level of their participation in the labour market, there is a deficit of women's representation in union leadership bodies in all countries... Thus, according to our data and those of the ETUC, at best a third of members of confederal bureaux and other day-to-day leadership bodies are women⁹ in only two of the countries surveyed (Denmark and the Netherlands), elsewhere only a quarter of members are women and sometimes the figure is of less than 20%...

However, and this is a unique instance in Europe and therefore deserves our attention, *CGT* (France) at its last congress in 1999 adopted parity (i.e. 50:50 representation) for these leadership bodies (Executive Committee and Confederal Bureau).

Another point worth mentioning: even in unions where women are a majority, they are still under-represented (for example the civil servant union *FTF* in Denmark has 70% women members but “only” 50% women in leadership positions.).

⁹ In order to have an element of comparison, we have separated executive committees that have about thirty to fifty members who represent all affiliated organisations and are elected during Union Congress from confederal or day-to-day bureaux, which are smaller and carry out daily leadership of the trade union confederation.

Table 4: Women’s unionisation, economic activity and representation in union leadership bodies

Countries	Trade union organisation	General rate of unionisation (%)	Share of women trade unionists 2000 (%)	Share of economically active women (%)	Share of Women in Executive Committees		Share of women in Confederal Bureaux and other day-to-day leadership bodies	
					(%)	(Absolute figures)	(%)	(Absolute figures)
Austria	OeGB	39.8	32,3	44	16,6	10/60	20	2/10
Belgium	<i>FGTB</i>	69.2	33	42.5	14,9	7/42	28,6	2/7
	<i>CSC</i>		47,6		10,5	3/35	11,1	1/9
	<i>CGSLB</i>		39		0	0/8	14,3	3/21
Denmark	<i>LO</i>	87.5	49	46.9	22		3	
	<i>FTF</i>		+/-70		50		26	
	<i>AC</i>		36		40		50	
France	<i>CGT</i>	9	28	45.6	48	43/90	47	8/17
	<i>CFDT</i>		42		30,5	11/36	22,2	2/9
	<i>CGT-FO</i>		45		12	6/49	23	3/13
	<i>CFTC</i>		40		13,6	6/44	12,5	2/1
	<i>CFE-CGC</i>		18,5		30		11,1	1/9
Italy	<i>CGIL</i>	35.4	49	38.5	39		33,3%	3/9
	<i>CISL</i>		40		14,5			
	<i>UIL</i>		18		12	18/45	13	1/8
Netherlands	<i>FNV</i>	27	28	43.2	29,7		33	2/6
	<i>CNV</i>				14	2/14		

Source: MSU survey 2000-2002; in *italics* ETUC, 1999.

Let us now observe more precisely how in each country a gender mainstreaming approach has been introduced – or not – in trade union confederations.

Obstacles and levers for a gender mainstreaming approach

Gender mainstreaming – or rather “an integrated approach to equality” - is still far from being a process, that is really implemented by trade unions. The idea of “integrating” the issue of equality between men and women in unions is not, however, a recent one. As C. Rogerat (1995) recalled for France, integration occurred before in a different way: “*Indeed, it was a matter (in the sixties and seventies) of including women in unions and assimilating them on the basis of the dominant model*”.

The gender mainstreaming approach is completely different and new, as it is now composed of a dual strategy: maintaining specific actions, whilst, simultaneously, developing a transversal gender approach in all union practices and ensuring that the issues of the place of women and equality are present all the time. Moreover, this approach is made up of two inseparable aspects:

- The place of women in union structures and their representativeness is an unavoidable element of mainstreaming.
- A really transversal and integrated approach to equality presupposes that, besides representativeness, the issue of equality and a gender perspective are incorporated in all

trade union strategies and practices (struggles against occupational inequalities and incorporating equality in collective bargaining, etc.).

Although these developments are still slow within each national trade union confederation, at the European level, this approach has been developed by action carried about by the ETUC. In 1992, the ETUC women's committee introduced the term in reference to the Commission's third action programme on equal opportunities: *"The term, mainstreaming, corresponded with expectations of women in the ETUC's women's committee, who were worried that women's actions were becoming "ghettoised" in specialised structures. (...) They demanded, above all, that the women's committee participate in the ETUC's standing committees and that leaders of these committees be aware of gender issues in their area and that confederal secretariats and their departments within standing committees have responsibility and resources to promote gender policies in their activities"* (Cockburn, 1997). Since this initiative, a women's conference is organised before each ETUC congress (every four years). The ETUC's constitution has been amended, so that the women's committee can be represented in each decision-making structure (congress, executive committee, organising committee and some standing committees).

In the ETUC's action plan, that was adopted in 1995 and renewed in 1999 the principle was confirmed: *"a perspective of equal opportunity and treatment of women and men is necessary, in order to reflect women's interests in the same way as those of men in trade union policies and programmes. (...) unions should guarantee the expression of collective and individual problems of women in all union policies, programmes and collective bargaining."* (ETUC, 1995). In 1999, the plan promoting equality in the ETUC and affiliated unions was more explicit with three objectives: firstly, ensuring representativeness of women in collective bargaining and decision-making bodies; secondly, *"incorporating equality between men and women in all areas of union policy (gender mainstreaming)"*. The principle of pay equality was also announced.

Essential principles of mainstreaming were thus contained in this action plan which also stated in its introduction: *"We want to draw attention to links between all three objectives. The more women are represented in collective bargaining processes, the greater the chances of themes related to equality – and, therefore, equal pay - being dealt with"*.

It has to be noted today that these declared principles - in the framework of the ETUC – are not always reflected within the national trade union confederations, which have been chosen for our study. One of the initial results of our surveys emphasises indeed that few trade unions have really experimented gender mainstreaming and that those, which have approached it, have not done so recently (in the last five years). The study shows, however, that certain approaches – in as much as they aim at more effectively incorporating equality and the place of women in all trade union structures and practices in an on-going and systematic way – are close to a gender mainstreaming approach.

There are many obstacles to gender mainstreaming in unions. They relate to historical and relatively "objective" factors, such as trade union membership and also more strategic factors linked to the way trade unions function internally. On the basis of existing or on-going work concerning this issue at the international level (ILO, 1993, ETUC, 1998 and Dublin Foundation, 1999) and surveys carried out in the framework of MSU, five decisive dimensions can be identified regarding the implementation of gender mainstreaming: legal context of each country; economic context and unionisation; attitudes of employers; trade

union structures and the way they function internally and the cultural dimension, as observed via behaviour and individual paths of women and men activists.

1. Problem of terminology

An initial observation that is the same for the different countries studied is that the concept of “gender mainstreaming” is not used much in unions, perhaps because there is not an equivalent term in French, German and Italian... But, of course, besides this barrier, national contexts affect the degree of involvement of each national trade union confederation in the area of gender mainstreaming.

Thus, in some trade union confederations (*LO* in Denmark, *FNV* in the Netherlands, *CFDT* in France and *CGIL* in Italy), the term is translated or even mentioned as such. In the Netherlands, this approach is perhaps most advanced – for trade unionists, there is no doubt that demands and subjects concerning women should be fully taken into account in all union policies. In France, *CFDT* translates the term gender mainstreaming by the desire to have “an integrated approach, in order for there to be gender balance regarding social issues”. In Italy, within *CGIL*, the theoretical and practical implications of this concept were reaffirmed at *CGIL*'s congress in 1996.

In other countries and some trade union confederations, reluctance persists – in Austria, there is the difficulty of translating both “gender” and “mainstreaming”. The fact that there is no translation in German reflects a fundamental problem – the idea that different roles played by men and women in trade unions can be decoded and then changed remains foreign for many activists. In Italy, besides declared theoretical principles, there is great fear amongst some people, that this approach invalidates efforts, which have been made to acquire visibility in the area of equal opportunities. The fear of seeing such specific approaches diluted in general union actions still exists.

2. Legal context and type of collective bargaining

It was emphasised at the beginning of this presentation, that the development of gender mainstreaming has been promoted by European legislation and directives (as was the case for equal opportunities policies). The change is significant - even if it remains insufficient – between the restrictive concept of equal pay between men and women as laid out in article 117 of the 1957 Treaty, the Maastricht Treaty, which regulated equal opportunities in the labour market, recent directives on “reconciling” time at and “outside” work (work/life balance) and finally the introduction of gender mainstreaming in the framework of European employment policy (Luxembourg Summit in 1997). However, even if at European level the development of legislation is considered to be important and in each country there are laws on equality, these developments have not always had the effects that they were expected to. Implementation of texts, directives and union agreements remains insufficient and there are no penalties, if they are not respected.

As publications of the Dublin Foundation (1996 and 1999) show, the relationship between law and collective bargaining is totally different from country to country and heavily influences the place given to equality in collective bargaining. In France, for instance, law plays a decisive role, whereas in Nordic countries, collective agreements are preponderant.

Depending on the place of collective bargaining in each country, there is a particular kind of relationship between equal opportunities and bargaining. To simplify, it is possible to contrast two rationales, on the understanding that each configuration gives rise to real situations that are more complex:

- In many European countries, equal opportunities are not a real issue for collective bargaining and remain rather symbolic. Law on equality is often considered to be sufficient to ensure that equality is respected (France, Italy and Belgium). In this first group of countries, the effect of law on union structures is sometimes great. Thus, the introduction of voluntarist measures, with a view to fostering women's representativeness in decision-making positions has appeared in recent years – in France, notably, the law on parity in politics led to a debate within trade union confederations. Women's movements, which are more or less institutionalised in these countries, have also contributed to introducing such an approach.
- In Nordic countries (in this case, Denmark) - and also partly in Austria and the Netherlands – equal opportunities are incorporated in collective bargaining and are part of trade union responsibilities, regarding both working conditions and, more broadly, living conditions of men and women employees. Such a principle is not without negative consequences: *“The theme of equality between men and women is central to what social partners say, but it tends to be focused essentially on traditional themes of Welfare State and, more particularly, on reconciling family and working life”* (Kravaritou, 1997). There is, therefore, the risk of reinforcing traditional splits, by assimilating family issues with women alone, without dealing globally with the issue of equality, both regarding occupations and society. The case of the Netherlands illustrates this approach perfectly: for all trade unionists, women are recognised as being full status employees, but with specific features (working part-time and being especially interested in links between work and childcare). The demand for “chosen” part-time work seems central here, but is not to be seen elsewhere (in France, notably). We should note finally that in this group of countries, laws on equality can also play an undeniable role and provide a framework for some bargaining themes.

3. Internal functioning of trade unions and “dominant” culture

In all the countries of the study, the way trade unions function is still often characterised by a model of “male activists”. Trade union officers have to be extremely available and mobile in a context that does not sufficiently take into account family responsibilities – even more so than what a company can demand of its managers. This type of functioning obviously has a negative influence on the presence and participation of women in trade union life and positions of responsibility, especially as recruitment criteria for officers are often related to closed co-option networks.

This general observation differs in detail depending on the country and the union. Criteria such as relations between leadership and grass roots, autonomy of affiliated sector unions, size of unions, existence and effectiveness of women's commissions, the ways unions function (timing of meetings, etc.) are all factors that contribute to promoting or holding up gender mainstreaming. For example, patriarchal traditions are still significant in Austria – there is a real **“meetings, availability and mobility culture”**. This patriarchal culture neglects – and sometimes rejects – women's interests. It has, however, begun to change gradually in a direction that is more favourable to gender mainstreaming – very largely as a

result of “new interests” of the new generation of trade union men. They are more sensitive to these issues, as their partners work.

The requirement of “total availability” is mainly explained by the practice of **holding several positions concurrently**. This is denounced notably in the Netherlands, as being one of the major obstacles to women’s access to leadership positions. It is difficult to avoid this practice, given the small number of activists and weak union rights, for example in France. Representatives say they are forced to occupy different positions (union representatives, workplace representatives, works council secretaries and employee advisors...). In all the countries covered by the study, it is clear that holding several positions concurrently is an obstacle to new women accessing positions of responsibility - but the few women, who do so, are also trapped in the spiral. There are too few women in such positions, so unions tend to make them play a bigger role. Holding several union positions over time is also very frequent – making a trade union “career” from a local position, to a national sector union one and then on to a position in the confederation is also part of the activist model, that is now contested. Today, many women – and also young activists – do not wish to become union full-timers, or, at least, only for a few years. The idea of maintaining a foothold in the world of work and not being totally cut off from their own occupation, the work collective and “reality” is increasingly expressed by women trade unionists.

This is also observed in Belgium, where action is often carried out by the same activists (who are members of consultative councils, which organise activities and training) and “equal” opportunities” activity is additional to other union responsibilities. A recent study confirms that factors which explain women’s low level of union involvement are: lack of time and access to information, few possibilities of training and the existence of networks that are reserved for male activists. This report also refers to problems regarding the selection of candidates, which is an informal process in which male activists play a decisive role. Candidates must be broadly informed on everything in the company, speak easily and be known by the majority of employees – all of which are features of male activists who have been around along time. So it is not surprising that men accumulate successive terms of office for periods up to 20 years. Therefore, few positions are available for women,.

We should add that in the Netherlands, the very organisation of structures is considered to be too rigid – there have to be delegates, committees and bargaining delegations. Not everyone can participate and it takes up a lot of time with long meetings and unending negotiations.

Different kinds of behaviour can be identified as to the way in which women and men are active and the way they relate to power. On the basis of the hypothesis that the dominant view would be that of men, some men, however, bring a different concept, that takes into account the fact they are also fathers and partners. Men’s and women’s behaviour can, therefore, converge, while some women take on the dominant male model. But the difficulties of the trade union movement in all European countries brings trade unions to incorporate new behaviour more effectively, without fundamentally being able to challenge their traditional way of functioning. However, women are the ones who have doubts and feel guilty... about their ability to take on trade union responsibilities. Even though, in the Netherlands, there is an increasing desire to change union culture and activist traditions (late meetings and big rallies, etc.), it is a difficult thing to do. Women, themselves, are not always ready to fight, take a long-term position and do what is necessary to improve their situation.

Finally, a slogan was often heard during interviews with French union officers: “*one more woman means one man less*”... Thus, during preparations for the industrial tribunal (*prud’hommes*) elections in December 2002, it is sometimes difficult to give women their full place on the lists of candidates – on the one hand, it is a matter of convincing men of the importance of women’s representativeness and, on the other hand, men, who have often been tribunal members for a long time, have to accept giving up their place and be convinced that women are sufficiently competent to carry out this function.

Tools for developing mainstreaming

given the lack of women in decision-making and different methods within unions: raising men and women employees’ awareness, training women for positions of responsibility or, in a more voluntarist way, introducing reserved places for women or quotas. Likewise, developing the theme of equality in all actions is one of the foremost objectives of gender mainstreaming.

1. Promoting the place of women: quotas, gender balance and parity

Amongst all available tools, the most visible ones involve promoting the place of women in leadership bodies by voluntarist policies. The **existence of a “critical mass”** of women, that is estimated to be about a third of membership, has been identified in a number of European reports¹⁰, as a prerequisite for better gender mainstreaming. We have, however, recalled that gender mainstreaming is not only limited to the issue of women’s representativeness.

Thus, the ETUC’s equality plan insists very much on this dimension. The following recommendations came out of the midway appraisal of the equality plan: “*We need to implement the “dual approach” – i.e. we need to combine the use of specific measures (...) as well as really operating a system of gender mainstreaming in order to ensure that women are properly represented in both the decision-making and collective bargaining process of our trade unions. The need for positive actions and voluntarist measures, with quantifiable objectives and a set timetable cannot be under-estimated*”. (ETUC, 2001).

However, our MSU study shows that many obstacles still persist in implementing such quantifiable voluntarist measures in the countries covered by the study. Major differences appear between countries and even, within certain countries, between trade union confederations, depending on the existence, or not, of declared quantified objectives for leadership bodies. Moreover, the length of time, that such an approach has existed, must also be taken into account. **Paradoxically, those countries, which correspond with the “neo-corporatist” model and seem most advanced on these issues, do not - or hardly - implement a policy of quotas. Whereas, this issue seems to be now in the forefront especially in France (with strong internal divisions depending on the union) and partly in Italy and Belgium.**

In **Denmark**, for example, the introduction of quotas was rejected, even though positive action existed previously, in order to promote the place of women and equality. This approach was implemented especially in the political field, in some associations, but not in the union movement. Progress in the feminisation of trade union bodies could be attributed, above all, to the effect of feminisation of labour and the emergence of women in public debates and politics, etc. Thus, it seems that this country, which is well known for incorporating equality in a big way at political and economic levels and for an industrial relations system, that is

¹⁰ E.g., the study by A. Garcia for the ETUC and that of the Dublin Foundation

stable and relatively consensual, is not necessarily advanced regarding policies of women's representativeness in trade union leaderships. This reluctance is shared in the **Netherlands**, where, according to many trade union officers, women's under-representation in unions is not entirely their fault: in fact, it reflects the division of tasks within families, which always leaves women little time for being involved in unions (and also occupations) However, unions have tried to change this trend by using quotas, reserved places and other measures. But here, also, the issue of quotas came up against strong reluctance and, according to an *AK* officer, including amongst women's groups themselves. However, positive action in favour of the presence of women or, above all, "*the more gradual concept of proportional representation of women*" was accepted better. In **Austria**, only *GPA* (white collar union) introduced a system of quotas in 1995 – 43% of full-time officers should be women.

Conversely, in **France**, the issue of the place of women in decision-making, especially in politics, has led to major public debate recently, given the deficit of women in various political bodies. Changes to the constitution in June 1999 had important repercussions: after much controversial debate on parity, the French constitution introduced the principle of promoting equal access for men and women to elected posts, which was implemented in elections in 2002, where there had to be 50% men and 50% women on lists of candidates (without imposing obligations regarding results, i.e. the order of women on the lists...).

Until now, these laws have had a rather moderate statistical impact in terms of the aims of parity¹¹. However, the effect on other areas cannot be denied: the idea of creating an equivalent system in workplace elections has also been adopted (without directly imposing parity on electoral lists, given the highly male-dominated composition of some sectors). Paradoxically, although this country had always resisted implementing positive action regarding recruitment and promotion (including in the public sector), this law now encourages improved observation of the composition of delegations in all places where there is representation.

This debate also had an effect on trade unions. The *CFDT* was the first to introduce the principle of **quotas** – in fact, a long time ago, in the 1980s, it introduced a quota of a third of members of major confederation level bodies (national bureau and executive committee) and is now considering a mixture of schemes: parity at the inter-sector level and gender balance in the affiliated unions (and "fair representation" of women according to sectors of activity). Much later, but more radically, the *CGT* adopted the principle of **parity** for two confederal leadership bodies (Confederal bureau and executive committee) at its 1999 congress. The other trade union confederations (*FO*, *CFTC* and *CFE-CGC*) are very reluctant to use any forms of coercion in this area. Such policies are complex and controversial¹², as was the debate about the introduction of parity in politics: should equality be "forced"? Should fair

¹¹ Thus, in general elections, women represented 10.9% of members of Parliament (*Assemblée nationale*) in 1999 and now, 12.3%. Whereas the law envisages that 50% of candidates should be women, only 38% were on the lists and few were in positions, where they were likely to be elected. Major political parties (Socialist party and UMP) only presented 36% and 20% women respectively and will be financially penalised. However, the law had much greater visible impact at local level (47.5% of women in local councils in towns with more than 3,500 inhabitants, compared with 25.7% in 1995). But the number of women mayors remains small (10.9% compared with 7.5%). There are now 10.9% women in the Senate, compared with 5.6% before...

¹² Including inside the same confederation : L. Brovelli, who as a confederation level officer of the CGT then, spoke against parity : « *Electing 50% women to the executive committee would not in itself guarantee removing shortcomings. Worse still, it would make us feel alright, in the belief that we had taken a decisive step. It would be more effective if we planned stages, linked to real activity with sufficient resources to achieve parity, but firstly regarding the number of women union members* ».

representativeness be imposed – thereby running the risk of a “community- or group-centred” approach? Observation shows that the most common situation is, however, that “spontaneous” changes will be far from sufficient to reach fair recognition of the place of women in trade union structures.

Overall, these approaches have had a real impact on the way trade unions function. Even if the presence of women is far from being the only vehicle of equality, this approach seems to be a prerequisite for developing and promoting the theme of equality more effectively. But principles of parity, gender balance and “fair representation of women” all come up against greater difficulties at the level of national affiliated unions and geographical structures. For example, in the *CGT*, parity has not been introduced in the National confederal committee (*CCN*), which is the real leadership body between congresses. Parity is far from existing (25% of members are women), because this structure reflects the composition of affiliated unions. Thus, we observed that only 10% of national unions affiliated to the *CGT* are led by women. Nevertheless, the situation is far from being negative: in most unions, the debate on the place of women and equality issues takes place in preparing congresses of the different structures and this shows that implementation of parity at the level of the confederation can have repercussions on all structures in the long-term.

Likewise, in **Italy** – but to a lesser extent: although we have observed that there are many women members in the *CGIL* (49% of all members are women), they are little represented in leadership bodies. This situation led to the introduction of a **minimum quota** of women amongst union officers in 1991. Thus in *CGIL*'s constitution, a new article was adopted at its 12th congress: *“In the composition of leadership bodies - from membership committees and pensioners' leagues to national and international representative leaderships, it is established that neither sex can have less than 40% or more than 60% representation”*. Likewise, an **“anti-discrimination standard”** has established better representation of women in leaderships with a rate of 30% to 40%. This standard is beginning to have positive effects, above all in affiliated unions, where jobs are feminised (textiles, clothing and shoes). At the last *CGIL* congress, which took place in September 2002, 38.5% of delegates were women with between 40% and 60% of delegates coming from retailing, textiles and public employment. As for the second confederation, *CISL*, women represent 40% of members and, as a result of the introduction of a minimum quota, 30% of the leadership are now women.

Finally, in **Belgium**, quotas or parity mechanisms are not implemented in workplace elections or trade union structures. Only *FGTB* has taken a step in this direction by introducing at its last congress in June 2002 a quota of a third of women within its executive bureau. But it is recognised that the composition of structures is not always to the advantage of women: in resolution at the conference, that was held on the 31 May and 1 June 2002, on *“High quality employment and high quality life”*, *FGTB* declares: *“Parity between men and women is gradually becoming the rule. FGTB, which was on the frontline of the battle for equality should prepare its structures for it. With this aim in mind, the objective should be for men and women candidates to be in alternating positions on workplace electoral lists in 2004. In sectors, where the representation of men and women is unbalanced and where this objective logically cannot be achieved, the aim should be proportional participation. FGTB confederation decides to include at least 1/3 of women in its executive bureau”*. Reluctance to “impose” women exists in the other unions: *CGSLB* insists on the fact that men – and women – should represent the interests of everyone – both men and women – whether they are target groups or not.

But efforts regarding representativeness can be observed more at the inter-sector level than at sector-level unions. The *CGT* (France)'s policy on parity only concerns two leadership bodies for the moment (confederal bureau and executive committee – not the national confederal committee, which is made up of members designated by the various affiliated sector-level unions) – obstacles to fair representation of women in sector-level unions are still great. This is revealing of the way, in which most confederations function, that are marked by a strong federalist tradition. In Belgium, in *FGTB* and *CSC*, there are supervisory structures for equal opportunities policy, but such structures do not exist in all sector-level unions and regional structures. Thus, an important factor is that measures, that are aimed at developing equality, are to be observed at the confederal level, but less so at other levels.

2. Fostering equality in action and collective bargaining

Besides representativeness of women within structures, we have already emphasised that a real gender mainstreaming approach presupposes that all union practices and strategies incorporate a gender equality perspective in action, demands and, of course, in collective bargaining. The Dublin Foundation's study (Kravariotou, 1997), which has already been quoted, shows the extent to which it is difficult to incorporate equality in collective bargaining in all countries, but to varying degrees. "*Male-centrism persists in collective bargaining and in the content of collective agreements*". Even though the issue of equality appears more often, it remains marginal and is dealt with separately.

Of course, there are notable differences between countries. Y. Kravariotou identifies five situations, that partly correspond with our observations:

- Countries, where equal opportunities and collective bargaining are combined (Denmark, Sweden and Finland).
- Countries, where there is less collective bargaining on equality and it takes place in a conflictual framework (the Netherlands, Belgium and France).
- Countries, where collective bargaining on equality is limited to stereotyped issues (Austria and Italy...).
- Countries, where there are no links between equality and collective bargaining (South).
- United Kingdom and Ireland are special cases.

The results of our own survey are fairly similar, except for the Netherlands, where it seems that equality and collective bargaining are more often combined, thus putting this country in the first group.

The **Netherlands** are, indeed, very certainly the country, where union desire to foster equality in all union practices is greatest today. Many initiatives have been made to foster equality and involve women in action. All union representatives think that it is important to interest and involve women union members, by using methods that are different from the usual ones. It is done more widely, using the media – not only the union press – in order to present unions as gender-balanced organisations, which defend the collective and individual interests of men and women. It is generally a matter of presenting the union as an organisation, that takes into account the opinions of members and non-members and seeks to involve employees in all levels of union action. Different principles have thus been introduced, regarding both methods and content of actions and collective bargaining – prior to negotiations, studies and opinion polls are, for example, carried out in order to improve consideration of employees' – notably women's – opinions, as the latter do not participate directly in meetings. They propose new

activities and explicitly involve women in them (more on social issues, as well as consultation, training, editorial and organisational work....). Moreover, the issue of work/life balance has clearly become a central point in collective bargaining – aimed at improving the situation of women at work. There are also innovative experiments concerning unequal pay, such as the creation of a real observatory of women’s pay within *FNV* (Wierenk, 2002) and new concrete initiatives, such as the battle against discrimination in job evaluation. Joint efforts of unions and employers to establish a list of problems related to this issue within the association, called *STAR*, can be considered “revolutionary”.

In **Denmark**, after *LO*’s congress in 1999, gender issues were introduced in all areas of union policy and measures were envisaged for improving the relationship between men and women in all internal commissions and activities. But these measures have since experienced a certain degree of *status quo*. As for collective bargaining, it should, however, be emphasised that amongst important issues, reduction of pay inequality between men and women was favoured and still plays a central role. Likewise, mobilisation on shorter working hours for parents had an essential impact on equality and, in the end, led to improved working and living conditions for all employees.

In **Austria**, such integration is less systematic, but a special example can be found in the debate on education and childcare. The fact that women trade unionists monitored this debate led men to take initiatives concerning funding childcare. In fact, the absence of women in decision-making bodies still has a negative impact on information, that arrives at the bottom of the ladder, in the workplace. Male leaders tend to ignore information concerning gender issues.

In other countries, gender mainstreaming is beginning to appear, but in different forms. The process seems slower and more linked to a context of encouragement from legislation. This is explained by the specific role of the State in the area of industrial relations in France – and also Italy and partly in Belgium.

In **France**, bargaining traditions regarding equality are weak. But all trade union confederations consider that the law on occupational equality, that was adopted on 9 May 2001, will promote the issue of equality in collective bargaining. There was consensus amongst all those, who were interviewed, regarding the part of this law, which concerns collective bargaining: the fact that it will be **compulsory** to negotiate occupational equality, both as such and amongst bargaining themes, and the introduction of gendered indicators... will contribute to more effective incorporation of equality. Some people have sometimes expressed doubts about the real longer-term effects of the law. The results of the previous law (adopted in 1983) on occupational equality are rather negative – few occupational equality plans and few reports on the place of women and men, even when such reports were compulsory... so there is a fear that the new law will have as little impact: if local company-level actors – and above all unions – do not get involved, this theme will not just come on to the negotiating table on its own... However, the number of bargaining themes (besides pay, hours, collective social protection, there are now also equality and save-as-you-earn schemes) and low union membership in many companies do not simplify the tasks of those, who do the negotiating. Finally, trade union members also have legitimate doubts about the involvement of management, given the fact that there are few penalties, for example in the absence of real bargaining on pay.

Overall, a gender perspective is not systematically incorporated in union practices. It is as though current demands (fight against unemployment and redundancies, defence of public services and future of pensions, etc.) are priorities, that have no consequences in terms of gender – which is obviously not the case.

* In **Italy**, new bargaining practices have been developed since the 1986/87 bargaining session. They regulate respect for equal opportunities, by making it compulsory to include clauses, that promote training, which is favourable to women. Drawing up platforms for agreements has given the union movement the opportunity to define instruments for intervening to support equal opportunities policies and, for the first time, there is explicit recognition of the existence of inequality at work and the right to equal opportunities for men and women. Moreover, the important EEC 1994 recommendation on fostering positive action, in order to remove obstacles to equality contributed to involving women in the union movement. Since then, in the *CGIL*'s view, implementation of equal opportunities through mainstreaming, involves including equal opportunities in all aspects of collective bargaining and in this way including it in drawing up all national agreements. The women's forum, called "bargaining for high quality work and high quality life", emphasised the way in which these themes affect inter-union relations at the regional and national levels, and also at European level. According to the *CGIL*, existing instruments should be reinforced. Thus, gender mainstreaming applies, in principle, to collective bargaining, but its real impact still has to be measured.

In **Belgium**, in the context of inter-sector agreements, attention is given to the issue of gender equality, but it is far from being systematic. It can be observed that in periods of positive conjuncture, there is a more favourable attitude to incorporating the theme of equal opportunities in consultative bodies. When the conjuncture is negative, there is a step backwards and it is dealt with last. In the current situation, during preparations for the 2002-2004 inter-sector agreements, unions' demands once again pay little attention to the issue of equal opportunities.

So, in all the countries, that are covered by the study, demands are tending to become broader and go beyond the strict field of work and companies and incorporate more effectively other dimensions, notably shorter working hours (demands for free time and childcare...). One can consider that such common developments are linked to more effective incorporation of demands, that were initially "feminist" ones.

The issue of forms of mobilisation, action and collective bargaining, regarding equality is central to our study. This will be examined later in our programme, because we will be looking at this theme in sector-level unions.

3. Changing internal functioning and union structures

In all the countries covered by this study – given the dominant union "culture", which was referred to above- there is a growing desire to render internal functioning and union structures more flexible. There are proposals for organisational changes (in **France**, for example, discussions on timing of union meetings and help with redeploying trade unionists by introducing real "management of union resources" (*CFDT*); introducing less concentrated management with, for example, collegial (and gender balanced) leadership; changing and reducing some structures by mergers and developing more horizontal organisations (the Netherlands)...

Such transformations are still often at the discussion stage and do not always directly aim at gender equality, but they do often have indirect consequences on this issue. Via various measures, the aim is to more effectively meet expectations of all employees and unemployed people, notably younger ones. These "new" interests are sometimes introduced by male members, as in Austria. Likewise, in the **Netherlands**, emphasis is put on promoting trade union "diversity" (ethnic minorities, youth, unemployed and women). But, there is a real debate about abandoning structures for women, as for example in *FNV Bondgenoten*, where there is a proposal to abolish the national women's committee and to create a joint structure for women, ethnic minorities and young people.

4. Trade union education: an essential tool

For all countries, this tool is, indeed, vital. Whether it is a matter of incorporating the theme of equality in basic education or developing specific courses on these themes, trade union education plays an unquestionable transversal role and one of permanent integration of equality in all trade union confederations. This area covers two issues: firstly studies are often carried out on women's representativeness on union courses (as in Belgium, Italy and France) and conclude that women are under-represented (about 20% of women union members participate in courses in Belgium, for example). This deficit reflects difficulties, that have already been referred to – lack of availability for courses, that last several days, childcare problems and women's lack of confidence and a feeling that the themes covered by unions do not concern them... In Italy, according to research done by "*Io donna nella UIL*" (I am a member of *UIL*), 75% of women members think that union education is useful and 65% think that there is a relationship between such education, ability to represent and the role of unions in collective bargaining. Nevertheless, 62% of women did not participate in union courses in the past five years. Discriminatory selection criteria are the cause of such limited participation.

Moreover, in most of the countries studied, the theme of equality is promoted in all courses and, notably, for union full-timers (Austria). But this process is far from being systematic (France and Belgium). Courses, devoted to this issue, are favoured in France, where, following on from the new law on occupational equality, all union confederations have organised study days on bargaining equality. The risk is that, once again, such training remains too specific and is "reserved" for people, who are already concerned (a majority of women participate in them).

There are also innovative educational experiences in Denmark, which aim at fostering women's access to leadership positions in unions ("Starlet" programme for young women with a view to training "integration ambassadors" and promoting a system of tutorials; "Victoria" programme for longer-standing women trade union members, in order to provide them with political and personal knowledge and, thirdly, a "feminist leadership" programme for experts and political leaders originally from unions and also from outside – it aims at creating a professional network, which will be able to break all glass ceilings and raise awareness of equality amongst such actors).

Other tools also contribute to mainstreaming. Thus, the approach promoted by the ETUC, that takes the form a "plan in favour of equality", which is partly reflected in the principle of the "gender balance charter" that some confederations have introduced, but which is far from being generalised in all confederations. This approach makes it possible for such efforts to be

more visible and involve all organisations in the process. It involves regular assessment of efforts made.

Traditional communications tools (press) and more innovative ones (internet) play an unquestionable supportive role regarding gender mainstreaming (for example, in Belgium, where employers allow trade unionists to have time to develop such tools). Often, such approaches are not systematic, seem marginal and are carried out only by those in charge of equality issues (women's committees). Thus, in Austria, a study on the place of gender in the union press shows that this theme is growing in importance, but only represents 10% of articles. Externally, there are major systematic mobilisations on the situation of women and equality: conferences, forums, participation in mobilisations on international women's day, participation in women's demonstrations and inter-union meetings.

CONCLUSION

The various national reports show that gender mainstreaming is a slow process, which is still experiencing many difficulties to become established, including in industrial relations contexts, that seem favourable (such as the Austrian system of cooperation, Danish tripartite cooperation and the Dutch « *polder* model »). There is still not full recognition of women - or even of the theme of equality - within union structures. It is, therefore, possible to consider that “neo-corporatist” systems have not had a direct impact on the process of gender mainstreaming in unions. Such integrated social models developed much more around the defence of the interests of a “hard core” of employees, who were essentially men (industrial manual workers). The Austrian example is edifying in this respect – despite early and great unionisation of women - they have remained broadly excluded from union decision-making centres at all levels of the three structures, on which the Austrian social model is based. Moreover, it is alarming to observe that when gender mainstreaming seems to be achieved – sometimes for a long time already – it remains fragile and, everywhere, it appears difficult to maintain both permanent and transversal action.

Many questions arise from this initial stage of analysis. They can be grouped together in two main themes:

A specific approach and an integrated / mainstreaming approach – how can they be combined?

The question of combining specific action and gender mainstreaming is present throughout the history of the union movement and remains at the heart of its development today. Most research on this issue – as well as certain trade union practices themselves – fit in with this type of question: should “women's, gender balance and equality” committees be kept or should not these issues be dealt with in all union practices – during each major action and, above all, during all collective bargaining? Should specific structures be kept (which bring together women alone, in order to promote their own identity) or, on the contrary, what can be done in order for men to take up these issues as well and be involved in the egalitarian process themselves? The reply lies, in reality, between these extreme positions: just as is the case for public policies, unions need to respond simultaneously to needs, demands and specific representativeness of women, while incorporating a global approach to equality. In fact, both of these strategies are complementary. Regular intervention by women's committees and conferences on women within unions foster mainstreaming and make it possible for these

issues not to remain specific, but to intervene permanently in union strategies and action. But such a process can only be achieved if those places, where there are discussions and decisions are made, have a real effect on the way unions function and if their resources – both financial and human – are sufficient and their activity really recognised – but this is not yet the case in all the countries, covered by this study.

Moreover, a real mainstreaming approach should inter-link such “women’s, gender balance and equality” committees with other decision-making bodies at all levels of unions. If there are not relays and interaction between the various structures, there is a real risk of “ghettoisation” . This is, in fact, one of the points that the ETUC women’s committee has emphasised. But, including at this level, where the approach has been promoted by the women’s committee for a decade, results are partial, especially as men in ETUC still have difficulties in interpreting all issues “from a gender perspective” and, above all, tend to consider that important issues have nothing to do with “women’s issues” and vice versa, according to C. Cockburn’s observations (1999).

The future of positive action policies

Comparative study of the challenge of gender mainstreaming in unions has enabled us to identify pre-conditions, that are necessary for such an approach: “neo-corporatist” industrial relations systems, that are marked by high union membership and ascendancy of egalitarian issues, that are promoted jointly by public authorities and social partners, have fostered such an integrated approach. But, it seems that in Denmark – and partly in the Netherlands – positive action measures, with a view to improving women’s access to leadership positions, have been abandoned. Nevertheless, gender mainstreaming appears in other forms (incorporating this issue in all union practices, notably collective bargaining). But the share of women in leadership positions of main trade union confederations in these countries is, nevertheless, lower than their level of unionisation.

However, in countries, where the industrial relations system is more oppositional (in France and partly in Italy), the State makes up for the absence of consensus on equality, by introducing legislation, that is more binding and/or using European directives (as in Italy). In these countries, recently, it seems that strong measures are appearing in unions with a view to improving consideration for women in union structures and their demands, as a result of two-fold pressure from social movements (including feminist ones) and legislation. In this context, voluntarist measures appear (such as quotas, anti-discrimination standards and parity...), whose impact is still relatively limited for the time being. Thus, in France, the introduction of parity within two CGT leadership bodies is worthy of being emphasised. However, it seems more difficult to implement real mainstreaming measures in all unions strategies and actions.

Our study has emphasised the interaction between the presence of women and disseminating equality in union practices. The presence of women in union leaderships influences issues that are taken up by unions (sexual harassment and childcare, etc.) and also working methods, that are considered to be more democratic. Thus fostering women’s representativeness is one of the ways of disseminating egalitarian themes.

An ILO study confirms the last point, by showing that the presence of women union full-time officers makes it possible to deal with new priorities in collective bargaining, such as equal pay, childcare, maternity leave and sexual harassment. “Morris’ thesis (deputy equal rights officer of the British TUC in 1992) that gender pay differences are the key to authentic

feminisation of unions has been confirmed by women in Nordic countries, who – although they have the smallest pay gap in Europe – have all embarked on activity to improve women’s pay and base it on the “value” of their work. (...) Equality will change the dominant culture of work – namely that women are low paid and men better paid – and by changing this relationship, one goes to the very heart of the essence of union activity” (Coleman and Hasting, 1993).

It, therefore, seems difficult to envisage real gender mainstreaming policy without continuing voluntarist actions, as in Denmark, even if, of course, such measures are not sufficient in themselves. Such positive action programmes (quotas and reserved seats) simultaneously require global equality policy in unions and real commitment to such policy.

Overall, in differing forms and to varying degrees, it seems that not only the issue of equality is more often present within trade union confederations, but also that this activity is one of the places of joint transversal discussions and action between different unions within a country and also at the European level. Issues of women’s rights federate joint objectives amongst union confederations, including in countries, which are marked by strong union divisions (notably in France). At the European level, the ETUC’s women’s committee’s actions are an important relay for expression. Thus, the European initiative in 2000 on the issue of equal pay was reflected in European countries and made it possible to hold totally new kinds of inter-union meetings.

All these discussions and initiatives on gender mainstreaming go well beyond the issue of women’s representativeness in union bodies, even if this is an unavoidable pre-condition. Such an approach is one of the major issues for the union movement, in order to foster occupational equality and also equality in all dimensions of life. Equality will remain an empty objective if the social partners are not involved and, conversely, the future of the union movement is linked to real recognition of the place of women inside and outside the workplace.