

**What impact has the organisation of women's groups in
the Fire Brigades Union had on the participation of
women, the culture and the effectiveness of the
organisation?**

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Introduction: aims of the research

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) was founded in 1918 to organise and represent 'Firemen'. For almost 100 years it has continued to organise in the work arena of local authority fire brigades, now referred to as 'Fire and Rescue Services'. Over that time the union has enjoyed a relatively high density of membership. Responding to pressure during the 1980s the Fire Service began to put more effort into recruiting women into operational firefighting roles, a hitherto neglected area, and also came under pressure to employ more black and ethnic firefighters to reflect the communities in the UK.

By the early 90s a number of issues relating to 'Equal Opportunities' were being raised by union activists. Around this time The FBU began to develop organising priorities for a number of under represented groups within the UK Fire and Rescue Service, their target membership.

In this piece of research I will examine what impact the organisation of women's groups within the FBU has had on the culture and the organisation of the union over the past two decades. I will specifically investigate whether self organisation by women has improved union participation and effectiveness of women members.

This dissertation will examine the way the organisation of women within the FBU has:

- Changed the way the union organises
- Improved participation of women within the union

- Improved the effectiveness of women to influence the union
- Affected the culture of the union
- Impacted on the union's general approach to collective bargaining

Specifically, the research will examine the impact of the organisation of women on the culture and organisational priorities of the union. It will examine 'self organising' alongside the specific organising measures taken by the union as a whole in respect of women in the FBU.

To do so it will be necessary to review the organisational structures and bargaining priorities of the union pre and post the setting up of a formal women's group. It will also be necessary to examine the strategies being used and their effectiveness in the wider trade union context.

The objective of this research is to;

Add to material which may be used in furthering the development of women's or other marginalised groups.

Consider whether such organisation is an effective tool for overall union organisation.

Consider whether the specific organisation of women improves participation and effectiveness of women.

Consider whether improving participation and effectiveness of marginalised groups strengthens the union as a whole.

General Contextual Background

There are three main contextual areas I will be considering in respect of the general context for this research. These I would identify as being Government policy; Trade Union policy and organisation; The FBU policy and organisation.

However it will also be necessary to look historically at the culture of both the Fire Service and the FBU in order to identify any changes brought about by the organising of women.

There has been little written in respect of the FBU history. In fact other than references in general trade union history or the Trades Union Congress (TUC) archives there appears to be only two such works.

The first 'Fetch the Engine' by F.H. Radford addressed the years 1918-1950. The second 'Forged in Fire' was published in 1992 and takes us up to 1977. I will therefore rely on archive material available from the union itself.

During the 1980s a small number of Fire Brigades began to employ women back into the role of operational firefighting. This was a new initiative at the time but not the first time women had been recruited into the service. During the Second World War women had taken over many of the jobs in the fire service, particularly in London, as most men were in the armed services. This was however the only time where

it can be seen that they played an active firefighting role and this reversed soon after the end of the war.

The culture of the fire service was influenced in its very early formation. Victor Bailey, editor of 'Forged in Fire' talks about the Victorian values and the expectations of new recruits. He points out that "*ex seamen were thought to be the best candidates.*"¹ The navy provided much of the background for the culture as can be seen from the terms which to this day continue to be used. Victor Bailey points out "*The language, lore and social rules of the job, indeed the entire work culture, was redolent of salt water.*"² He also identifies, I believe, the origin of the institutional problems with diversity. It was clear that recruitment standards set in 1920 for the largest brigade in the UK, London, were tailored specifically to exclude women and also to exclude black men and women or applicants from ethnic backgrounds. These stated at the time that recruits needed to be "*over 19 and under 31 years of age, at least 5 feet 5 inches tall, not less than 37 inches in chest measurement and able to read well and write legibly. They also had to be British subjects of pure British decent.*"³

In most respects this then set the culture of a public service and had major implications for the trade union organising within that particular group of workers. In the period from 1920 until the outbreak of the Second World War there was little or no focus on organising other sections of society either in the FBU or for that matter in many other trade unions.

¹ Forged in Fire, Chapter 1 Page 4, Bailey, Victor

² Ibid page 5

³ Ibid page 4

This culture appears to have become ingrained within the FBU and the institution of the fire service as it developed during the post war years. It is the impact on this culture which I will examine in respect of the organisation of women within the union.

Literature Review

In reviewing relevant literature for this research I have looked at different perspectives. Firstly I have looked at literature in respect of the historical culture of the fire service. Secondly, and leading on from this, I have reviewed some literature in respect of theories of work and the division of labour. Thirdly I have examined literature regarding the actions or indeed the inactions of unions in respect of gender issues including that relating to self organising of women and the effectiveness of women's groups within the trade union movement.

Eighty one years after the formation of the Fire Brigades Union, a union which solely organises within local authority fire brigades, Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate (HMI) carried out a thematic review of the service across England and Wales. One of the recommendations of this review was, "*each brigade should take positive steps to introduce a culture that values the contribution that can be made to it by women, that facilities required by*

women firefighters are introduced as a matter of the highest priority"⁴

Some twenty three years following the introduction of the sex discrimination act this clearly indicated that this organisation had some way to go. This was probably not surprising and while literature on this subject is relatively scarce, there are records which show support for inequality within the fire service.

⁴ HM Fire Service Inspector Thematic Review "Founding a Culture of Equality", Sept 1999 page 10

On 1 July 1975 Baroness Steadman, a Labour appointed Peer, said during the second reading of the Sex Discrimination Bill, 1975, “*I believe that a woman member of a fire crew would always be suspect in extreme circumstances and would thus cause the confidence of a crew to be undermined; and it is their lives and the lives of others that are at risk. This we should not do.*”⁵ More than half a century after the setting of discriminatory standards for recruitment in London, adopted by most other brigades around the UK, the attitude, at least towards women in the fire service was still one of hostility. Baroness Steadman during the debate pointed out to the House of Lords that she herself had been involved in the fire service during the war years and as far as she was concerned the contribution to firefighting by woman had been very limited and opposition from male firefighters was strong. At least one chief officer, according to Terry Segars refused to admit women to his brigade saying, “*I would rather resign than be made to drill young girls and women to be firemen.*”⁶ Not much seemed to change up to 1975. Suffice to say that the attitude of women not being able to do this job was still receiving support from high offices with the Baroness and others seeking to have the fire service exempt from the sex discrimination bill. Perhaps however the real reason for the continued opposition was revealed in her speech in the same debate when she said, “*Clearly one cannot predict how many women are likely to opt for operational fire-fighting duties and what additional facilities would*

⁵ Hansard 1 July 1975 House of Lords 5.15pm

⁶ Bailey Victor. Forged In Fire The History Of The Fire Brigades Union, Chapter 3 Page 140.

have to be provided, but they would need to be of a size to accommodate the number who might want to take up this job.

I have no estimate of what would be required nationally to carry out the necessary building work, but, as your Lordships will know, local government is now under continual pressure from central Government to restrict both revenue and capital expenditure, and the funds for this work are therefore not available at present.”⁷ Despite these supporters, the move for exemption failed.

The exclusion of women from operational firefighting roles had been re-established following the Second World War when men came out of the armed forces.

From 1941 -1943 women’s membership of the FBU had risen to over 8000⁸. However by 1948 this had dropped to 500⁹.

Little then was done to retain or encourage women. At this time a similar ‘offensive’ was taking place against members of the black communities (which were already fairly well established in some parts of the UK). Discrimination against women and other marginalised groups has many historic similarities and arguments about protecting jobs for white men have been at the core.

It is worth perhaps mentioning the issue of race as this is something with a specific impact on development of the culture of the fire brigades union and the fire service.

Racism in the Labour and Trade Union movement was not a new thing.

At the same time as the overtly racist and sexist standards were being

⁷ Ibid

⁸ FBU Report of proceedings 1943 page 42

⁹ TUC Annual report 1948 page 37

set for entry into the fire service other unions and the TUC were taking action to protect white British workers. Demobilising of men following the First World War and rising unemployment put many in conflict for jobs. Similar to the fire service white seamen were taking action to prevent black sailors from gaining jobs. Mary Davis points out in her history of the British labour movement, 'Comrade or Brother?', "*The call to oust black seamen from their jobs in preference to their British (i.e. white) counterparts was supported by a TUC resolution in 1919 which supported the seaman's union campaigning for preference to be given first to British white and then British black labour.*"¹⁰

There is no evidence to suggest that the FBU did not support this position.

For some time the trade union movement continued to fail in recognising the racist nature of their own organisations and failed also to benefit from the considerable experience of many of the immigrant black workers who had a lot of experience in collective action and union activity in their home countries. Mary Davis said of this, "*Apart from support given by some international organisations like the Communist Party and assorted individuals on the left of the Labour Party, the predominantly white labour movement took little interest in the struggles of black workers and thereby turned its back on a fertile stream of ideas and experience.*" She goes on to describe how not only did the trade union movement behave in a shameful way and miss out on the opportunity to gain from much of the experience that was within the black workers at the time, but that in respect of this

¹⁰ Davis, Mary. Chapter 15, Page 250, Comrade or Brother?, A history of the British Labour Movement, Second edition

previous experience, *“black people maintained this commitment in Britain, joining unions even when they were not made particularly welcome, there was no similar effort on the part of most white activists to learn from their black brothers and sisters.”*¹¹ With such attitudes prevalent throughout the trade unions and general workforces it is hardly surprising that a culture of exclusion was developed. This position was of course not restricted to black people. The trade unions were, following both the first and second world wars, keen to protect jobs for men. Women were, in many instances discriminated against in a similar fashion as Davis pointed out. She described the following extract from the TUC 1948 Annual Report as a *“gem of unenlightenment”*, *“There is little doubt in the minds of the General Council that the home is one of the most important spheres for a woman worker and that it would be doing a great injury to the life of the nation if women were persuaded or forced to neglect their domestic duties in order to enter industry particularly where there are young children to cater for.”*¹²

The general response by trade unions to the issue of racial and gender discrimination has in my view been poor. It requires us however to understand what it was or is that creates the kind of responses that we have seen. Why do so called left wing organisations such as trade unions respond in these ways? This brings me to the second area of the literature under review.

¹¹ Ibid page 257.

¹² Ibid page 261

Theories of work and the division of labour.

From the sociological perspective there are perhaps a number of issues worth considering. The FBU has as one of its objectives, “*To support and promote working class unity through the trade union and labour movement and therefore to oppose all forms of discrimination whether on the grounds of race, sex, disability, age, religion, sexual orientation or trade union membership.*”¹³ This rule includes a number of issues which are related to divisions within society.

From a theoretical point of view the divisions within society also affect the division of labour within society.

Keith Grint considers Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim as “*situated in the three corners of the triangle:*”¹⁴ The corners of this so called triangle were three different approaches to work and the effects of work on society. Grint believes that this “*gang of three*”¹⁵ provided “*the classical approaches to work*”¹⁶.

Durkheim published his doctoral dissertation in 1893 and called it ‘The Division of Labour’. According to Grint he was “*of a social democratic orientation*”¹⁷. Durkheim published his dissertation at a time of great industrial upheaval. There was a move from an agricultural based society to a manufacturing based one. Some were predicting the collapse of society due to this change. Durkheim on the other hand believed that rather than destroy society, society required the division of labour for its very existence. He said in respect of this “*whatever*

¹³ The Fire Brigades Union Rule Book 2010, page 6.

¹⁴ Grint, Keith... The Sociology of Work 2nd Edition. Chapter 3, Page 85

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

assessment we make of the division of labour, we all sense that it is, and increasingly so, one of the fundamental bases of the social order."¹⁸ He believed that rather than society collapsing as a result of an increase in the division of labour, developing societies could not survive without it. He relates the development of these societies to the development of the labour divisions between men and women which he describes in the development of solidarity within marriage, "*it can be seen historically as having developed precisely along the same lines and in the same way as marital solidarity*"¹⁹. He goes on to say, "*that these great political societies also cannot sustain their equilibrium save by the specialisation of tasks; and that the division of labour is the source-if not the sole, at least the main one- of social solidarity.*"²⁰ It seems that Durkheim was a believer in what he referred to as social and natural inequalities. Grint points out that, "*He also assumed that the gender-based domestic division of labour was a good example of the social harmony generated when social inequalities were allowed to mirror 'natural' inequalities.*"²¹ Marx, in another corner, according to Grint, believed that, "*class conflict predetermines all other forms of social conflict, in particular that based on gender, ethnic or national considerations.*"²² Marx's ideas that all forms of exploitation and discrimination emanate from the capitalist system are written about and argued about often. It is clear that, whether we agree or disagree, his theory is one in which in the consideration of trade union organisation and the representation of workers we should

¹⁸ Durkheim, Emile *The Division of Labour in Society*, -(contemporary social theory) ISBN 0-333-33980-0. Introduction, page 3

¹⁹ *Ibid* Chapter 1 page 18.

²⁰ *Ibid* page 23

²¹ Grint, Keith... *The Sociology of Work* 2nd Edition. page 98

²² *Ibid* page 94

consider seriously. Doing so we may see that Marx, as highlighted by Grint, did not believe that Trade Unions would themselves be a solution to the problem of capitalism as they themselves were a product of it. He, I would argue, realised that trade unions would not be the organisations to defeat the inequalities between workers due to gender, race or ethnicity or for that matter sexuality. Marx believed that the class struggle would lead to equality for all and see the abolition of class. He did write on issues relating to the division of labour which he believed were developed naturally. Marx believed that it developed through family and further on the development of tribes. He said, *“there springs up naturally a division of labour, caused by differences of sex and age, a division that is consequentially based on a purely physiological foundation, which division enlarges its materials by the expansion of the community, by the increase of population, and more especially by the conflict of different tribes, and the subjugation of one tribe by another.”*²³ Marx perhaps did not consider the subjugation of women within either the family or the tribe to be a factor in the division of labour, relying on the theory that this occurred naturally.

In the third and final corner of Grint’s triangle was Max Weber. Weber took a different approach to Marx. He argued that the revolution predicted by Marx was unlikely. Weber believed that class was not such a clearly defined idea as Marx had described. He felt that it was not sufficient to rely on the economic emphasis used by Marx. S.M

²³ Marx, Karl. Selected Writings-Second edition Edited by David McLellan ISBN 0-19-878265-9

Miller in explanation of Weber describes him as “*post-Marxian*”²⁴. Weber discussed and developed ideas around class, status and party. His concern as a sociologist was on the development of social order which he said “*is of course conditioned by the economic order to a high degree, and in turn reacts upon it. Now: ‘classes,’ ‘status groups,’ and ‘parties’ are phenomena of the distribution of power within a community.*”²⁵ In relation to the kind of power which may be associated with the developing trade unions and certainly of modern trade unions he said of the, “*Bureaucratic machine*” that “*once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are hardest to destroy.*”²⁶

He believed, in my view, that people would react and develop a consciousness based on the stake they had in a particular issue or problem. Perhaps this is illustrated by the creation of many craft unions who although representing working class men (and sometimes women) sought to ensure adequate difference in status from other workers. This is where it seems he believed that the rise of the proletariat would stumble as individuals would have a different stake in society which if challenged would affect their own status. In the FBU this can be seen in the differentials in pay for various grades and for those who work in non operational posts i.e. Firefighters Control (mostly women) are paid 95% of the rate of Firefighters (97% men).

²⁴ Weber, Max Selections from his work, with an introduction by S.M.Miller Introduction Page 8.

²⁵ Ibid Chapter 5 page 43

²⁶ Ibid Chapter 6 page 73

Turning to how these theories have impacted on trade unions developing, Grint has looked at Gender, Patriarchy and trade unions. In respect of the three contributions made by Marx, Weber and Durkheim i.e. the classical approach, he says that their input to “*The examination of gender relations at work are less than useful in the main.*”²⁷ This he argues is because they “*all seemed to assume that gender inequalities were omnipresent in all forms of society,*”²⁸.

Grint argues that “*The invisibility of gender within the classical approaches has given way in recent years to a plethora of competing approaches.*”²⁹ His approach is to discuss a number of positions which exist. He chooses to look at a number of differing approaches which range from the classical, which I have outlined in respect of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, to “*Composite contingent subordination*”³⁰. This he states is “*where gender inequality is derived from the heterogeneous interleaving of gender, ethnicity and class but the connections and their particular influences are both contingently interpreted and constructed and tension-ridden.*”³¹

Among the plethora of competing approaches to women in work, Grint highlights a number of theoretical approaches such as patriarchally derived subordination; symbiotically derived subordination: capitalist patriarchy; dualist approaches: capitalism and patriarchy as autonomous.

²⁷ Ibid Chapter 6 page 191

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ ibid

³¹ ibid

All of these theoretical approaches have examined and argued different causes of inequality and oppression of women workers and also some minority groups such as black or disabled workers.

The problem of inequality of women and black or ethnic minorities while rooted in the developed culture of the Fire and Rescue service does not necessarily share all the same components as other industries. At least it is not so obvious. For those women employed as firefighters there is no obvious pay discrimination i.e. they receive the same rate of pay as their male colleagues on a weekly basis.

In summary, Grint did not conclude that these theoretical approaches to the division of labour could solve the problem on their own. He said *“Although the social world of work is inordinately complex the variables of class, race and gender are significantly superordinate in the quest for explanation. Relationships at work are not constructed by the interaction of men and women, workers and bosses, blacks and whites, but by white male bosses, and black female workers and by all the other possible permeations of this triangular social construct.”*³²

When looking at cases of inequality it is important to look at all issues which influence relationships and impact on social development.

As well as highlighting the problems of membership density of women in some unions Grint has criticised the performance of trade unions in general. He has used a quote from the 1982, March edition of ‘Marxism Today’ which in my view reflects much of the attitude and cultural feelings in trade unions at the beginning of the 1980’s, when I myself

³² Ibid Chapter 6 Page 223

first became involved. He quotes B. Campbell as saying, “*For most women, trade unions meet at the wrong time in the wrong place about the wrong things. For most trade unions, women are the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time going on about the wrong things.*”³³

Social changes and the growing number of women entering the employment market and, “*the force of woman’s self-organization and commitment to change have begun to restructure their collective experience.*”³⁴

It is this new collective experience which becomes important in the organisation of minority groups of workers.

This leads to the third area of my literature review ‘Actions or inactions of unions in respect of gender equality.’

The exclusion of women from many occupations as I have touched on is something that has been going on for many years. This is not to say that there were not some occupations which were dominated by women. This piece of research is not broad enough to look at the reasons and effect this had on trade union or collective organisation in those industries.

In 1920 Barbara Drake produced a report on ‘Women in Trade Unions’ this report has now been published and reprinted on a number of occasions. In the report she talks about the trade union restrictions on female labour. She highlighted that it was common practise among organised trades to restrict entry and in particular the entry of women. She says, “*Men trade unionists are accused of a policy of sex privilege and*

³³ Ibid page 215

³⁴ Ibid 224

prejudice, especially by middle class women. The charge, unfortunately has a basis of truth. A belief in the divine right of every man to his job is not peculiar to kings or capitalists, and democracy is hard to practice at home.” She goes on further and qualifies this statement by saying, *“Trade unionists are, in fact, no better than other men.”*³⁵ That long ago Drake had identified a number of problems trade unions faced in terms of exploitation and discrimination of women workers and for a large part they, as we have seen, not only failed to meet the needs of women but actively excluded them. This highlights, I believe, one of the threats for the organisation of women in the fire service, which I will say more about later in the research, which are the dangers of not organising women and other marginalised groups. Drake identified this as a problem for trade unions in her study in 1920 and said, *“The action of the men’s trade unions in refusing to recognize women does not necessarily achieve its end of excluding them from employment, but too often the result is only to leave them unorganized or to be organized by other societies, which have not the same trade interests to protect.”*³⁶

Over the past twenty to thirty years the trade union movement in general has come to realise, not always for the same reasons, that there was a greater need to address the gender issues that existed and made recruitment of women more difficult. The FBU were, and remain in a slightly different position in that the ability to recruit those women who are in the fire service is relatively high. The percentage of women in the service however is extremely low. Using proportionality would indicate that women were adequately represented in the union. The

³⁵ Drake, Barbara. *Women in Trade Unions*, 1984 Virago Press, Part III Chapter V page 220

³⁶ *Ibid* page 200

FBU does seem to share the problem that its women have difficulty in influencing the bargaining priorities and to achieve senior positions within the predominately white male union.

More has been written on the organisation of women in trade unions in the past twenty or so years. Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith were among the first to address the subject. When discussing the under-representation of women they identify a long list of “*putative causes*” which include “*patriarchal attitudes, inequality at work, union rules on office holding, inconvenient times and locations of union meetings, unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities and the lack of quality childcare provision*”³⁷.

In the late 80s these two women were engaged in research with the print union SOGAT '82 following a merger with the National Graphic Union, forming the Graphical, Paper and Media Union (GPMU) and slightly later with the new public sector union Unison. This was to allow some comparative work. They described these unions, one being a closed union and one being an open union. Unison, with a large women's membership was the open union which had embarked on “*an ambitious equal opportunities programme with a 'long agenda'*,”³⁸ In respect of this long agenda they point out that the point of this is to try and create a lasting and “*transformational change*”³⁹. This was contrary to the GPMU, which like the FBU, are “*male dominated, traditional,*

³⁷ Women in Organisations, Challenging Gender Politics. Edited by Sue Ledwith and Fiona Colgan Chapter 6 page 154

³⁸ Ibid Page 166

³⁹ Ibid page 163

patriarchal, and highly occupationally segmented by gender”⁴⁰ Part of the openness was the support given by Unison to the setting up of a number of “*Self –Organised Groups (SOG’s)*,”⁴¹. This self organisation was described as “*interim separatism*” which Colgan and Ledwith say was clearly a way to increase unity and not as some were arguing a tactic which would ultimately lead to some form of separatism. Unison had encapsulated these SOG’s within their democratic structures and viewed this as a way of empowering the members of SOG’s. There were divisions of course in the views of women to the approach being taken in these two unions. Colgan and Ledwith looked at similarities and differences among women who identified themselves as feminists and non-feminists. They further broke these groups into traditional women, feminist women, women in transition and welfarist women. While there were many different beliefs among all of these women their conclusions shows, “*that there is strong support for a number of the key elements on the feminist trade union agenda, and for feminist strategies of interim separatism.*”⁴²

The area of women’s groups in trade unions remained an area with very little research behind it at the beginning of the 90’s.

Jane Parker pointed out in 2003 women now, “*constitute nearly half of the British workforce and their union membership continues to grow*”⁴³

She went on to say that, “*Despite this, their progress within unions has been slow and uneven, and women’s union representation and*

⁴⁰ Ibid 167

⁴¹ Ibid page 169

⁴² Ibid page 183

⁴³ Parker, Jane Women’s Groups and Equality in British Trades Unions Chapter 1 page 56

involvement still lag behind those of men.”⁴⁴ Similar to Colgan and Ledwith she has used a comparative study of two unions in her research, the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (MSF) and the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) which in 2001 according to the TUC had 32% and 60% women members. Both these unions have significantly higher percentage of women members than the FBU which in 2001 had less than 3%. In this study Parker has looked at how and what significance there is in the way that unions engaged with women’s groups, pointing out that this has occurred for a number of different reasons and not always based on trying to establish any kind of equality or create a ‘culture’ of inclusion. With union membership declining in general and a growing number of women entering the labour market she says, “*unions have increasingly recognised their need to attract and involve more women to help reverse their contracting numbers and operate more effectively.*”⁴⁵ Parker looked at the ‘Social process and modes of operating’ within these two unions and said that, “*Many areas of both unions can be broadly characterised as traditional, bureaucratic, white maledoms.*” which would be very similar to that of the FBU. She went on to say that their, “*sexist operations were found to alienate and block some women (and some men) from participating in union structures*”⁴⁶ Looking at the transformative equality agenda Parker was clear that there has not been enough research in the arena of women’s participation in unions. While changes made to the modes of operating

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ *Ibid* page 17

⁴⁶ *Ibid* page 134

and in some cases the introduction of women's groups may have helped to increase membership of women and activity within unions there are still clearly barriers to senior positions on decision making or bargaining bodies. With the figures given earlier we can see from the percentage of women members on the national executives that there is a considerable shortfall, MSF which had 23% women's membership and 21% representation on the national executive were clearly doing far better than USDAW which had a very poor 31% representation on the national executive compared with a 62% women's membership. This was perhaps down to the fact that MSF, "*sanctions positive discrimination while USDAW generally does not.*"⁴⁷ In this context Parker refers to a view taken by Colgan and Ledwith who, "*view women's conferences, committees, officers and reserved seats as positive discrimination measures (i.e. measures used to pursue equal outcomes) while many classify them as positive action initiatives,*"⁴⁸ Others looking at self organising in unions such as Jill C. Humphrey say that, "*self-organising is born from a position of exclusion from or subordination within a wider polity*". In terms of the idea of separatism mentioned in other literature she says that an, "*ongoing moment of 'separatism' is a necessary component of self organisation insofar as deprived groups will require separate spaces to debate their predicaments prior to negotiations with dominant groups.*"⁴⁹ Humphrey is critical of the definition of self –organisation used by Colgan and Ledwith and asserts that the way in which, "*they analyse self-*

⁴⁷ Ibid Chapter 3 page 135

⁴⁸ Ibid Chapter 1 page 28

⁴⁹ Humphrey, Jill C. Self-organization and trade union democracy, The Sociology Review 2000

organization in terms of separatism” does not help them to address whether, “*the groups are engaged in a fully-fledged or an interim form of separatism*”⁵⁰ Humphrey deals primarily with the historic development of SOG’s within Unison which she clearly believes had their foundations well laid within National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) almost a decade before they merged to create Unison and argues that the terms of the debate around SOG’s has been one of whether they were created and supported as a, “*means to an end or as ends in themselves*”. She has identified common obstacles to the advancement of individuals and to the achievement of the SOG’s in general. In respect of mainstreaming, as some argue, the end itself, she says in respect of SOG leaders that they, “*have had to assimilate terminology and procedures in order to play by the rules of the game;*” developing this to argue that this in itself can then lead to those leaders becoming, “*estranged from and perplexed by various aspects of their own* *SOG’s.*”⁵¹

The TUC has produced booklets and pamphlets on women and work over the past decades. Two decades ago it produced a book, ‘Working Women’ with the stated aim of giving all trade unionists the opportunity to discuss why women are disadvantaged at work, this book was in the format of an education resource and came more than ten years after the TUC published its charter for women. It was almost silent on the formation of SOG’s, mentioning in only one exercise the possibility of unions developing, “*the desirability of setting up*

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ *ibid*

*advisory committees within its constitutional machinery to ensure that the special interests of its women members are protected.”*⁵² It certainly seems that the TUC were taking a rather ‘safe’ approach to the gender equality debate that was already being pushed in a number of unions. Their softly softly attitude was perhaps due to the fact that there were very few women on its own general council at the time.

Summary of literature review

From the literature reviewed it is clear that there are many gaps in the research of self organisation of women in unions. Little has been produced on the affect of union organisation on workplace culture; the support given by unions for self organisation; the understanding of mainstream trade unionists on the reasons for self organisation or how self organisation impacts on the overall bargaining power and agenda of unions. Most studies have been carried out by women; meaning that the issue is further marginalised as it is then viewed by some as purely a feminist issue. Gaps exist in research of the long term affects and benefits of self organisation within trade unions. Further more it is abundantly clear that little or nothing has been done in respect of research into small trade unions which recruit from workforce’s which are white, heterosexual male dominated such as the FBU. The FBU culture which has developed over its history is perhaps not quite unique; in fact even larger unions with high numbers of women

⁵² Working for Women, TUC handbook January 1991, page 97

members have had and continue to have cultural barriers to women's participation.

In further sections of this research I will examine what has or has not gone on in the FBU to challenge or change cultural barriers and will reflect on the findings of research already produced.

Methodology

Most of the literature reviewed for this research has shown that qualitative researching of women's groups in trades unions and other organisations have been the most prominent method used. Most of the literature relied on the use of case studies; Parker used MSF and USDAW while Ledwith and Colgan used Unison and GPMU.

In order to explain the methodology used in this research it is necessary for me to outline my position in relation to the organisation under examination. I have been a 'Participant' in the FBU since September 1984 and have held various positions since 1986 when I first became active in the union. For the past ten years I have been a full time official of the union. My roles as a full time official have included responsibility, in the past five years, for supporting the union's three equality sections (Women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender-LGBT and the Black and ethnic minority group-B&EMM). This research has therefore an ethnographic element to it which would need to be described as a predominately covert one. When taking up positions in the FBU I did not set out with a plan to conduct a study and did not see my self as a participant observer. This was something that developed over the past three years since setting out on part time university studies. I will say a bit more about the methods used and their strengths and weaknesses later but would point out that this research is not solely an ethnological study.

Ethnography involves participation and one of the challenges faced for this type of study is often the ability to access the group of people to

be studied. Clearly this was not an obstacle for me as I was immersed in the organisation for a much extended period. The basic elements of ethnography (participation), *“involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time,”*⁵³ Whitfield and Strauss describe this type of study as, *“at its core a hands-on process that involves interacting with people, often over extended periods of time.”*⁵⁴ As a social science research method ethnography has strengths and weaknesses. One of the strengths is that it is helpful in addressing research questions that, *“require an understanding of culture, social interaction, or other aspects of complex social systems that cannot be reduced to individual actions or attitudes.”*⁵⁵ This of course is not a perfect science and is vulnerable in the fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for someone to verify the views of the researcher as each individuals experience will be different, as Whitefield and Strauss say, *“ethnographic studies are not easily amenable to replication.”*, they go on to say also that, *“it is not a good way to prove theoretical statements.”* The challenge for any researcher using this method is that, *“it is up to the individual researcher to convince the reader that the research was done properly, that the insights generated are accurate, and that the researcher truly does understand the phenomenon under study.”*⁵⁶ When outlining findings in this type of study it is important to understand the dangers of the biases of the researcher as, *“The risk here is that findings may*

⁵³ Hammersley and Atkinson in Whitfield and Strauss, *Researching the World of Work* Chapter 7 page 114.

⁵⁴ Ibid 115

⁵⁵ ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid 120

be influenced by the researchers' own biases and expectations:"⁵⁷ I have sought to make sure this has not happened although I am clear in respect of some of the changes to my own views and attitude to the culture and organisational priorities of the FBU.

Along with this participation approach being threaded throughout the research I have also relied on historical information to inform the work and information gathered from the participant perspective has been examined in a qualitative way either against documents or against responses in interviews or from a questionnaire. The research has tried to challenge any views of the observer by testing these against questions to those who were interviewed or participated in the qualitative questionnaire. Historical documentation has been used to examine the nature of the culture in the union under examination as those who were around at the development stages have not all been accessible for interview or able to provide any direct comments. For researchers, taking a historical approach can help to provide, "*a long-term perspective, enabling them to avoid the pitfalls of the snapshot.*"⁵⁸ Historical research, like all other methods, has its problems. E.H. Carr says that when we ask the question; what is history?, "*our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live.*"⁵⁹ So not unlike the dangers of the biases of a participant observer it is necessary to be aware of the danger of

⁵⁷ Ibid page 121

⁵⁸ Ibid Chapter 13 page 213

⁵⁹ Carr, E.H. What is history Second edition Chapter 1 page 2.

interpreting documents to suit and also to be aware of the time in which they were produced and by who.

To assist in the research and counter or support some of the information gathered through participation an element of qualitative research was undertaken. Qualitative research is, according to Whitefield and Strauss, “*particularly appropriate for studies of culture, power, and change*”⁶⁰. This took the form of a number of interviews with people who were purposively targeted or sampled which in turn led to a small snowballing approach to selection. This did not always prove successful, as on occasions those sampled did not have sufficient knowledge of the questions raised or in some cases were unwilling to be interviewed.

Both face to face and telephone interviews were carried out within the research and on one occasion in a face to face situation two interviewees were present.

An unstructured interview technique was used in all interviews with open questions being asked of the interviewees. Those selected for interview ranged from former staff, retired officials and current officials of the FBU, most of whom were women. Those chosen were selected either due to the strategic roles they held in the organisation or as activists in the FBU’s self organised groups.

Unstructured interviews with open questions were chosen in order to create an opportunity for expansion on views and to explore wider feeling from those participants.

⁶⁰ Whitfield and Strauss, *Researching the World of Work* Chapter 3 page 58

The use of telephone interviews was not chosen as a first option but due to timescales it was necessary. Those interviewed by telephone were reasonably well known to the researcher and this in some way alleviated what Bryman described as a disadvantage of telephone interviews for the interviewer of not being able to, “*engage in observation.*”⁶¹

In summarising the research methods used, this research is predominantly qualitative in approach with the researcher having been embedded as a participant in the area of study and able to access historical documents and witness events to inform the research. Acknowledging the dangers of personal biases has been important and hopefully the research reflects that these did not influence the findings.

⁶¹ Bryman, Alan Social Research Methods, Second Edition Chapter 5 Page 115

Findings

Understanding in what, if any way, the organising of women within the FBU has; changed the way the union organises; improved participation of women within the union; improved the effectiveness of women to influence the union; affected the culture of the union it is necessary to examine in a historical context the organisational structure of the union and in particular the kind of culture that developed. Homa Dean said that, “*The culture of a union (as of any organisation) is composed of its norms, values and regular behaviour*”⁶²

Until the early 80s the FBU paid scant attention to gender or equality issues. Less than two percent of the members were women and no records were kept in respect of black firefighters.

The development of the FBU was in some respects not dissimilar to many craft based unions in the early twentieth century. Perhaps the one thing that set it apart or made it different was the militaristic organisation of fire brigades in which it was attempting to organise. At that time most professional firefighters were employed in the London brigade.

Having outlined some of the criteria required for joining the service in the early part of the 1900s it is hardly surprising that the figures reflected such a high proportion of ex navy and military. In 1920 of the 1,391 in the London brigade, “*444 were ex-members of the Royal*

⁶² Dean, Homa Women in Trade Unions ETUI for research, Education and H & S 2006

Navy.” a further, “454 had been in the merchant marine” and “261 had served in the army”.⁶³

During these early years fire crews were on duty 24 hours per day for fourteen days with the fifteenth being, in theory, free from duty. Given that women had responsibility as carers it was highly unlikely that this type of work pattern would attract any women workers. It was simply made impossible and I would therefore argue that gender inequality was to be embedded in the fire service from very early days.

Discipline procedures were very severe and also often applied in an arbitrary manner with, some brigades being directly included in police forces. Bailey says, “*Habits of obedience and sentiments of loyalty to the service were instilled by para-military regimes, whether in professional or police brigades. In such an occupational culture firemen did not readily think in collective terms.*”⁶⁴

Progress in organising a union was made and many firemen joined the National Union of Corporation Workers (NUCW). By the end of 1913 there were, “1,100 members out of 1,300 London Firemen.”⁶⁵ At the same time another group of firemen had formed the Firemen’s Trade Union (FTU). It took a number of years before the NUCW gained recognition for firemen in London and in other brigades around the country. Following which most NUCW members then transferred to the FTU and almost all of the London firemen left the NUCW and joined the FTU who took over the recognition deal.

⁶³ Bailey Victor. Forged In Fire The History Of The Fire Brigades Union Chapter 1 page 5

⁶⁴ Ibid page 9

⁶⁵ Ibid page 11

The years prior to the Second World War were taken up by the union fighting for better pay, shorter hours and pension rights for its members.

In 1930 the union was renamed The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in order to prevent confusion between railway and ships firemen.

Up until 1939 and the start of the Second World War there was no involvement of women in the FBU even though working hours had significantly changed. Firemen had a bit more time away from the stations and were now working 76 Hours per week but were still required to be on duty for periods of 24 hours.

In 1939 the union elected a new General Secretary, John Horner, who held the position until 1964. An insight of his use of the firemen's culture is given by comments he made when asked about the challenge of organising a union with such a militaristic influence on the workforce. He said, "*the strong bond of mutual reliance which characterised "the job" could be a powerful element in forging a special kind of trade union for a special kind of service.*"⁶⁶ It is difficult to tell what he thought was special about the FBU as a trade union or for that matter why he thought it was a special kind of service. It is possible however that this was a glimpse of the type of attitude which prevailed in the fire service i.e. they were special and thus creating barriers to admission into this group of men.

The arrival of the Second World War changed, for a time at least, the make up of the FBU in terms of its membership of women.

⁶⁶ Ibid page 10

The creation of an Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) was necessary due to the impending outbreak of the Second World War. The government set about this on a national basis and created the National Fire Service. With many male workers conscripted to other military duties women were being recruited into the AFS and were being required to work shorter hours, responding to emergencies from home or work places.

Many of the 'professional' firemen were unconvinced that war would come and felt that there was no great need to organise the, "*transient horde of wartime auxiliaries*"⁶⁷ as Sir Walter Citrine described them. John Horner, the General Secretary managed to convince the union that it was essential to try and organise these workers. He convinced the union's national executive that, "*the AFS could neither be left unorganised, nor left to any other group to organise.*"⁶⁸ Horner's aim was that following the war the FBU would be the union negotiating on behalf of firemen all over the UK. He wanted the FBU to be in a position to argue for national conditions and understood that it was likely that the fire service would be denationalised after the war.

In the year from 1939 to 1940 the membership of the FBU had increased from 3,500 to 66,500, this figure included 1000 women members. It is clear that the influx of so many workers into the AFS and subsequently the FBU during the war years was extraordinary. The FBU had recruited 8,500 women members by July 1943⁶⁹. The union had appointed a woman organiser in 1941, "*to recruit women into the*

⁶⁷ Fifty Years, FBU publications , Horner Chapter 10 page 311

⁶⁸ Bailey Victor. Forged In Fire The History Of The Fire Brigades Union Chapter 1 Page 45

⁶⁹ FBU report of proceedings 1944

*union and look after their interests.”*⁷⁰ This was followed by a further appointment of two more women’s organisers during 1943 and the creation of two reserved seats for women on the National Executive. At this time you might conclude that women’s organisation in this union was progressive.

Most of the women in the fire service at this time were involved in control room and driving duties although some were pump operators and firefighters.

Government pay policy was to try and keep women on two thirds of the men’s rate of pay. The FBU organised a special women’s conference in 1943 to deal with women’s issues (which were still felt to be separate from the men’s.) which called for equal pay for women. This was raised later in the year at the union’s annual conference and delegates agreed to include it in the pay claim for that year. It appears however from the debate that the men may have been convinced out of self interest rather than natural solidarity to support this position. A woman delegate put it to the conference that, *“after the war, when the men come back from the Forces and demand their jobs back, the employers will find that they can do very well with the women and only pay 60 percent of the wages”*⁷¹. This statement by Mrs Stein exposes what seems to be some underlying thought of the women in respect of the long term expectations of employment, the fact that women felt that they were only filling in temporarily for men. There was no suggestion from the debate that the men at the conference thought differently.

⁷⁰ Segars, Terry in *Forged in Fire The History of the Fire Brigades Union Chapter 3 page 150*

⁷¹ FBU Report of Proceedings 1943. Page 31

Women in the FBU were active and organising in the wider trade union movement. The first women from the FBU attended the TUC Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) conference in 1942 when two delegates and three observers attended. On 12 October 1944 an FBU woman, Mrs B Wallace, was elected onto the TUC's WAC at its meeting in Southport.⁷²

The TUC's report of the annual conference of unions catering for women workers reported on the issue of women being required to carry out Fire Guard duties. The general council of the TUC had asked the Women's Advisory Committee to give consideration to the government's proposal to compel women to undertake these duties, until then only men were compelled to do so. The WAC came to the conclusion after consultation with the FBU women that as military conscription was already in force for women that they could not oppose this move on the grounds that it was too dangerous for women. It had been proposed at the time by the home secretary, Herbert Morrison, both men and women should be equally trained in this role, a matter which the WAC welcomed. They advised the TUC general council that they would be prepared to support the compulsion on two conditions, *“(a) that it should be extended to all women and not confined to women working on business premises only; (b) that the compensation payable to women for injuries should be exactly the same as the compensation*

⁷² TUC Report of Women's Advisory Committee Conference 1944-45

paid to men."⁷³ The male dominated general council of the TUC referred these recommendations back to the WAC and then went on to "*reaffirm their opposition to the application of compulsory fire-watching to women in principle.*"⁷⁴ The attitude of the TUC seems to have been that men should be utilised on the first instance which was consistent with the general behaviour of unions at that time.

Women's membership of the FBU had grown to its peak of 8,500 by July 1943. By 1948 with the war ended and the fire service returned to local authority control and the abolition of the NFS along with the auxiliaries the union claimed only 500 women members.⁷⁵

In the early post war years support for women in the fire service was varied across the country. London had almost entirely gone back to employing all men except for some driving jobs. Other areas had taken the decisions to use women in control room jobs and roles that did not include firefighting duties. The FBU stopped organising women and it seems that the women's reserved seats were removed.

The war years had involved some work, all be it unsuccessful, on the issue of equal pay for control staff. However it was not until 1972 following the Equal Pay Act that equal pay for women in control rooms was achieved. The majority of control staff was women.

The pre war culture of a male dominated fire service had survived unchanged. This was despite a huge influx of women into the service and into the union during those war years. It is interesting that in 79

⁷³ TUC Report of the 13th Annual Conference of Unions catering for women workers. Page 11

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ TUC annual report 1948 page 37.

pages of *'Recollections of a General Secretary'*⁷⁶ John Horner does not make one single reference to the role women played in the FBU during his term of office.

Following the war unions, which were dominated by men, reaffirmed their position that men should be the bread winners and therefore their employment should come first before that of women.

The norms of the FBU were to concentrate on the majority of its members i.e. male firefighters and to continue to support the exclusion of women from firefighting roles thus restoring firefighting to an exclusively male occupation and the FBU to a male dominated union.

By 1976 women were challenging these norms which existed in society as much as they did in the fire service. Women had been arguing for equal pay for equal work and fighting against discrimination on the grounds of sex. The introduction of legislation to prevent discrimination on the grounds of gender and also to ensure equal pay for equal work, the 1970 Equal Pay Act(Enacted Nov 1975) and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 was to have an impact on the fire service and hence the FBU.

Post war employment of women firefighters in full time positions never occurred until the London brigade employed the first woman in 1982. At this time Ken Livingstone was the labour leader of the Greater London Council (GLC). Livingstone was part of a left group within

⁷⁶ Forged in Fire The History of the Fire Brigades Union

London who had organised and taken control of the GLC. They were pushing forward with progressive ideas to make London a multi cultural city with an identity to match. The implementation of the council's equal opportunities policy was designed to open up new opportunities for women and people from black and ethnic communities to access jobs and services from the GLC. Terry Segars, then a member of the Fire Brigades Union's executive believed that it was as a direct result of this policy that the "*question of woman firefighters was forced back onto the agenda.*"⁷⁷ This, from my own experience, was a commonly held view in the fire service during the early eighties.

Following the recruitment of women in London there was an attitude among male firefighters from across the country that what was happening in London would inevitably happen else where. My own memory in 1984 of attending training school along with 40 male recruits from all 8 brigades in Scotland and one from England (Northumberland) was that the overwhelming view was that 'Woman were not up to the job'. A member of my recruits training course when asked of his memory of discussion at the time was that, "*it will no work, there's nae way that wumin could hack (put up with it) it.*" He went on to add that he remembered, "*people complaining that they would need tae sleep in the same billets as wumin and that wid cause a barny in the hoose.*"⁷⁸ The attitude which was prevalent at the time was one of an invasion of privacy. Some male firefighters felt that this was

⁷⁷ Segars, Terry in Forged in Fire The History of the Fire Brigades Union Chapter 3 page 152

⁷⁸ Name of the firefighter with held for ethical reasons. Interview conducted by the researcher.

their domain which was about to be invaded by woman. This attitude was still around in 1999 when HMI found, “*The overwhelming collective view of uniformed staff, including many officers interviewed during the inspection, was strong opposition to women being employed in the operational fire service. Many reasons were given, but the overriding view was that women were not capable of doing a mans job.*”⁷⁹

Fire services were anxious and nervous about the litigious threat this would be for them as they knew the kind of macho environment that existed in the still militaristic fire service.

The pre war attitude to discipline, close working relationships and the long working hours, particularly night time shifts, on average 15 hours long, seemed to create an environment which on many occasions was one most men would not want to expose a female member of their family to. It was common practise to hold initiation ceremonies for new recruits which most found degrading but necessary as part of the ‘fitting in’ process. The Chief Inspector of Fire Services in England and Wales carried out a review of equality in the service and said of this organisational set up, “*This closed organisation effect is exaggerated by a macho culture that requires laddish behaviour and male bonding, characterised by a requirement to fit in.*”⁸⁰

The practice of male firefighter’s watching pornography during night shifts while waiting for fire calls became rife and was used as a means

⁷⁹ A Thematic Review By HM Fire Services Inspectorate “Founding a Cultural Equality” September 1999 Part 1 page 23

⁸⁰ A Thematic Review By HM Fire Services Inspectorate “Founding a Cultural Equality” September 1999 Part 1, page 22

of harassment. One of the woman interviewed told me that in her early days, *“You know they put porn on in the TV room to see how long you would stand it.”* She went on to say that, *“And these were the people in charge!”*

During the 80s London employed a further 60 women firefighters who had a mixed set of experiences in their work places. In an interview with two women who joined London in 1985, making a total of 11 women at that time, one said, *“there were two cases that were in the press at the time. A woman from Clerkenwell and a woman from Soho, she never survived that, they were huge cases of harassment. We were seen as trouble makers.”* Both these women who are now union activists holding elected positions described how they felt the need to ‘fit in’. One said that when she came across another woman on the fire ground, *“I used to run away because I was not allowed to talk to another woman on the fire ground or anything like that.”* She told me that this was an instruction, *“From the watch, if you want to fit in don’t talk to other women; women were like second class citizens... I couldn’t be seen to be speaking to them or anything like that.”*⁸¹

In an interview with another woman firefighter she described the workplace culture, *“It was like a wee boy’s club with all these stupid rules.”*

When asked if they had been aware of the FBU and had it provided any support one woman said, *“I can’t remember seeing any notice boards there was no letters home, I had nothing. It was all done through word*

⁸¹ Interview 2 London women FBU officials 18 Jan 2011.

of mouth from other women, because I had no support at all from my male colleagues.” Another said, “I didn’t know mainly what was union and what wasn’t....but as woman we got involved before we was [sic] organised within the union we organised and we met up ourselves.”⁸²

The changes in the fire service were being driven by external influences such as the GLC equality policy and the FBU were trying then to deal with the effects. Organisational change was being forced onto the fire service and the union.

By the mid 80s women firefighters from London had begun to organise informal meetings as a means of a support network. This was without union or management involvement. As one of the women told me, “*I made it my business to find out where other women were and just phoned them up to talk. I knew how important it was for me to have other women there so to have contact....And I disliked the sexism and the culture.*”

In 1985 there were only 32 women firefighters serving in the UK and they were spread across 9 different brigades with the majority in London.⁸³

The Soho case of harassment mentioned by one of the women interviewed received a good deal of high profile adverse publicity for the fire service and for the FBU. The union had given representation to those who were found guilty of, “*sexual harassment related charges*”⁸⁴.

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ FBU Equal Opportunities policy “statistical information” Updated from Nov 1985, issued May 1988

⁸⁴ FBU Report of proceedings 1985 page 96

This resulted in an emergency motion to the FBU national conference from its London region which called for an immediate investigation into “*the FBU’s ability to comply with the TUC policy on sexual harassment*” it went on to say that those conducting the investigation should consider “*whether those found guilty of racial or sexual harassment related charges should be considered for action under the FBU discipline rule*”⁸⁵. The debate itself drew attention to the position of the equal opportunities commission who in 1978 had highlighted that the fire service was not exempt from the sex discrimination act and that the fire service should be open to both men and women. A delegate from London said, “*Ask yourself what the Fire Brigades Union has done to promote the cause of female firefighters since then?*”⁸⁶ The same debate saw the first call for a national statement on behalf of the union on the position of equal opportunities; this call came from the West Midlands and said, “*We further ask this conference to make a public commitment to an equal opportunities policy for our own organisation.*”⁸⁷ When this motion was carried the president of the union said, “*Very importantly, that is unanimous. Don’t ever forget that.*”⁸⁸ The indication was that the union would be taking this seriously. The 1987 annual report of the unions work contained only 18 lines under the heading of “FBU Equal Opportunities Committee.” The report outlined a long consultation process which was taking place on the proposed policy and concluded that, “*The Executive Council regard*

⁸⁵ FBU Record of Decisions 1985 page 20

⁸⁶ FBU Report of proceedings 1985 page 97

⁸⁷ Ibid page 102

⁸⁸ Ibid page 110

*this matter most important and one that requires definite action to obtain a more democratic and representative union.”*⁸⁹ A National Officer reported to the conference that the union had established an equal opportunities committee. He went on to say that the Executive Council (EC) wanted to “*obtain equal opportunities policies and declarations throughout the UK to be negotiated with Fire Authorities to promote equal opportunities within the Fire Service and avoid racial or sexual harassment, to settle quickly any grievances arising over this,*”⁹⁰ It was not until early 1987 that the union finally published a policy which included reference to previous achievements on pay and pension equality and then continued “*Whilst we must continue to take up these issues, the task we now have is to change the composition of the service to more adequately represent the public we serve.*”⁹¹

By May of 1988 there had been an increase of 50% in the number of woman firefighters which meant in three years only 18 more women had been employed and this was across 9 more brigades. Progress in changing the composition of the service was extremely slow. The figures were every bit as damning for black and ethnic minority firefighters. These had risen from 212 in 1985 to 335 in 1988 and this was across approximately 30 brigades (there were 64 brigades in total). The equal opportunities committee, one female and 4 white men from the EC, was taking advice from the TUC.

⁸⁹ FBU Annual report 1987 page 129

⁹⁰ FBU Report of Proceedings 1986 page 88

⁹¹ Ibid page 96

During the following years the FBU paid further attention to equal opportunities in the fire service, raising issues at national level with employers and chief officers and ensuring equal opportunities was an issue on bargaining agendas and part of the union's own education programme.

At this time the union leadership was trying desperately to make the working environment a place fit for women and men. They were also aware that there were now questions being asked about women, black and ethnic and gay and lesbian firefighters that they could not answer. Meetings of members from the minority groups in London were arranged but received a poor response. This was tried again and 9 black firefighters (all male) and 3 women attended. Further meetings were held in West Midlands, Bedfordshire and Northampton brigades and the union officer reported that the feedback was that these members, "*do not wish to be regarded as something special.*"⁹² This was a view shared by the women interviewed and reflected the feeling of wanting to fit in. This kind of feeling can often be found when women have a lack of awareness of gender politics. None of the women I interviewed expressed any interest in politics prior to joining the fire service. Colgan and Ledwith talk about, "*A trajectory of women's consciousness and activism*"⁹³ and I would suggest that most women joining the fire service would fit into the traditional end of the trajectory, "*which implies broad acceptance of women's gendered place in society....It does not necessarily mean agreement with the*

⁹² FBU Report of proceedings 1986 page 88

⁹³ Ledwith and Colgan, Women in Organisations, Challenging Gender Politics Chapter 1 page 24

terms and conditions which women actually experience, although it could denote a high level of tolerance and conformity with the dominant (male) culture.”⁹⁴ From the early statements produced by the FBU it appears that there was no awareness of gender politics from within the leadership and their focus was on trying to make the employers make the changes needed to provide equal opportunities. An early circular with a proposed statement sent to Brigade Secretaries focused on, *“joint involvement in every aspect of the policy’s implementation.”*⁹⁵

The culture of the service was such that Chief Officers who had recruited women were, at times, according to a number of women I came across over the last 25 years, using them as tokens of achievement.

The FBU concentrated on education of members and officials, education which was primarily designed to change behaviours. The most common complaint from women was one of harassment which they told me during interviews, *“We just wanted it to stop.”*

The first formal FBU meeting of women firefighters took place on 22 September 1989 and was organised by the London Regional Committee. One of the women who attended that meeting said that the officials around at that time, *“contacted us about setting up a women’s group...I think they were being asked questions about the women that they couldn’t answer.”* This first meeting was called under the auspices of a

⁹⁴ Ibid page 25

⁹⁵ FBU Circular 86HOC300DR (a) 1st July 1986

Women's Advisory Committee (WAC). While this was clearly seen by the women as a progressive step they were concerned with the motives. During the meeting the women raised issues of concern and were told that in order for their issues to be raised with management they would have to pass a formal resolution. The EC Member, "*Brother Bluestone stated that if the resolution was passed at the London Regional Committee then the matter would be taken up with the Brigade.*"⁹⁶

Women interviewed consistently expressed the view that although some male officials seemed to be supportive of a WAC they did not seem to trust the women to deal with issues and felt that there always needed to be a final controlling measure.

Despite the formation of the London WAC victimisation and harassment continued in the fire service sometimes with the knowledge of FBU officials.

Women and black firefighters continued to organise informally inside and outside of London. Black firefighters told me that they sought out other black firefighters and met in pubs or away from work just for moral support. This was similar to the women who were organising an informal support network.

Finally in 1992 the FBU organised its first national seminar for women. That year the General Secretary, Ken Cameron said at the start of a debate on equal opportunities, "*I believe that this particular debate is one of the most important debates we have this week.*"⁹⁷ Cameron at the time was responding to events within the union and

⁹⁶ Minutes of the Meeting of the Women's Advisory Committee 22/9/89

⁹⁷ FBU report of proceedings 1992 page 40

trying to deal with ongoing cases of harassment and trying also to maintain recognition for progress made by the union. The General Secretary had employed a new 'Researcher', Philippa Clarke, who had considerable experience politically and in particular with the organisation of women. Clark had been brought in by Cameron principally to advise him on how the FBU could improve the situation for women. Clark herself faced some difficulties as she was seen by some executive members as having too much influence over the very popular and progressive General Secretary. Clark was among the women who encouraged the union leadership to adopt a radical approach to equal opportunities which is described by Ledwith and Colgan as, "*more than making existing procedures and systems fair, or 'tinkering' at the margins': it is about challenging existing structures, attitudes and cultures in pursuit of change.*"⁹⁸

There was still strong pressure from members at station level to exclude women and opinion was varied on whether progress had been made or not. Cameron said, "*The work we began seven years ago I believe has paid dividends.....there has been a noticeable change in attitude throughout the union, a much deeper understanding of the problems of discrimination, of racism and sexism.*" Linda Shanahan, the only woman Brigade Secretary at that time, said during the debate, "*I wish I could find another title for this much over-used and consequently almost meaningless phrase (Equal Opportunities).We*

⁹⁸ Ledwith and Colgan, Women in Organisations, Challenging Gender Politics Chapter 1 page 20

have been talking about this since 1985 and I say talking, because we really haven't done an awful lot." Ruth Winters a woman control delegate (Later the first woman president of the FBU.) said, *"You would think after five years of having Equal Opportunities policies and many more years of having active women members and officials of this union, that we would have moved forward at least a little."*⁹⁹

For the first time the FBU were discussing the issue of improving representation within the union of under represented groups.

Women were well along the 'trajectory' of gender awareness and activism.

Cameron referred to various approaches taken by other union's to organising women and said that he hoped that the seminar organised for women would be used to, *"concentrate our minds on the best way forward for women in the FBU"* he talked about progress made and tried to reassure the women that he had, on behalf of the executive, given a, *"commitment as a union to putting our own house in order."*¹⁰⁰

The changes taking place in the FBU were significant. Women themselves were the agents for organisational change. By their very presence in the union and workplace, not only had management needed to make new provisions but so to did this white male dominated union have to adapt. This was not just due to a small increase in women members. It was due to the new location of those members and their organising activities. They were now working as firefighters on fire stations and networking together informally.

⁹⁹ Ibid page 46

¹⁰⁰ FBU report of proceedings 1992 Page 44

The union established a National Women's Advisory Committee (NWAC) and in 1995 FBU conference called for a review of the equal opportunities policy. This was led by a National Officer of the union, Andy Gilchrist, who was widely tipped as the official who would take over from Ken Cameron on his retirement. He brought the review back to the conference in 1996. In introducing the reviewed policy the General Secretary informed the conference that the union would now be focusing on 'Fairness at Work'. He explained that there was concern that the term equal opportunity is greatly misunderstood. He said that it was something which was, "*maliciously misinterpreted.*" and went on to explain the use of the term Fairness at Work. He said, "*We sincerely hope that this might make the point that equal opportunities works to the benefit of everyone.....It is also to stop people's eyes glazing over as they unfortunately do, and their brains switching off at the very words "equal opportunities".*"¹⁰¹

The union had been pushing the fire service to introduce measures and policies to ensure equal opportunities. The service in return reacted in a way that was almost expected. In most cases it had appointed badly trained senior officers into positions of equality officers rather than looking outward for expert support. This in my view contributed to the glazing eye affect. The FBU policy introduced in 1996 was titled 'All Different All Equal' and took a fairly radical approach among trade unions on the issue of representation for members accused of harassment or bullying. This approach was being championed by

¹⁰¹ FBU report of Proceedings 1996 Page 78

Gilchrist who seemed determined to change attitudes in the union and the fire service. The women in the FBU, by now gaining strength and support from the leadership of the union, argued that to give confidence to those suffering harassment that the union should not automatically represent members accused of harassing. The policy was finally agreed with much controversy. This, in my view, placed new and increasing pressure on women and the leadership as those officials opposing it were whipping up support by telling the majority of members that they would not get support if a woman made a complaint against them. The union tried hard to educate members on the new policy which meant members would only be given representation if after an investigation it was found that they had an arguable defence. At the same time as introducing this new policy a National Women's Advisory committee was established as a formal part of the union's structure. A woman official involved in the initial advisory committee told me when interviewed, "*We knew that being an advisory committee was not going to be enough and that we would need formal recognition as a section of the union with rights to represent and not just advise. We knew that Ken (Cameron) and Andy(Gilchrist) were supportive of the position and that we could make it happen.*"¹⁰²

The union had, I believe by 1998 won over the majority of its officials on the issue of equal opportunities. Although how much they believed it was their responsibility to deliver remains uncertain. The new challenge for the leadership came in convincing the still mainly male

¹⁰² Interview 12 December 2010, Woman's name withheld for ethical reasons.

officials at brigade level of the need to take further measures to ensure the voices of under represented groups were heard. The union's equal opportunities policy 'All Different All Equal' had been reviewed and officials were engaged in delivering this to their members. The arguments were changing now as the leadership was proposing what seemed to some as radical changes. The proposals included changing the status of the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) to the National Women's Committee (NWC) and embedding it in the structures in order that women would have a say and a vote at all levels of the union. The EC were laying out a two year plan for rule changes to be made and the appropriate support put in place. This time scale would encompass the election of a new General Secretary. Gilchrist was successful in this election and had made equality a very central part of his election campaign. There was, it seems, two groups in opposition to the proposals. At this time I was the Brigade Secretary of one of the largest brigades, Strathclyde, and our committee's position had been very supportive of Gilchrist's election. We were prepared to support the idea that women and other minority groups should be given the right to vote at all levels. Our concern, which was shared by a number of other brigades, was that such small groups would disproportionately alter the outcome of any votes at, particularly, EC level. We were at the time trying to convince Gilchrist and the EC to look at the possibility of proportional voting. The other group in opposition were against the idea of giving minority groups the vote and used some arguments of democracy. One delegate asked conference to consider

three hypothetical examples, “A *Black lesbian control officer. She would be represented by six executive council members. Secondly a black male firefighter. He would be represented by two executive council members. Lastly, a white male firefighter. He would be represented by one voting Executive council member. Is this really what, all different, all equal is saying to our members?*”¹⁰³ Arguing against this the Brigade Secretary of Cleveland said that despite some previous arguments presented, “*this is not about segregation but about integration.*”¹⁰⁴ In an interview with a senior women’s official who was at the conference she told me, “*We were anxious about the result and really felt that this was the decisive moment for women. If we didn’t win the policy we did not know what or where we would turn to.*” She went on to say that in hind sight she felt that a lot of support came from delegates who had, “*been sort of bullied into supporting the position.*” Discussing this further she explained that she had felt at the time that some of the arguments were presented as either, “*progressive and on the left or anti women and not on the left.*” This was to an extent true. Vicky Knight, the secretary of the new national WAC said of the equality sections, “*we are not the enemy. I tell you who the enemy are. They are some members and officials of this union who have failed to protect other members.*” Knight went on to say, “*This paper is about representation. It is about making sure there is representation for those who have failed to have their voices heard any other way.*”¹⁰⁵

The leadership had laid out in its proposal to the conference that, “*the*

¹⁰³ FBU report of proceedings 1998 page 46

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¹⁰⁵ Ibid page 44

guiding principle for developing the work of the three groups should be that they feed into our existing democratic structures at all levels of the FBU."¹⁰⁶ The statement was carried by the conference and rule changes were agreed in 1999 to create reserved seats for Women, Black and Ethnic Minority Members (B&EMM) and Gay and Lesbian Members (G & L) on all committee's including the EC. The FBU had made fundamental decisions to assist minority voices to be heard, they were using positive measures to ensure views could be heard at all levels. I would suggest that these 'separatist' measures were being taken with the long agenda in mind and that they were more intended as 'interim separatist' measures so that once equality was delivered there would be no need for sections to exist. This has been a commonly expressed view, even among very senior officials of the FBU. It is unlikely however that in a union which has a workforce with little more than 6 % of women in 2011 that this will be changed for some time. The EC stated, "*all parties must recognise that these groups can only fit into the democratic structures of the union, when they exist and are recognised at all levels of the FBU.*"¹⁰⁷

As a result of the positive actions taken by the union women began to play a much more visible role from 2001 onwards, attending TUC and all other major conferences as part of senior delegations. Women maintained control of their own education and organisation methods. Altering how and where they held meetings to ensure issues such as child care were resolved and facilities were adequate to allow

¹⁰⁶ FBU Record of Decisions 1998 page 3

¹⁰⁷ FBU Policy Statement 1998 on Representation for minority groups within the fire service and the FBU. Page 3

participation of all women. Looking at the syllabus for each of the Women's schools held from 2001 it is possible, I would argue, to see a political consciousness developing as changes were made each year. In 2002 most issues related to the FBU and the Fire Service e.g. pay, pensions, union structure and fairness at work. By 2006 this had changed and while incorporating those early subjects the inclusion of subjects like women's history, speaking up for yourself and 'getting involved' all seem to change the focus of the women. The impact on the culture can also be seen from the conference agenda each year from the early eighties and the increase in the number of equality issues being raised not only by women but by men.

Perhaps signs of women influencing the bargaining agenda can be seen when in 2002 the union tabled a claim with the National Employer's which was not just for pay but also for equality in the fire service. This claim included a call for equal pay for control operators (mostly women); equal that is with their still predominantly male firefighter colleagues. Seifert and Sibley said of this, "*The second and third pillars of the claim (equal pay for control staff and equal pay for retained staff) were further evidence of the FBU's desire for, and commitment to equality throughout the service, as would be expected from a progressive union.*"¹⁰⁸

With most changes there are those who remain in opposition and find it difficult to embrace new ways. The women who responded to the

¹⁰⁸ Seifert and Sibley, *United they Stood, the story of the UK Firefighters' dispute 2002-2004* Chapter 2 page 82

questionnaire felt that there were still obstacles to organising within the union and all expressed a lack of commitment from the new leadership. The change in leadership seems a significant one. Ruth Winters had been elected as Vice President in 1999 and then President in 2002. The implication for the FBU of Winters' election was that she was the first woman and the first control operator to hold either of these positions. Her election had been supported unanimously by the national executive in 1999. This position changed in 2003 during a very high profile industrial dispute when a section of members and officials challenged the outcome and blamed the national leadership of Gilchrist and Winters. Gilchrist, who had remained a strong advocate of women in the union was challenged by Matt Wrack, an outspoken regional official from London. Wrack campaigned against Gilchrist and argued that the support of the 3 equality EC members had protected him during the national dispute of 2002/3. He argued, wrongly, that their votes at crucial times had allowed Gilchrist to direct the outcome of the dispute. This politicised the equality representatives in the eyes of Wrack's supporters. Winters was challenged in February 2007 and the union elected a male firefighter also from London, Mick Shaw. The significance for women, I would argue was that the EC had shifted support from the women. According to FBU rules it was only those members who had served at least two years as an executive member who were eligible to stand in a presidential election. Shaw knew that it would be difficult for a woman to win in an election of all members. This was a view shared by Winters who stood down and Shaw became

president. The Leadership in the form of the EC had shifted support and most were sheepish about it; arguing that the members would not vote for a woman control operator before a male firefighter and that they could not hope to influence them enough. All of the EC had survived and been re elected following the 2002/3 dispute other than the one of the two women members of the EC, Val Salmon who represented control operators. She was replaced by another woman who was a supporter of Wrack. Winters had given the FBU women a very high profile in the union. A senior women's official told me "*Losing Ruth was a big blow for us. Although she was involved in all the mainstream business and all women did not always agree with her, she was a beacon for all of us and gave us all confidence.*"¹⁰⁹ The NWC supported Winters and openly published an article in their magazine, 'Siren', immediately prior to her stepping down where she said "*the NWC has taken the union from strength to strength on all issues that are relevant and specific to our women members in a union that has always claimed to represent us fully.*"¹¹⁰ In the same article she drew attention to a forthcoming motion to the annual conference, which was being supported by those who supported the new leaders, she said "*It does however seem that at our annual conference this year some are determined to reduce the impact and recognition of what has and could continue to be achieved for our union by way of removing votes for elected women representatives at some or all levels of this union in the*

¹⁰⁹ Name of Woman withheld for ethical reasons.

¹¹⁰ Siren, Spring 2007 FBU publication page 5

future. It would in my view be a great shame.”¹¹¹ There were moves in the FBU in 2007 to remove ‘Voting rights’ for equality sections. It should be noted that the FBU have six sections in all. Three which are known as Equality Sections and three known as Trade Sections. The trade Sections represent Control Staff, Officer Grades and Retained Staff. The focus in 2007 was only to remove votes from equality sections which seems to have exposed an anti equality attack. This attack was viewed by many in the union as a political attack organised by Wrack as he had argued that they were responsible for the outcome of an industrial dispute. The NWC issued a briefing note to all women and supporters which said of the resolutions from Northern Ireland and Nottinghamshire, which were almost identical in content and wording which was seen then as a coordinated attack, “*The truth is these resolutions are nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with the politics of power.*”¹¹² Women managed to establish enough pressure for both resolutions to be withdrawn from the agenda prior to debate which seems to indicate a high level of organisation and influence by a minority group inside the FBU i.e. women. One senior male delegate told me that the women had been well organised and had lobbied heavily prior to conference and convinced others that this was nothing more than a vicious attack against women and other equality sections. Clearly the union is still involved in a ‘long agenda’ approach to equality. For ethical reasons I have refrained from naming any of the women interviewed. However all of those interviewed indicated that

¹¹¹ *ibid*

¹¹² NWC Briefing note –supplied by National Women’s Secretary.

they were happy for me to do so as they have always believed that they should be accountable for anything they say and do. It is common for them to come up against anonymous opposition. One senior woman said that *“We have not achieved everything but we have always known it would be a struggle.”*

Further changes are proposed for the 2011 conference, which if agreed will affect the organising ability of the women’s section. This change is being proposed on the grounds of cost. The union is losing members and is taking austerity measures. One of these is to cut the payment of trade union facility leave for the NWC National Secretary. An NWC member told me *“our biggest fear is we will no longer be progressive as we will be lucky to keep our heads above water organising and supporting women who are still putting up with all sorts of crap.”*

The FBU seem to be at a turning point in their commitment to the long term agenda they embarked on in the mid 80s.

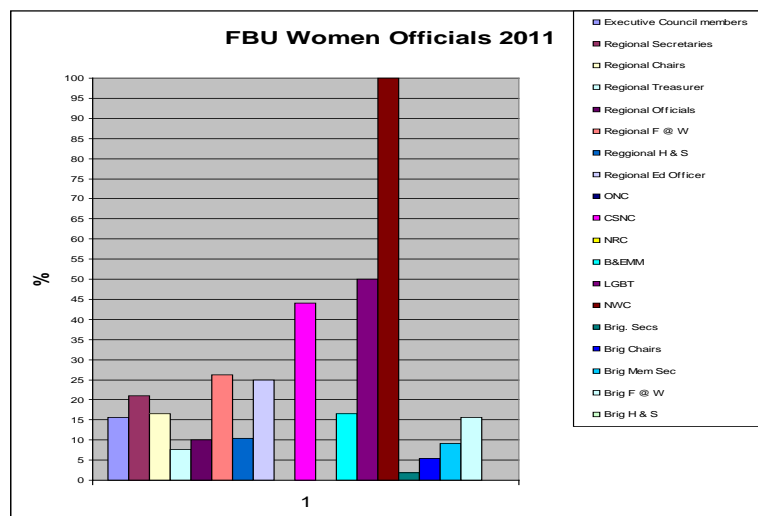
Analysis

The FBU organises in an industry which continues to be white male dominated and displays the characteristics of a paramilitary style of organisation. During the eighties it had been forced into a situation of having to take measures to deal with serious allegations made against its membership of being sexist, racist and homophobic. Initially lacking in gender awareness the leadership took steps to try and change the militaristic style of management by addressing 'equal opportunities'. The Union seemed unaware of the impact the organisation of its own structures were playing in discriminating against minority groups. There was no provision for the voices of minority groups of members to be heard. Despite this, there is evidence that I have outlined that in the mid eighties the leadership began to develop some gender awareness and began a process of change. The changes were of a transformational nature as referred to by Ledwith and Colgan. These were designed to change the patriarchal attitudes which dominated the union. The development of the dominating culture in the FBU had created the type of bureaucratic machine which Weber had argued was the hardest to destroy.

The strategy which developed over the years from 1985 through until 1998 took steps, as women's activism in the workplace changed, to provide a balance to the bureaucracy. These changes were driven by women who were involved in self organising activities, supported by outside pressure such as the introduction of equality legislation. It does appear that it was women who were the agents for organisational

change in the union. Ledwith and Colgan described an agent for change as a, “*competent individual who has enough skill to be successful in a particular environment.*”¹¹³

The participation of women in the FBU has grown since the change agenda began and shows some success. In 1992 approximately 5.8% of union positions at brigade level and above were held by women this had significantly increased by 2010 when the figure was 10.3%.¹¹⁴ Taking these figures against membership numbers in 2009 it can be determined that women are twice as likely to take up a union position as their male counterparts, 1.8% of women hold positions at brigade level or above and only 1% of men.¹¹⁵



Source FBU.

It is difficult to determine how much class impacted on the development of the FBU and from a Marxist perspective it would be worth examining why the division of labour which was based on the subjugation of women has had become so ingrained in this union.

¹¹³ Ledwith and Colgan Women in Organisations, Challenging Gender Politics Chapter 1 page 30

¹¹⁴ FBU annual reports 1992, 2010

¹¹⁵ Calculations using figures from FBU annual report 2010

Conclusions

Women's organisation within the FBU has: changed the way the union organises; improved the participation of women within the union; improved the effectiveness of women to influence the union; affected the culture and impacted on the union's general approach to collective bargaining.

New committee's and positions of representation, with voting powers, were introduced. An increase in the number of women taking positions increased and membership density of women remains high. This led to more women specific issues such as maternity provision being placed on bargaining tables. Gender neutral language was adopted by the union at conferences and within its own literature by the late eighties. Direct and specific communication with women and policies to prevent harassment and improve inclusivity were introduced. All of this had an impact on the unions overall approach to collective bargaining at least until 2004. However it seems that the advancement of a real change of culture has proven more elusive. In May of 2008 the Department for Communities and Local Government published the results of a survey which had sampled all serving women firefighters in England and a random sample of men found that in the 12 months prior to the survey (2006) that staff in the fire service had saw or heard at least once “:verbal assaults (witnessed by 58%); bullying and harassment (51%); the use and distribution of pornography (39%); age discrimination (23%); gender discrimination (21%); discrimination on the grounds of

*sexuality (14%); racial discrimination (13%) and physical assaults (11%). In all cases women and under represented groups in the Service saw or heard these behaviours more often than their colleagues.”*¹¹⁶

The FBU did not oppose these figures, in fact a National Officer reporting to the 2008 conference said *“Those are our workplaces where our officials are and we have got a job to make sure that it stops.”*¹¹⁷

The Fire service in 2008 set recruitment targets of 15% of new recruits to be women by 2013 (these targets were subsequently scrapped by the coalition government in 2010!). Should these targets be reached it would take until approximately the end of the century to achieve a workforce that reflected 50% men and 50% women!

In terms of union organisation and gender equality further research on the nature of workplace culture in a paramilitary organisation would perhaps assist in framing further elements of a long term organisational change agenda in support of gender representation in a union where it is likely that women’s membership will remain low for many years to come.

Overall membership density remains high with figures of around 77% with a negligible difference between men and women. Unlike previous studies it is clear that the FBU have not taken measures to increase participation of women to prevent a decline in membership. This is unlike the actions of the larger general unions who have been the subject of previous studies. With the small numbers of women being

¹¹⁶ Communities and Local Government ref Number 08 RSD 05263, ISBN:978-1-4098-0031-6

¹¹⁷ FBU report of proceedings 2008 page 149

targeted for recruitment into the fire service this is unlikely to become a major driver for the FBU in the near future.

The effectiveness of the organisation of a minority group in a traditionally macho and white male environment could perhaps be used as a guide for further strengthening union organisation in general.

Further investigation into why women are taking up positions in the FBU would be worth while.

The role of progressive leaders was important to the progress made in changing attitudes and behaviours in the FBU. Changing the so called culture of the fire service seems to be an extremely slow process and perhaps this is an area which independent research may assist in discovering barriers to improvements. The present leadership may find it useful to consider what the overall effects of being seen to support or not support women and minority groups could have on the ability to make improvements for the wider membership.

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