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**The Rise and Fall of the Women's
Structures in the Union of Shop,
Distributive and Allied Workers
1985–2005**

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of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis charts the rise and fall of women's structures in the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) from their introduction in 1985 to their demise in 2005. It explores the factors leading to the establishments of the Women in USDAW structures, analyses the achievements and challenges, and seeks to explain why they were disbanded. The research is set in the context of what happened in the trade union and wider labour movement and the women's movement in that period.

The thesis argues that the introduction of the Women in USDAW structures was more about increasing women's membership at a time of significant decline, rather than increasing female participation and representation. It finds that USDAW women were more visible, more active and more involved in campaigning, contributing to a higher profile for women's issues. The oral testimonies from Scottish women involved with the Women in USDAW committees complement the documentary evidence and demonstrate how the women's structures provided new avenues for female participation not available to them in the mainstream structure. Evidence shows that progress for women was not linear. The research highlights the continuing under-representation of women in the union, and the ongoing male resistance and hostility to separate women's structures. On the demise of the women's structures, the thesis argues that a significant factor is that in their composition and operation they remained firmly in the control of the male leadership and that this hindered the development of autonomous women's structures.

The thesis plays a part in retrieving women trade unionists from obscurity and including them in the historical record. It contributes to the historiography of women in trade unions, specifically to the debate on separate women's structures.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Printed name:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The thesis charts the rise and fall of the women's structures in the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) from their inception in 1985 to their demise in 2005. The aims are to explore the factors leading to the introduction of women's structures, and to analyse their achievements and challenges to determine whether they made a difference to women in USDAW. It also seeks to explain why they were abandoned two decades later. This will be set in the context of what was happening in the trade union and wider labour movement and the women's movement.

From the 1970s onwards, there was a significant increase in publications by feminist historians and sociologists on all aspects of women's lives, much of it inspired by the resurgence of the women's movement. Recording women's activities, achievements and challenges, and rectifying the exclusion of women by many male authors was the dominant strand in the literature.¹ The historiography of women at work and in trade unions uncovered the struggles of women workers and their attempts to recruit and organise. Their success and failures were highlighted and analysed.² A key objective was to interrogate the accepted versions of history. They challenged the long-held views that women were difficult to organise and that women workers themselves were the problem, rather than the unions, their structures and the male leadership.³

¹ Women's history in this period was pioneered by Sheila Rowbotham, whose seminal work was *Hidden from History* (Pluto Press, London, 1973). She re-examined women's roles over four centuries, from the Puritan revolution until the 1930s, and demonstrated that women were active and participated in the public sphere, despite multiple obstacles. Gordon observed that a key role for feminist historians was to retrieve women from obscurity and to destroy the myths that depicted them as 'insignificant, irrelevant or anachronistic' – see Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p. 5.

² The overwhelming impression from standard works on trade unionism was that women workers were of little significance. They depicted a world that was predominantly male, manual and militant. See Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (MacMillan, London, 1960); Henry Phelps Brown, *A History of Trade Union Power* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986); Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, (Routledge, London, 1980); W. Hamish Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, (MacMillan, London, 1999); Chris Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933* (Cambridge University, Cambridge, 2002). An indication of how pervasive this approach was are the comments of Alice Kessler-Harris, American feminist historian, who in writing her dissertation in the early 1960s excluded everything to do with women, as her research was on the Labour movement. 'I could not see beyond the normative male image.' – Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labour History* (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2007) p. 5.

³ For research demonstrating women's active agency, see Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (Virago, London, 1984). The original book was published in 1920. She identified that low female union membership was related to the type of work women did, their home responsibilities, their lack of experience in union procedures and the antagonism of employers and male trade unionists. Similar

Many employers and male trade unionists clung strongly to the ideology of the family wage, that is the assumption that women were economic dependants and working men economic providers, despite evidence that many men did not economically support families, while many women workers did.⁴ Despite women being regularly in paid employment, there were constant challenges to their right to work.⁵ From the 1950s onwards, the trend of female employment was upwards, in the main due to more married women, many working part-time, returning to the labour market.⁶

Women part-time workers were first identified in the 1951 census. Prior to that, women chiefly occupied in unpaid domestic work were returned as unoccupied, even if they were in paid employment for a small number of hours per week.⁷ Table 1.1 identifies the increase in female part-time working, with a significant increase in 1971.

reasons were noted by feminist writers more than 50 years later: Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*; Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (Lawrence and Wishart, London 2015); Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions, An Outline History of Women in the British Labour Movement* (Ernest Benn Ltd, London, 1977); Sheila Cunnison and Jane Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions, Challenging the Culture of Masculinity* (Routledge, London, 1995).

⁴ See Boston, *Women Workers*; Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*; Rosemary Crompton, *Women and Work in Modern Britain* (Oxford Press, Oxford, 1977); Teresa Rees, *Women and the Labour Market* (Routledge, London, 1992); Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work; Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986); Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom and the Struggle for Women's Liberation* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987). The Welfare State, based on the 1942 Beveridge Report, was built on the assumption that married women were dependent on their husbands, and that most were not in paid employment.

⁵ For example, in the 1930s, men blamed women for their unemployment (Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 156). The reality was that, in some areas, women were working in the emerging mass production factories, not in 'male' sectors of the economy – see Miriam Glucksman, *Women Assemble – Women Workers in New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (Routledge, London, 1990).

⁶ In 1951, 22% of married women were in paid work. This had increased to 68% by 1987 – Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women, Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations* (MacMillan, London, 1991) pp. 79–80. Lewenhak highlighted the negative attitudes of male union officials to part-time women workers (*Women and Trade Unions*, pp. 266–7).

⁷ K. E. Gales and P. H. Marks, 'Twentieth Century Trends in the Work of Women in England and Wales', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol 137, No 1, 1974, pp. 60–74, p. 62.

Table 1.1: Full and Part-Time Workers, Britain 1951–2001 (in thousands)

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Men full-time	15,262	15,574	14,430	13,374	13,438	13,555
Men part-time	47	174	602	362	784	1396
Women full-time	6,041	5,698	5,413	5,602	6,230	7,054
Women part-time	784	1,892	3,288	3,543	5,020	5,622

Sources: C. Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work, Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment* (Athlone Press, London, 1996), p. 64; Labour Force Survey 2004.

Dominant themes in the literature of women in trade unions are the marginalisation and under-representation of women workers, the impact of job segregation, the persistence of low pay, and the haltingly slow progress towards equal pay.⁸ Phillips and Taylor argued that skill was a socially constructed concept, and that women's work was assigned less value because of the gender of those performing it, rather than any inherent quality of the work.⁹

⁸ Equal pay was an agenda item at the TUC from 1888 onwards. It was regularly endorsed but rarely acted upon. Drake contrasted the acceptance of the principle with the inaction of male union leaders (*Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 227–37). Boston (*Women Workers*) and Lewenhak (*Women in Trade Unions*) traced the longevity of the struggle and the setbacks. Mary Davis noted that the Royal Commission on Equal Pay (1946) endorsed implementation, but the government declared not yet, as it would be inflationary – see Mary Davis, *Comrade or Brother? A History of the British Labour Movement* (Pluto Press, London, 2009) p. 259. Equal pay was achieved in some areas of the public sector in the 1950s, but a TUC inquiry in 1962 noted that there had had been little progress for the vast majority of women workers. It was the strike by women machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant in 1968 which propelled the issue of equal pay in the private sector to the forefront and led to Barbara Castle's Equal Pay legislation in 1970. Boston pointed out that the continuance of job segregation limited the Act's impact (Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 284). The Equal Value amendment (1984) improved the situation, but the issue of equal pay for all women is yet to be achieved.

⁹ Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *Sex and Skill in Waged Work* (Virago, London, 1986). Rosemary Crompton endorsed this view, in J. West (ed.), *Women, Work and the Labour Market* (Routledge, London, 1982). In her study of male composers in the newspaper industry, Cynthia Cockburn described their ingrained sex bias and exclusionary practices, and brought out the complicity of the union in the maintenance of job segregation, to the detriment of women workers – see *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change* (Pluto Press, London, third edition, 1991).

The history of women in the trade union movement reveals that progress was uneven, not linear. It ebbed and flowed and was influenced by a number of factors. Feminist writers placed importance on the influence of the women's movement, and there was widespread acceptance that it played a part in the advances achieved.¹⁰ Walby recognised the contribution but identified a wider context. As well as the increase in women at work and in trade unions, she argued that the crisis in the trade union movement, with a combination of declining membership and a hostile Tory government, created an environment where union leaders were more responsive to the long-standing demands of women members.¹¹ Cockburn concurred and stated that unions in the 1980s were slowly coming to the realisation that, if they were to survive into the next century there needed to be a different approach to women workers.¹²

It was in this context that the case for separate structures for women re-emerged. A review of the literature on separate organising in the second half of the twentieth century demonstrated that the consensus, albeit with reservations, was in favour of their establishment as a key mechanism to advance equality for women.¹³ Ambiguities and complexities emerged. In the TUC and in individual unions, tensions existed between those who were against separate structures, seeing it as undermining class solidarity, and those who did not necessarily disavow this ideology but argued for separate structures for women.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Jenny Beale, *Getting it Together: Women as Trade Unionists* (Pluto Press, London, 1982); Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*; Sue Ledwith and Fiona Colgan, *Women in Organisations, Challenging Gender Politics* (MacMillan, Basingstoke, 1996); Boston, *Women Workers*.

¹¹ Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, p. 209.

¹² Cynthia Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, Fabian Research Series, 349, 1987. She pointed out that in the period 1968–78 the number of women in trade unions affiliated to the TUC increased from 1.7 to 3.5 million (p. 6). An example of spectacular growth was the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) where female membership increased by 236% from 1968–78 – see Judith Hunt and Shelley Adams, *Women, Work and Trade Union Organisation* (WEA, London, 1980) p. 14.

¹³ See Cynthia Cockburn, *Strategies for Gender Democracy: Women and the European Social Dialogue* (European Commission, Luxembourg, 1995); Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (eds), *Women Challenging Unions, Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto University Press, Toronto, 1993); Anne McBride, *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions* (Routledge, London 2001); Jane Parker, *Women's Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions* (Mellen Press, New York, 2001); Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*; Elizabeth Lawrence, *Gender and Trade Unions* (Taylor & Francis, London, 1994); Gill Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006).

¹⁴ The debate on separate structures was not confined to the trade union movement. Parallel discussions were taking place in the Labour Party. Some key women activists were involved in the Labour Party, the trade unions and the women's movement. See Christine Collette, *The Newer Eve: Women, Feminists and the Labour Party* (Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2009); Meg Russell, *Building New Labour, The Politics of Party Organisation* (Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2005).

Separate structures in the trade union movement were not new. The National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), established in 1906 under Mary MacArthur, was women-only, not as a matter of principle, but of expediency, to recruit and organise women workers who were excluded from trade unions, or where no union existed for their trade. In 1920 the NFWW merged with the National Union of General Workers in the belief that class solidarity was more important than separate women's organisations. MacArthur wrote:

Inside the national union we shall be able to demonstrate the possibility of a great industrial organisation of men and women, and have one in which women are not submerged, but one in which they take as active a part as men.¹⁵

The reality was different. The separate national and district women's committees were disbanded, and the number of women officers fell from sixteen to one.¹⁶ For feminists, 50 years on, this provided a strong argument for the retention of women's structures.

The discussions around all-women branches, reserved seats for women and women's advisory councils identified by Drake in 1920 would be replicated in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷ Debates around women's structures were also taking place in the early decades of the twentieth century at the TUC. Campaigning by women activists resulted in two reserved seats for women, a women's conference and a women's committee.¹⁸ Neither the conference, nor the committee were women only: both involved members of the General Council. Dissent and hostility, from women as well as men, persisted, with ongoing attempts to disband the women's conference.¹⁹ The main argument for retention was that the maintenance of the status quo had failed to achieve equality and the women's conference was necessary to make progress for women workers. The continued existence of the TUC women's committee and conference provided a forum for women to debate issues relevant to them, and plan recruitment campaigns on issues specific to women workers.²⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, after a period of limited success, they became a springboard for action, culminating in the TUC Charter for Equality for Women within

¹⁵ The Woman Worker, August/September 1920, in Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 149.

¹⁶ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 164.

¹⁷ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 203–19.

¹⁸ Without the two reserved seats, there would have been no women on the General Council.

¹⁹ The arguments from the 1920s persisted, with those opposed condemning the conference as a diversion from the class struggle, as 'an artificial and undesirable division' (Motion to TUC conference, 1961, p. 338).

²⁰ Boston, in *Women Workers*, tracked the activities, challenges and setbacks of the TUC women's structures from their inception through to the campaigns for greater powers in the 1960s and beyond.

Trade Unions in 1979.²¹ The charter was recognised as a significant advance for women.²² The under-representation of women at all levels within the trade union movement provided an impetus for the advocacy of women's structures. A number of authors have outlined the many barriers that made participation difficult for women.²³ The absence of women from the key decision-making bodies resulted in women's issues and priorities being overlooked or marginalised. Cockburn and others have argued that the lack of women on negotiating committees was a barrier to improving their wages and conditions. If women were not represented on the committees, their issues were either viewed as a low priority or were non-existent on the collective bargaining agenda.²⁴

Separate women's structures were put forward as part of the solution to the marginalisation of women and their priorities, but they were not advanced as a panacea that would effortlessly transform the position of women. Feminist writers, although supportive of the strategy, identified potential problems. With women's committees, there was the danger that they might ghettoise women and further isolate them from the mainstream; that they may have too few powers and limited resources.²⁵ Research indicated that, even when women did reach key positions on negotiating bodies or union executives, this did not necessarily advance women's issues or priorities. Presence was not always power. If women were elected by men and women, they were not inevitably going to speak out about, or pursue, issues of relevance to women. They were not there to represent women's interests but the interests of their workplace/industrial sector.²⁶ Women in reserved seats

²¹ The charter was approved by the TUC conference and commended by the General Council to all union executives. The aim was to secure greater integration of women in unions. It contained ten action points, including the setting up of women's committees and conferences and the appointment of women's officers.

²² Cockburn noted that the charter 'acknowledged for the first time the uncomfortable truth that male colleagues as well as bosses had an adverse bearing on women trade unionists' (*Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties* (Fabian Society, London, 1987) p. 12). Coote and Campbell commented that the charter provided a legitimacy for positive action (*Sweet Freedom*, p. 170).

²³ These included home and family responsibilities, time and venues of union meetings, lack of confidence and sexism. See Jane Stageman, *Women in Trade Unions* (University of Hull, Hull, 1980); Chris Aldred, *Women at Work* (Pan Books, London, 1981); Beale, *Getting it Together*; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*; Briskin and McDermott, *Women Challenging Unions*; Lawrence, *Gender and Trade Unions*; Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*; Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*.

²⁴ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*; Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*; McBride, *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*; Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*.

²⁵ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 12.

²⁶ Cockburn, *Women and the European Social Dialogue*. Cunnison and Stageman claimed that even with women's involvement there remained 'the pervasive hold of male culture' (*Feminizing the Unions*, pp. 167-8). See also Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*, p. 1.

were generally outnumbered by male representatives, which could make it difficult to make their voices heard.²⁷

The effectiveness of women's separate structures required support from male leaders and male representatives in the workplace. Research has shown that this was not always forthcoming.²⁸ Cockburn identified a short and a long equality agenda. The former was tokenistic, the minimum union leaders felt constrained to deliver, while the latter was more ambitious and met the aspirations of feminists. Cockburn referred to the difference between the two agendas as 'between cosmetic treatment and a transformative change in organisations'.²⁹ She concluded that it was more often the short equality agenda that was implemented. Briskin advocated a model for women's committees which took into account the reservations and concerns previously identified. She argued that the continued success of women's structures in trade unions required the maintenance of a strategic balance between autonomy from the mainstream and integration into these structures. She categorised this concept as 'a radical edge for the women's structures allied to decision-making within mainstream structures'.³⁰

Despite weaknesses and flaws identified in the operation of women's structures, there was still a belief that their existence did bring about a measure of success in the advancement of women in trade unions. Kirton summed up this position:

It would be a retrograde and risky step to dismantle the structures which have given women a voice and variable degrees of power and influence in the last twenty years or more.³¹

Progress for trade union women up to the early years of the twenty-first century remained uneven.³² The records show that there were more women on union executives and

²⁷ Aldred, *Women at Work*, p. 157.

²⁸ Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy contended that women's structures were tolerated so long as they did not challenge male dominance (*British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 38, No 3, 2000, p. 359). Rees commented on the discrepancy between the national rhetoric of support and what was happening in the workplace (*Women and the Labour Market*, p. 81).

²⁹ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 13.

³⁰ Briskin and McDermott, *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 12. Earlier researchers had recognised what Beale described as 'the tricky dilemma' of having freedom from the mainstream and also links into decision-making (*Getting It Together*, p. 102). Aldred claimed that success was more likely if there were women from the women's committee on the national executive (*Women At Work*, p. 157).

³¹ Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 163. Parker observed that the women's committees contributed to widening the union agenda, raising issues of specific relevance to women including low pay, maternity rights, childcare, sexual harassment and domestic abuse ('Women's Groups in Trade Unions', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 40, No 1, 2002, p. 39).

negotiating committees, that some unions pursued equal value cases, that low pay and part-time workers rights were given a higher priority and that issues such as women's health, childcare and domestic violence featured on the unions' agendas. Women's structures contributed to this advance. However, equality was far from being achieved. Few unions had achieved proportionality in female representation and the number of women officials remained stubbornly low across the trade union movement.

This thesis contributes to the historiography of women in trade unions. It augments the existing literature by focusing on one specific union, USDAW, where the majority of members are women, working in retail, a low-paid sector of the economy, with many working part-time. The themes previously identified – the family wage ideology, the challenge to a women's right to work, marginalisation, low pay and unequal pay – are explored from the perspective of USDAW women. The research provided an opportunity to retrieve USDAW women activists from relative obscurity, so that their activism and the resistance they faced are not 'hidden from history'. There is a continuing need to ensure that the least-researched union women are 'discovered' and included in the historical record. The thesis also contributes to the debate on separate women's structures.

The introduction, operation and demise of the Women in USDAW structures from 1985 to 2005 are the central themes of the research. From the general issues around women's structures identified earlier, the thesis focuses on the specifics within one union, USDAW, a union not associated prior to 1985 with innovative structures to advance equality for women, a union not in the vanguard of positive action strategies, and where feminists were not joining the union to initiate change. Yet USDAW established a national and divisional women's committees and a national conference and appointed a national women's officer.

The questions posed are:

1. Why were the Women in USDAW structures introduced? What were the internal and external factors that led to their establishment?
2. What difference did the Women in USDAW structures make in the 20 years of their existence? Did they achieve a greater agency for women or were they marginalised?

³² The eight surveys conducted by the Southern and Eastern Council of the TUC (SERTUC) women's committee on equality in trade unions between 1987 and 2008 highlighted that progress was not linear, and that unions adopted different strategies and displayed varying commitment to progress for women.

3. Why were the Women in USDAW structures disbanded in 2005? Was it because women in the union had achieved equality and they were no longer necessary, or were there other factors at work?

This thesis covers the entire lifespan of the Women in USDAW structures, which adds depth and insights into the changing and evolving practices and theories on separate structures for women in the existing literature. An additional dimension is that USDAW was not involved in any mergers or amalgamations in this period.³³ Other unions, largely driven by financial imperatives, amalgamated, which involved negotiating a new constitution. This had an impact on the women's structures that had previously existed and the emergence of different frameworks for women.

There are two union histories, one by Hoffman, published in 1949, and the other by Richardson, published in 1979.³⁴ Hoffman in his history of the early days of the Shops Assistants Union highlighted the contributions of women such as Mabel Talbot, who became the first woman president of the union in 1920, and Hilda Canham, who played a pivotal role in the John Lewis strike in 1919. Drake endorsed his view that women in the retail sector at the turn of the century were not all passive or indifferent to unions. The records show that there were women who spoke out, who fought against marginalisation and campaigned vigorously for the implementation of equal pay. Little of this emerged from Richardson's history of the union, published in 1979. Women in his account were peripheral. He inserted one brief chapter, near the end of the book, to cover 80 years of women in the union. He referred to the under-representation of women in the union as a problem that still awaits a solution; and then moved on without any recommendations.³⁵ There have been three significant pieces of research into Women in USDAW. In 1983, USDAW commissioned research into the union's structures to identify barriers to women's participation. This survey of all branch secretaries, conducted by Teresa Rees of the sociology department of Cardiff University, was initiated by the Women in USDAW Working Party in line with the recommendations of the 1979 Charter on Equality for

³³ The last merger in USDAW was in 1979 when the small Scottish Bakers Union became part of the union and adopted the existing USDAW structures. There were no separate structures for women in either union at that time.

³⁴ The two union histories are Philip Hoffman, *They Also Serve: The Story of the Shopworker* (Porcupine Press, London, 1948) and William Richardson, *A Union of Many Trades, The History of USDAW* (USDAW, Manchester, 1980).

³⁵ Richardson, *A Union of Many Trades*, p. 321.

Women Within Trade Unions. Rees concluded that branch meetings were a serious obstacle to women's participation. She described them as the first stage in 'filtering out' women's involvement in the union.³⁶ The information from the survey provided a valuable insight into the position of women in USDAW in the early 1980s. It prompted the question as to what happened to the branch structure in the years that followed. Was the branch structure, in the light of Rees's findings, changed to remove the barriers to women's involvement, and if there had been a failure to adapt the branch structure, would this indicate a lack of willingness to 'open up' the union to women?

Another piece of research was undertaken by Harrington into women's activism at local level, which involved interviewing 13 USDAW women activists, including members of the divisional women's committee, between 1992 and 1994. This research identified that the women's committee had widened the union's agenda to include issues such as maternity rights, childcare and sexual harassment, and that there was increased involvement of women in recruitment and campaigning.³⁷ She also pointed to the rejection by the USDAW women of the label 'feminism' and to their lack of enthusiasm for separate structures for women. This opened up avenues to explore and develop. Was the activism of the USDAW women from Wales replicated in other parts of the country? Was the rejection of feminism and separate structures for women widespread? Further research involving USDAW women was undertaken by Parker, who explored the impact of women's groups on trade union organisation.³⁸ Her findings, like those of Harrington, identified how some women's issues were incorporated into the mainstream. However, she injected a note of caution, which stated that recognising issues of specific relevance to women members did not necessarily mean that they were prioritised.³⁹ She observed that USDAW, despite its female majority, 'largely tolerates women's groups as vehicles to sameness equality ends'.⁴⁰ The thesis will examine these findings. The three studies provided valuable research on USDAW to interrogate and build upon. However, there were a number of

³⁶ Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*, p. 101.

³⁷ Jane Harrington, *Women's Local Level Trade Union Participation* (Bristol Business School, University of the West of Scotland, PhD, 2000). The research also included 27 interviews with women members of the Bank, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU).

³⁸ Jane Parker, *Women's Equality in British Trade Unions, The Roles and Impacts of Women's Groups Organising* (PhD, University of Warwick, 2000). She conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with USDAW officials and members throughout the UK between 1996 and 1998. She also interviewed 65 members of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF).

³⁹ Parker, *Women's Groups in Trade Unions*, p. 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

gaps. Notably, the research does not cover the period 1999–2005, and, thus, they do not examine the final stages and the demise of the women’s structures. Parker specifically claimed in 1998 that there was ‘no evidence to suggest that equalities would lead to the replacement of women’s groups in the near future’.⁴¹ Yet this is precisely what happened in 2005.

A major source of information was the USDAW annual conference reports from the 1960s to 2006, and a selection from the 1930s to the 1950s. These conferences were reported verbatim and thus give insights into the debates, not just the final decisions. An analysis of these records identified what were the main preoccupations of the union and what women delegates had to contribute. They confirmed that women in USDAW were always active, though at times numerically small. The reports also demonstrated an increase in women delegates at conferences, and a changing union agenda in the period of the Women in USDAW structures. Also analysed were executive council statements to annual conferences, which dealt with topics such as low pay, part-time working, recruitment, political activities and campaigning. The Women in USDAW Working Party reported to conference 1983–85, and the subsequent Women in USDAW reports from 1986 till they ceased publication in 1996 were consulted. USDAW journals for members and activists were examined. The TUC and TUC Women’s Conference reports were examined with a specific focus on the period from the late 1970s to 2006. Perusal of earlier reports, in particular of the TUC Women’s Conferences, again tracked the continuity of USDAW women’s involvement. The TUC reports outlined USDAW’s involvement in debates, what topics the union put on the TUC agenda, who spoke for the union, and the male/female composition of the union’s delegations. A similar exercise was carried out with the STUC and the STUC Women’s Conference reports. The chapter on Women in USDAW in Scotland includes oral testimonies to supplement the documentary evidence. Six USDAW women activists with involvement in the Scottish women’s committee were interviewed to ascertain their experiences of, and views on, women’s structures. This brought a more in-depth dimension and helped to create a more rounded picture of women activists. Three non-USDAW women were interviewed. They had engaged with the Scottish Women’s committee as tutors and as campaigners. This brought another perspective to the analysis of the Scottish women’s committee’s achievements and setbacks.

⁴¹ Parker, *Women’s Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 93.

This is a participant account. The researcher was involved with, and supportive of, the Women in USDAW structures. This has added to the resources, with personal copies of reports, publications, campaigning materials, training activities and leaflets. The attendance by the researcher at every USDAW annual conference from the mid-1970s to 2006 provides a detailed insight into the workings of the union, the personalities involved and the changing agenda. With this involvement comes the necessity to be alert for partisan bias, to stand back and objectively interrogate the sources, to look beyond the internal activities of USDAW to a wider perspective on the trade union and labour movement, and to locate the research in the existing historiography of women in unions, specifically of women's separate structures.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: *Introduction*

Chapter 2: *Women in Trade Unions, The Ebbs and Flows* sets the scene by looking at the position of women in trade unions from the 1920s to the 1950s. Themes emerge – such as the family wage ideology, job segregation, unequal pay and the hostility of male trade unionists – which continued to impact on women's role in the labour market and the trade unions in the decades ahead. The records show that women were continuously in paid employment and active in trade unions, which challenges the idea that they were difficult to organise and apathetic to trade unionism. The central theme of the chapter is women's structures in the trade union movement as they emerged, receded or disappeared. The focus is on the two unions which merged to form USDAW in 1947, but attention is also paid to developments within the TUC to provide a wider perspective. The arguments for and against women's structures which emerge in the 1920s were reiterated in later union conference debates up until the 1970s.

Chapter 3: *The Times They Are A Changing* examines the 1960s and 1970s for signs of progress for women workers. There are advances and setbacks, with progress uneven and inconsistent across the unions. Women's membership continued to increase, especially of white-collar workers, but under-representation and marginalisation of women within union structures persisted. There was some measure of success, with limited equal pay granted in the public sector. It is the strike of women workers at Ford's Dagenham plant in 1968 that

propels equal pay higher up the agenda and leads to Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act in 1970. There were debates at the TUC to abolish the women's conference – all unsuccessful – in 1961, 1969, 1971 and 1974. The arguments remain unchanged between those men and women who advocated class solidarity, and those who campaigned to retain women's structures as part of a strategy to achieve equality. The reasons behind the more vociferous demands for change by women activists, culminating in the 1979 TUC Charter for Equality for Women Within Trade Unions, are explored, with the influence of feminism examined. USDAW conferences in this period highlight the struggle for equal pay, with women activists challenging male negotiators. USDAW women, 60% of the membership by 1978, are actively involved in the TUC women's conference and on the TUC women's advisory committee, where they defend the continued existence of the TUC Women's Conference. The USDAW annual conference moves in the opposite direction, voting for the disbandment of the TUC Women's Conference in 1975. Why USDAW did not follow the TUC trend for positive action to improve the position of women is analysed.

Chapter 4: *In The Beginning – The Advent of Women in USDAW Structures* looks in detail at the move towards Women in USDAW structures in the period 1980 to 1985. At the beginning of the eighties, the union was unequivocally male-dominated, and there were no USDAW women campaigning for separate structures, yet by 1985 the union had national and divisional women's committees, a national women's conference and a women's officer. The internal and external factors behind this transformation are analysed. The second part of the chapter examines the specific structures introduced by USDAW and the rationale behind the choices made, to try to ascertain how far the structures selected had the potential to make progress towards equality for USDAW women, and how far they were limited by the power of the male hierarchy.

Chapter 5: *Women in USDAW in Action* explores the impact of the Women in USDAW structures between 1985 and 2004. This explores the recruitment and campaigning activities of USDAW Women and whether this led to a higher profile for women and women's issues. One issue examined is how far greater activity and visibility translate into improvements in pay and conditions through collective bargaining. This chapter looks at the number of full-time officers, women's representation on the national executive, women's participation at local and national level and the union's attitude to the newly created women's structures. An overarching theme of the chapter is how far the operation

of the Women in USDAW structures matches Briskin's autonomy/integration paradigm for women's equality, and Cockburn's long and short equality agendas.

Chapter 6: *Women in USDAW The Scottish Dimension* shifts the focus from the national to the Scottish scene and examines how far what was happening in Scotland mirrored the national picture. It explores the similarities and differences from the early days of the union to the demise of the Women in USDAW structures in 2005, with particular attention paid to the activities of the Scottish Women's committee. A more detailed, nuanced picture is provided by incorporating extracts from the interviews of six Scottish USDAW women activists and three women from outside the union who were involved with the Scottish women's committee. This augments the documentary evidence. The issue explored is whether or not USDAW women activists in Scotland were more visible, more active and more campaigning during the period of the women's structures 1985–2005.

Chapter 7: *And Then There was None* seeks explanations for the demise of the Women in USDAW structures in 2005. Possible contributory factors are examined. Had women in USDAW achieved equality, rendering the women's structures redundant? Was USDAW following the TUC with its move to an equalities structure? Was the lack of feminists in the union a factor? Were the Women in USDAW structures insecurely embedded from the start? Did male hostility and resistance play a part?

Chapter 8: *Conclusion* brings together the findings for the three research questions and locates them in the historiography of trade unions, specifically on women's structures.

Chapter 2: Women in Trade Unions – The Ebbs and Flows 1920s–1950s

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed significant developments in the history of women in trade unions. The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the NFWW demonstrated that women workers could be organised and militant in pursuit of better terms and conditions.¹ Women workers played a vital role in World War One, successfully taking over work previously the preserve of men. By the early 1920s, this period of expansion was waning. Women were pushed back into the home and were restricted to a peripheral role in the labour market. Female membership of trade unions diminished markedly.² Despite setbacks, women continued to be active within the unions and the workplaces. From the 1920s through to the end of the 1950s, women workers continued to challenge the power and prejudice of male trade unionists and employers. This opposition ebbed and flowed, was not always discernible, not always successful, but it never ceased to exist. The pioneering work of Lewenhak and Boston demolished the myth that, in these decades, women workers were apathetic, passive and not part of the struggle.³ They clearly delineated the hostility of male trade unionists and employers. They brought out the factors, internal and external, which impacted on the women's movement for equality within and outwith the unions. They charted how activity by women waxed and waned but never disappeared. The comment by Davis on working-class organisations is equally apposite for women union activists. 'Working-class organisations do not proceed in a linear onward and upward fashion; they are always marked by peaks and troughs in activity.'⁴

Illustration of this unbroken but non-linear thread can be found in the development of women's structures within trade unions.⁵ This chapter will focus on women in trade unions, and on women's structures as they emerged, receded or disappeared from the

¹ Gordon demonstrated that, in the period 1850 to 1914, women workers in Scotland struggled constantly against wage cuts, for increases, against victimisation (Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*).

² TUC Conference Report 1924 estimated that there were not more than 500,000 women members, which constituted a drop of 400,000 since 1921 (p. 232).

³ Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*; Boston, *Women Workers*.

⁴ Davis, *Comrade or Brother?* p. 285. These developments can also be said to mirror the feminist movement in the same period: 'at no point can a feminist movement be said to have ceased to exist ... the history reveals neither a steady progress nor a steady decline' – Olive Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism 1918–70* (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1993) p. 27.

⁵ Women's structures include women-only unions, women's committees, women's conferences, women's officers and reserved seats for women.

1920s to the end of the 1950s. Although the focus will be on the two unions which merged to form USDAW in 1947, attention will also be paid to developments within the TUC.

In the early 1920s, there was a trend away from separate women's organisations. In 1921 the staff and equipment of the WTUL transferred to the TUC to be part of the General Council Women Workers' Group. Gertrude Tuckwell of the WTUL exhorted delegates to continue where her organisation had left off. She quoted the League motto: 'Look to it that ye lose not the things that they had wrought'.⁶ The same year, the NFWW merged with the National Union of General Workers (NUGW). Mary Macarthur, the leader of the NFWW, argued that the existence of a women-only union was a temporary expedient, rendered necessary because of the refusal of some unions to accept women into membership. The NFWW was not hostile to mixed unions and encouraged women workers to join unions appropriate to their work where this was possible.⁷ Macarthur in the NFWW journal, in the autumn of 1920, wrote:

inside the national union we shall be able to demonstrate the possibility of a great industrial organisation of men and women in which women are not submerged, and one in which they take as active a part as the men do.⁸

Marion Phillips, Chief Women's Officer of the Labour Party, also expressed optimism about the move to the mixed union:

This is a new development which only took place last year, but it is hoped that by these means that the trade union organisation of women will learn to take a more active part in the affairs of the union.⁹

Drake, in the year before the amalgamation, noted the considerable autonomy that the union was to retain.¹⁰ Within a few years, the separate women's section in the NUGW had disappeared, the national women's committee had been abolished, the sixteen women organisers reduced to one and only a chief Women's Officer – Margaret Bondfield – remained.

⁶ TUC Conference Report 1921, p. 224.

⁷ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*, p. 228.

⁸ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 150.

⁹ Marion Phillips, *Organisation of Women in Trade Unions* (TUC, London, 1923) p. 6.

¹⁰ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 207. Drake, the niece of Beatrice Webb, was involved in the Fabian Women's Group, which along with the Labour Research Department published the book in 1920. Drake played a significant role in uncovering the low wages and poor conditions of women workers during World War One.

Feminist writers in the 1970s and 1980s portrayed this as a major setback for the development of separate women's organising. Lewenhak attributed the demise of the women's organisation in the NUGW in part to the resentment of the male officials to the separate women's structure which cut across the geographical divisions of their own areas, and was outwith their control.¹¹ The consequences of the merger of the NFWW with the NUGW were consistently quoted by campaigners for separate structures in the late 1960s and beyond. This stance has the advantage of hindsight and emerged strongly at a time of a resurgence of the women's movement. The amalgamation in 1921 was not forced upon the NFWW; it was a deliberate move in keeping with the belief of the women leaders that, by male and female trade unionists working together, progress could be achieved for women workers. The feminist movement fragmented in the wake of the partial enfranchisement of women in 1918.¹² For some women activists, their attention turned more to class politics and to the struggles of the fledgling Labour Party to achieve success at the ballot box.¹³ Mary Macarthur's obituary in the 1921 TUC Report sums up the dual aspects of her campaigning: 'worked on the principle of co-ordinating the activities of men and women, while never losing sight of the special needs of women'.¹⁴

While the position of the NFWW women within the NUGW was being eroded, developments in the opposite direction were happening at the TUC. In 1920, Mary Macarthur, on behalf of the NFWW, successfully moved an amendment to the TUC Constitution ensuring that, with reserved seats, there would be at least two women on the TUC General Council. The following year, Margaret Bondfield, National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW), and Julia Varley, Workers Party, were elected. Without this provision there would have been no women on the TUC General Council. The establishment of two reserved seats and the women's department aroused little controversy, which was not the case with the calls for a women's conference. At the 1923 TUC conference, there was a motion requesting the TUC to 'explore and report back upon the possible advantages to the movement of regular conferences of women representing all

¹¹ Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 187.

¹² The feminist movement continued into the post-war period but took a different form and had different demands. See Dale Spender, *There's Always Been A Women's Movement This Century* (Pandora Press, London, 1983); Valerie Wright, *Women's Organisations and Feminism in Inter-War Scotland* (PhD, University of Glasgow, 2008).

¹³ Mary Macarthur stood, unsuccessfully, as a Labour candidate in 1919. Margaret Bondfield, from the NFWW and then the NUGW, was elected as an MP in 1923. Ellen Wilkinson of AUCE, the co-operative workers union, was elected as an MP in 1924.

¹⁴ TUC Conference Report, 1921, p. 215.

the unions catering for them'.¹⁵ The mover was Dorothy Evans, from the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (AWCS).¹⁶ In 1925 Margaret Bondfield reiterated the demand for a woman's conference. In 1926, a conference was convened during the week of the TUC for unions catering for women workers. There were 87 delegates, 48 women and 36 men. Again the possibility of a regular annual women's conference was discussed. In 1930, the recommendation from the TUC General Council Women's Group to set up a women's conference was endorsed by Congress. This was not a demand for a women-only conference, but for an opportunity to discuss the position of women workers.

What were the arguments for and against the establishment of a women's conference that were voiced by TUC delegates? Those against emphasised working-class solidarity over gender. Ben Turner, General Textile Workers Union, stated unequivocally 'I do not believe in separate conferences. I think there should be one conference for the Labour Party and one for the Trade Union Congress, and not sex conferences.'¹⁷ The debate was not a straightforward clash between male and female trade unionists. Vociferous opposition came from Edith Howse, Union of Post Office Workers. She warned that a women's conference would be a retrograde step. 'We are affiliated to the TUC as workers, not as women ... represented as workers not as women.'¹⁸ The arguments to maintain an undivided organisation should be seen against the background of the 1920s: recession and unemployment and, in 1926, the General Strike which was to further weaken trade union organisation.

Those arguing in favour of the establishment of a women's conference emphasised the need to bring more women workers into the trade union fold. The TUC consultation in 1924 to assess interest among the unions cited the rationale as 'to promote the trade union organisation of women and thereby assist the whole trade union movement'.¹⁹ Dorothy Evans (AWCS) stated that the aim was to 'give serious consideration to the problem of

¹⁵ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 315. The motion referred to the progress made in the organisation of women within the Labour Party and sought similar machinery for the TUC; a reminder of the links between the trade union movement and the Labour Party, with women activists being involved in both.

¹⁶ AWCS was founded in 1903, affiliated to the TUC in 1919, and remained a women's union until 1941 when it merged with the National Union of Clerks.

¹⁷ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 318.

¹⁸ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 310. She took her objections to the 1926 meeting to further discuss the possibility. 'I object very much as a woman and principally as a worker to being sidetracked to something like children playing with dolls to imitate their parents with babies' TUC Conference Report, 1926, p. 8.

¹⁹ TUC Conference Report, 1924, p. 233.

unorganised women'.²⁰ Ellen Wilkinson, the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers' (NUDAW) woman's officer, commented that the resolution was not arguing for a separate TUC Congress for women, but rather a forum to train future women leaders, as 'this cannot be done for a beginning within so large an assembly as this'.²¹ It would also provide opportunities for discussing problems relating to women before bringing them to conference. By 1930, the argument for a women's conference had been accepted, but dissent did not disappear. There were sporadic attempts to disband the women's conference in the coming decades, with the positions adopted mirroring those advanced at the TUC in the 1920s.

The two retail unions at the turn of the twentieth century were the Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks and the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees (AUCE).²² The early days of the two unions are noteworthy for the women activists who went on to play wider national roles in the labour movement, women such as Mary Macarthur, Margaret Bondfield and Ellen Wilkinson. Macarthur joined the Shop Assistants Union in 1901, became secretary of the Ayr branch in 1902, and was elected President, of the Scottish Divisional Council. She went on to join the WTUL and in 1906 the NFWW. Bondfield's association with the Shop Assistants Union was longer, joining the union in 1894 and rising to a senior level. Lewenhak commented on Bondfield that she was the first working-class woman to become a national official in a 'mixed' union.²³ She moved to the NFWW and, on the merger with NUGW, became the union's chief women's officer. In AUCE, Ellen Wilkinson became the first woman organiser in 1915, and set up a women's department in 1917.²⁴ Her work with women in the co-operative societies reaped benefits for the union. Vernon recorded that the female membership rose astronomically, as Wilkinson was able to persuade women brought into the labour force during World War One and afterwards to join the union.²⁵ AUCE membership grew from 7,000 in 1914 to 36,000 in 1918.

²⁰ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 316. The debates around the organisation of women workers will be developed later in the chapter.

²¹ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 318.

²² With the merger in 1920 with the Warehouse Workers Union, AUCE became NUDAW.

²³ Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 95.

²⁴ As noted earlier, Wilkinson as the union's delegate in the 1920s was a key advocate of the establishment of the TUC women's conference.

²⁵ Betty Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson, 1891–1947* (Crom Helm, London, 1982) p. 47.

Macarthur, Bondfield and Wilkinson have established their place in the history of women in the trade union and labour movement, but there were other women in those early days who played a part. Their resilience and determination are brought to life in a history of the union by Hoffman. He was an official of the Shop Assistants Union and worked alongside Macarthur and Bondfield in the struggles for organisation and recognition from employers. He provided brief glimpses of women shop workers in action, from the striking dressmakers to the John Lewis strike in 1920. ‘Women everywhere from top to bottom crowding the platform ... Miss Talbot in the Chair ... the speeches of the women, novices at public speaking were wonderful.’²⁶ An agreement for dressmakers, covering 25,000 workers in 150 firms, was achieved. Mabel Talbot, a London dressmaker, went on to become the union’s first woman president in 1920. The John Lewis strike was provoked by the dismissal of staff, and then the engagement of new employees who had to sign an agreement not to be members of the union. Hoffman commented:

Miss Hilda Canham, who was on the deputation which at the end forced Old John (Lewis) found herself leader of the strike. Right well and modestly did she justify this fleeting greatness thrust upon her.²⁷

Hoffman did not address the issue of women’s structures in the Shop Assistants Union. Without the research undertaken by Drake into women in the trade unions, there would be few if any references to the initiatives taken by women activists such as Bessie Ward from Manchester. In 1909, she set up a women’s council in Manchester, which consisted of women representatives from the local branches. Drake attributed the invention of such a women’s council to the women shop workers.²⁸ Mabel Talbot claimed that the reasons behind the development were to educate women members, encourage them to take part in branches and secure the representation of women on all the committees of the union, without the use of reserved seats.²⁹ In 1911, Miss Tynan was appointed as the union’s first national woman organiser. Drake referred to the shop assistants as ‘keen feminists’.³⁰ This was reflected in the Souvenir Report prepared for the 1912 annual conference to celebrate

²⁶ Hoffman, *They Also Serve*, p. 154. The book concentrated almost exclusively on the Shop Assistants Union up to the formation of USDAW in 1947. The history of NUDAW is the subject of Richardson’s *A Union of Many Trades, The History of USDAW*, which then took up the history of USDAW from 1947 to 1979.

²⁷ Hoffman, *They Also Serve*, pp. 187–8.

²⁸ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 215.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Talbot organised the London Women’s Council in 1910. She advocated the appointment of a woman organiser in her first speech to the union’s annual conference. She was elected to the union’s national executive in 1914.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

the 21st year of the union's existence. It depicted an air of optimism about progress for women in the union in the years before World War One:

The awakening of shop assistants is a significant feature of our times, and those who feared the girls in shops would never organise, the growth of women's councils and the prominence taken by the gentler sex in recent disputes is most gratifying.³¹

The report also contained an article on the women's movement by Isa Davidson, at that time a member of the union's national executive. She outlined the existing women's structures: a national women organiser, women's councils and a women's conference to be held in 1912. She remarked: 'The Movement has taken root. The women have arrived.'³² These women's structures did not remain firmly rooted in the organisation. Drake recorded the differences of opinion between the women's councils and the national executive. The men on the executive suggested that the councils had served their purpose, as a few women had been elected to the executive. They further opined that the women were in danger of becoming aggressive. The women's national advisory committee was disbanded and local activities were 'at a standstill by want of funds'.³³

Ellen Wilkinson, AUCE's first national women's organiser, set up a women's department with the remit:

to deal with the problems of the many new members ... not with the intention of separating the interests of men and women in the ordinary routine of the branches, but to care for and represent women's special interests not coincident with those of men.³⁴

Recruitment and organisation of women during the war was the key objective, but the women's post and department continued beyond 1918. Women's activities and visibility in the retail unions began to wane as the 1920s progressed and the membership of the two unions declined.

The need to recruit and organise women workers is a theme that emerged strongly in the reports of the TUC in this period. This has to be set in the context of the prevailing and

³¹ Shop Assistants Annual Report 1912 Souvenir Edition, pp. 34–5.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 19. Women's sections of the union were in Glasgow, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Aberdeen, Bournemouth and Bristol. Isa Davidson became an official of the union in Edinburgh and was a contemporary of Agnes Gilroy of NUDAW. Both women made significant contributions to the STUC and STUC women's conferences.

³³ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 64.

³⁴ Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 47.

dominant ideology of the family wage ... a wage sufficient for the male worker to maintain a non-working wife and family. Gordon demonstrated that the assumption that women were economic dependents did not always stand up to scrutiny, and that the notion of a working man with a wife and family at home was essentially a middle-class phenomenon, an aspiration never realised by the majority of working-class men.³⁵ Women did participate in the workplace, despite the persistence of the male-breadwinner ideology. Economic necessity gave many working-class women no option. The rhetoric was of women in the home; the reality was women in the workplace.³⁶

The family wage ideology played a role in the continuing existence of occupational segregation, of low and unequal wages for women workers, issues that would remain central to the campaign for women's equality for decades to come. A consequence of the adherence to separate spheres was that many male trade unionists were less assiduous, less effective in recruiting women into the union. The low level of women's organisations was attributed to the apathy and lack of union consciousness of women workers.³⁷ This was challenged by women activists, who refuted the claim that women were to blame. Dorothy Evans, AWCS, remarked at the 1923 TUC: 'You may say it is impossible to organise the mass of women because they are so conservative, but isn't that because you have never given them the chance to be anything else?'³⁸ In the Organisation of Women debate at the 1929 TUC conference, Lily Hodson, Tailor and Garment Workers, declared that:

male trade unionists have not recognised the fact that it was just as important for women to be organised as themselves. They have not yet recognised the fact that

³⁵ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*. Simonton noted that having a non-working wife was 'a measure of masculinity as well as a building block in working-class notions of responsibility', Lynn Abrams *et al.*, *Gender in Scottish History Since 1700* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006) p. 215.

³⁶ See Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*; Esther Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, (Pressang, Glasgow, 1982); Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*; Feminist Review (ed.), *Waged Work: A Reader* (Virago, London, 1986); Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives and Factory Lives* (MacMillan, London, 1981); West (ed.) *Women, Work and the Labour Movement*; Laura Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in French and British Metal Working Industries 1914–1939* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca: NY, 1995). The TUC Women Workers Bulletin in 1983 recorded that: 'Stereotyped ideas of women's and men's roles are still strong ... despite the fact that it bears less and less relevance to the real world. Only 5% of households fit the stereotype of male breadwinner with a wife and two dependent children' (The TUC Womens Workers Bulletin No 3, 1983, p. 11.)

³⁷ The ideology of the male breadwinner and the difficulty of organising female labour also featured in the history of the trade union movement in the United States. Kessler-Harris noted that trade union men, in the early decades of the twentieth century, argued that a woman's place was in the home at the same time as lamenting their failure to join trade unions – Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labour History*, pp. 22–7.

³⁸ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 316.

women not being organised there is a tendency towards the lowering of men's wages.³⁹

Women activists had to constantly remind male trade unionists that women workers were a permanent feature of the labour market.

Drake attributed the weaker organisation of women workers to a broad range of factors. She highlighted that women worked in areas that are more difficult to organise.⁴⁰ Low wages she identified as a contributory factor, as well as the turnover of women workers.⁴¹ The antagonism on the part of employers and the reluctance of male trade unionists were also cited as explanations for the lower union density of female workers.⁴² Women historians writing in the second half of the twentieth century endorsed the views of the earlier women activists. They too argued that women workers were not intrinsically difficult to organise, and that the criticism levelled against women as being especially reluctant to become members of trade unions was not well founded. They recognised that there were a number of explanations for the lack of extensive union organisation among women, which included trade union practices and procedures and the failure of unions to address issues relevant to women workers.

The 1930s witnessed the Depression, which had a particular impact on women workers. During the 1930s there was a challenge to a woman's right to work. Women activists had to dismiss again and again the accusation that women were taking men's jobs. Anne Loughlin (NUTGW) in her union journal *The Garment Worker* commented:

I have the uneasy feeling that opinion is gaining ground that women are taking employment from men. The suggestion is sometimes made that women should be excluded from industry on the grounds of expediency as there are only so many jobs to go round and men are the breadwinners.⁴³

Anne Goodwin of the Central Amalgamated Workers Union (CAWU) again took up the challenge at the 1937 TUC conference. It was not true that women had taken men's jobs in the last 10 to 15 years ... they have been employed in expanded industries and new

³⁹ TUC Conference Report, 1923, p. 316.

⁴⁰ Marion Phillips, Labour Party, Chief Women's Officer, endorsed this view in 1923. She reinforced the argument that it was not women, but where they worked that was the barrier to recruitment.

⁴¹ Mary Macarthur and Margaret Bondfield made similar points.

⁴² Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp.198–202.

⁴³ Julie Arnot, *Women Workers and Union Participation in Scotland 1919–1939* (PhD. University of Glasgow, 1999) p. 239.

undertakings.⁴⁴ Eleanor Stewart, Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), chairing the 1937 STUC women's conference, asked 'those who advocate the wholesale dismissal of women to pause and ponder. Unemployment was caused by the decline in heavy industries where few women were employed.'⁴⁵ Boston argued that men blamed women, not capitalism, for unemployment and falling wages.⁴⁶ An illustration of this comes from an article in the union journal in 1935, from the general secretary of the Post Office Workers Union. 'Division, segregation, de-amalgamation and most of our present ills are traceable to the policy of employing less men and more women.'⁴⁷ Pugh considered the Depression and mass unemployment to have reinforced the ideology of the family wage in the minds of male trade unionists.⁴⁸ Where women worked in the 1930s was changing; employment in domestic service and textiles was overtaken by factory, clerical and shop work. Changes in types of employment did not alter the position of women in the labour market. Occupational segregation, low and unequal wages persisted.

Women's structures within the TUC developed further in the 1930s. The women's conference was established as an annual event and a women's officer was appointed to act as secretary to the women's advisory committee (WAC). The appointment of the TUC women's officer was protracted; first mooted in 1925, it was not until 1933 that the post was filled. Nancy Adam was the first to hold the position. In an earlier period, she had been an organiser with the NFWW in Scotland. In 1931, the first TUC Conference of Unions Catering for Women Workers was held and a national advisory committee set up, composed of five members of the General Council and five to be elected at the women's conference. It is relevant to note that the WAC was not women only as there were three men on it from the General Council, and men attended as delegates and spoke in debates. These incremental advances gave women trade unionists a forum for discussion and debate, an opportunity noticeably absent from the TUC conferences. It is noticeable that almost all the women who came through to leadership positions in their own unions or

⁴⁴ TUC Conference Report, 1937, p. 243. See Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble – Women Workers in the New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (Routledge, London, 1990). She explored the emergence of mass production and the rigid sexual division of labour that was established. On the issue of men's jobs being taken by women, she established that the jobs were newly created and that the decline in male employment was because skilled men were less and less required, as mass production techniques made their skills obsolete.

⁴⁵ STUC Conference Report, 1935, p. 65.

⁴⁶ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 156.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴⁸ Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism' pp. 144-164 in Harold Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1990) p. 147.

were elected to the women's seats on the General Council had participated for many years at the TUC Women's Conferences.

Against the background of the Depression and the challenge to a woman's right to work, WAC made valiant efforts to recruit and organise women workers, efforts unlikely to have emerged from the TUC General Council. The establishment of local women's advisory committees attached to trade councils was encouraged, but there was a lack of support from unions locally. The WAC noted that local women's committees were 'handicapped by a lack of response from affiliated organisations'.⁴⁹ The activities around recruitment of women workers might be best summed up by the WAC statement: 'consistent and important though not spectacular'.⁵⁰

The 1930s brought unemployment and deprivation to retail workers, as it did elsewhere in the country. Hoffman described the period as 'a retreat of the shop workers from the high ground', 'a tide of progress that gradually ebbed', of agreements being allowed to expire or be ignored by employers.⁵¹ He gave a specific example to illustrate the downward trend. The average wage for grocery workers 24 years of age and over was 60 shillings in 1926, but had tumbled to 45 shillings by 1936.⁵² In the October of that year, Ellen Wilkinson, who had been NUDAW's women's officer until 1935, led the unemployed workers march from Jarrow to London to highlight the mass unemployment and extreme poverty in the north-east.⁵³

The early 1920s had witnessed an upsurge of activity by women activists, but, as elsewhere, women in the two retail unions were less visible in the 1930s. There are some glimpses of attempts to target women for recruitment. The Shop Assistants Union produced some recruitment leaflets in the belief that 'men and women should be organised irrespective of sex, but the appeal to bring women in should be different'.⁵⁴ A leaflet aimed

⁴⁹ TUC Conference Report, 1950, p. 116.

⁵⁰ TUC Conference Report, 1934, p. 103.

⁵¹ Hoffman, *They Also Serve*, p. 214; Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, recorded the backlash against wages and conditions.

⁵² Hoffman, *They Also Serve*, p. 229.

⁵³ Wilkinson had lost her Middlesborough seat in 1931 and returned to NUDAW until she re-entered Parliament in 1935 as MP for Jarrow.

⁵⁴ *Shop Assistants Magazine*, report of the 1936 conference, contribution from Miss Alexander (West of Scotland) p. 332. Arnot described the attempts of women activists to recruit women, including the efforts by Isa Davidson, a Shop Assistants Union official in Edinburgh, to organise drapery workers by holding early morning meetings – *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 169.

at single women read: ‘Are you putting up with disgracefully low wages and long hours, thinking it won’t last for ever, one day I shall marry?’ The message was, think again. Elsewhere a decline in female activity is recorded. At the Shop Assistants conference in 1936 there was a motion asking the executive to explain why no action had been taken to implement the previous year’s resolution on a special campaign to organise women workers. In the debate, Mr G. R. Mason from Edinburgh observed that there ‘were fewer women at conferences than on former occasions and ... we are losing our hold on women members ... unless we get our present women membership active ... could not hope to attract and interest those outside’.⁵⁵ Miss Alexander from the West of Scotland criticised the union’s failure to recruit women. ‘The fact that they are not coming in proves that present methods do not appeal.’⁵⁶

The ideology of the family wage was to some extent submerged for the duration of World War Two, when unprecedented numbers of women, including married women, were brought into the workplace to become part of the war effort.⁵⁷ Boston wrote that ‘The years from 1939 to 1945 represent a brief surge forward for women, a bright interlude between the dark days of the thirties and the conservative days of the 1950s’.⁵⁸

Trade union women were alert to the possibility that their position in the workforce at the end of the war might resemble the previous expulsion of women after 1918. Ann Loughlin at the TUC 1941 conference stated: ‘Those of us old enough to remember the last war know that women got very little more than lip service when the war was over.’⁵⁹ The end of hostilities was to bring a return to the view that a woman’s place was in the home. The 1948 TUC Report stated:

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 where there are young children to cater for.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Shop Assistants Conference Report, 1936, p. 332.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵⁷ The wartime slogan ‘Be like Dad, Keep Mum’ utilised the family breadwinner concept.

⁵⁸ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 185.

⁵⁹ TUC Conference Report, 1941, p. 293.

⁶⁰ TUC Conference Report, 1948, p. 238.

This position replicated the stance taken in the Beveridge Report on the establishment of the welfare state, which was based on the assumption that women were economically dependent on men. The report stated:

The attitude of the housewife to gainful employment outside the home should not be the same as that of a single woman ... in the next 30 years as housewives and mothers have work to do in ensuring adequate continuance of the British race.⁶¹

Women made up 50% of the workforce in retail distribution during the war, but, again following the general trend, there was an expectation that women would leave employment to allow those returning from the war to regain their previous jobs. Richardson outlined the reinstatement procedures adopted by the co-operative societies, which shed light on how women workers were viewed. He wrote of the redundancy for many employees and members of the union, but never indicated that the majority were women. NUDAW national executive put forward proposals for ‘an orderly run-down of temporary staff; with pensioners to be the first to go, followed by married women with husbands in civilian employment, with married men with families the last to go’.⁶²

The 1945 Labour government brought specific benefits to shop workers, with the establishment in 1947 of the Retail Food and Retail Non-Food wages councils, which set legal minimum standards for wages and conditions in that sector. The Shops Act 1950 was the result of years of campaigning by the retail unions to reduce trading hours. The Act did not achieve all the goals of the unions but was nonetheless an advance. The shops now had a closing time of 7pm with one late night until 8pm.⁶³ A weakness, from the union’s point of view, was that local authorities had the power to vary orders.

The key issue for the two retail unions in the immediate post-war period was the merger negotiations. Separate structures for women members were not on the agenda. An illustration of the prevailing attitudes was when a motion to the 1946 NUDAW conference calling for a woman organiser for London was lost. Mrs Maddy pointed out that nationally there were only three women out of 60 full-time officials. She believed that a woman organiser would increase female membership. The motion was robustly rejected by Mr Hallsworth, general secretary: ‘We have stood for the principle of equality between the sexes, but what the proposers of this motion want is not to follow the principle of equality

⁶¹ Davis, *Comrade or Brother?* p. 261

⁶² Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 187.

⁶³ The unions had campaigned for a 6pm closing time and one late night to 7pm.

but to give preferential treatment to women.’⁶⁴ The two retail unions merged to form USDAW in 1947. All the national officials were men; there was a handful of women officials spread throughout the country; there were two women on the national executive, which decreased to one in 1949. There were no women’s structures of any kind.

Boston summed up the 1950s as a decade of conservatism in political and social attitudes.⁶⁵ The male breadwinner ideology persisted but now bolstered by Bowlby’s theory of maternal deprivation to support the ideology that married women should not go out to work. He argued that children need the full-time care of their mothers. Married women who went out to work were identified as the cause of serious social problems, from juvenile delinquency to failed marriages. Bowlby’s ideas fitted in well with those who espoused the belief that a woman’s place was in the home. Nonetheless, working-class women continued to go out to work because they had to. Against this background, in spite of the pervading atmosphere, married women were in employment in greater numbers, and part-time work was on the increase. Table 1.2 shows the upward trend of married women in the labour force in England and Wales.

Table 2.1: Female Employment Percentage in England and Wales 1911–51

	Married	Single	Widowed/Divorced
1911	14	77	9
1921	14	78	8
1931	16	77	7
1951	40	52	8

Source: Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 34 and Lewis, *Women in England, 1870 – 1950* (Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1984) p. 152.

By 1959, 53% of all working women were married.⁶⁶ Florence Hancock, TUC General Council, at the 1950 TUC women’s conference, refuted the view that married women were

⁶⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1946, p. 29.

⁶⁵ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 244.

⁶⁶ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 245. Many of the married women were able to return to the formal paid economy, because of the growth of part-time employment including the introduction of twilight shifts. See Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 266.

to blame for society's ills. She commented: 'suggestions of neglecting their home duties, breaking up family life, juvenile delinquency ... unjust and unwarranted criticism'.⁶⁷

Senior women trade unionists did not speak out against the closure of daytime nurseries at the end of the war. Alice Horan (NUGMW) said at the 1953 TUC conference that she regarded daytime nurseries as a temporary wartime expedient: 'we feel that priority should be given to the welfare of the infant who should remain with its parent'.⁶⁸ Anne Goodwin, responding for the General Council, said: 'I don't think this movement has ever accepted an obligation to maintain the children of those who go out to work.'⁶⁹ It would seem that some women trade unionists were not immune to the theory of maternal deprivation.

In 1951, there was an attempt to abolish the TUC women's conference, and the arguments of the 1920s resurfaced. Miss A. T. Bone, Inland Revenue Staff Association, said: 'Women have got beyond the tea party stage of trade unionism. They have been holding these conferences for 21 years and have surely graduated out of the kindergarten.'⁷⁰ She blamed the existence of the women's conference for keeping women out of the mainstream and for preventing them from being appointed as delegates to the TUC. Bone lambasted the women's conference as a dismal failure, with its purely advisory remit and its inability to recruit women into the unions.⁷¹ She identified the way forward as allowing women to 'stand on their own two feet', to take the rough and tumble of the polls and the ordinary meetings.⁷² This solution ignored the obstacles placed in the way of women trade unionists and failed to explain how the abolition of the women's conference would, by itself, increase the paltry percentage of women delegates at the TUC conference. Those defending the women's conference were Helene Walker, President (CAWU), Ethel Chipchase, Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) and Florence Hancock, (TGWU) and General Council. While Chipchase and Hancock did little more than observe that the time was not right to disband the conference, Walker spoke of having the freedom to speak at their own conferences and to build up confidence to be more assertive in the mixed meetings and committees – arguments reminiscent of those made by Ellen Wilkinson. Walker did not shrink from castigating the men:

⁶⁷ TUC Conference Report, 1950, p. 21.

⁶⁸ TUC Conference Report, 1953, p. 371.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ TUC Conference Report, 1951, p. 350.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* She noted that only 16% of women were union members and hailed this as 'a downright disgrace', p. 350.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 350.

I was struck by the fact that when the previous speaker was discussing the woman's point of view, there was a lot of laughter going on in this hall which suggests to me that there are very many men who still have not a proper appreciation of the part women have to play in the trade union movement.⁷³

It is interesting to note that the most robust defence of the women's conference came from an activist in a previously women-only union, AWCS, which merged to form CAWU. The union had a 50% female delegation. The motion was lost: the TUC women's structures remained intact.

By the end of the 1950s, it could be argued that women workers had made little progress. They were still, in the main, on low pay, on unequal pay, and segregated into a narrow range of occupations. Within the TUC and the individual unions, women were virtually invisible at senior levels and as full-time officers. The report of the women's advisory committee in 1954, however, highlighted that women were active at local level as shop stewards, collectors and committee members. As Gordon commented on trade union women of an earlier time, so too with women in the 1950s. 'They were not silent, it was simply that their voices could not be heard above the authoritative boom of respectable trade unionism.'⁷⁴

Many of the married women entering or returning to the labour market in the 1950s were employed in retail. In USDAW, the balance of members between men and women began to change. Between 1951 and 1955, male membership fell by 12,836 and female membership increased by 11,234. Women now constituted 45.5% of the membership, up from 38.75% in 1947.⁷⁵ Richardson recorded that: 'There were a great many part-time married women who were much more difficult to organise than full-timers.'⁷⁶ Again, this returns to the arguments of decades before on recruiting women workers ... the fault lay with the women. Mrs Mitchell in the union journal in 1952 highlighted one of the reasons that make it more difficult to be organised: 'domestic responsibilities ... men straight to the meeting from work and meal ready when he gets home'.⁷⁷ Despite the growing female membership, women in USDAW continued to be under-represented at all levels in the

⁷³ TUC Conference Report, 1951, p. 351.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Gordon, 'Women, Trade Unions and Industrial Militancy', pp. 52-73, in Glasgow Women's Studies Group, *Uncharted Lives: Extracts from Women's Experiences: 1850-1982* (Pressgang, Glasgow, 1983) p. 71.

⁷⁵ Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 202.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *The New Dawn*, Letters, January 1952, p. 31.

union, scarcely visible at the annual conference. USDAW delegations to the TUC in the 1950s had only a sprinkling of women. There were still only a handful of women officials. There was only one woman – Edna Hanes – on the national executive for the period 1950–60.

There was however an arena where USDAW women's voices were heard: the TUC Women's Conference. Throughout the 1950s, with the exception of 1953, Amy Wild, USDAW full-time officer, represented the union on the TUC women's advisory committee. At the 1952 conference, she pointed out the paucity of women on union executives and their minority position as officials and urged delegates to do everything they could to encourage women to apply for official positions.⁷⁸ At the same conference, Mrs V. Kendal from USDAW, in the debate on women in industry, demanded equal rights for women in the workplace.⁷⁹ Mrs Morgan from USDAW, in 1957, spoke of her union branch of 478 members with 330 women being 'run by women'.⁸⁰ Irene Shears, manageress of a shoe department at a London co-operative store, urged delegates to recruit part-timers.⁸¹

Women trade unionists played a substantial role in the early days of NUDAW and the Shop Assistants Union. At the beginning of the twentieth century, their participation was acknowledged and celebrated. World War One brought an upsurge in female membership and a recognition of the achievements of key women. As women were pushed back into the home, their numbers and influence in the two unions declined. In the 1950s, women, in particular married women, were joining USDAW in greater numbers, but this increase did not lead to women achieving senior roles in USDAW, or more than a handful of women officials being appointed. It was at the TUC Women's Conferences where there were glimpses of active USDAW women. The union was yet to realise that potential for growth was with part-time married women workers. In so far as a women's place was in her union, in USDAW it was largely confined to paying contributions and possibly playing a role at local level.

⁷⁸ TUC Women's Conference Report, 1952, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ TUC Women's Conference Report, 1957, p. 28.

⁸¹ TUC Women's Conference, 1959, p. 31. Irene Shears was elected to the USDAW national executive in 1961.

Chapter 3: The Times They Are A-Changing? 1960s–1970s

By the end of the 1960s, it could be argued that women workers had made little progress. They were still, in the main, on low pay and segregated into a narrow range of occupations. Within the TUC and individual unions, women were virtually invisible at senior levels. There was no revolution in the air, no dramatic reversal of the position of women either in the workplace or in the unions. There were only indications of stuttering ongoing progress. Boston commented that the decade up to 1968 was a period of transition between the social conservatism of the 1950s and the emerging militancy signalled by the women machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant.¹ Although the 1960s may not have been a decade of progress for women, neither was it one of stagnation. It was more complex, with some advances and some setbacks, a decade of fits and starts.

The issue of equal pay exemplified this. A hardy annual at TUC conferences from the first equal pay resolution moved by Clementina Black from the Women's Trade Union League at the 1888 conference, it was far from being achieved. At the TUC women's conference, from its inception, it was a dominant theme. It is probable that the persistence and ongoing demands for pay equity at the TUC women's conference contributed to ensuring that the issue remained on the mainstream agenda. Another factor in achieving some measure of equal pay in the 1960s was the increase in women's membership in white-collar unions.² This was to continue throughout the decade and beyond, boosted by the affiliation of the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Some success was achieved in the public sector, with women teachers and civil servants being granted equal pay. Women in the private sector were left behind. There was, however, a change of direction, which opened up the possibility of a more widespread application of equal pay. In 1961, the TUC General Council for the first time recognised that collective bargaining did not seem likely to achieve equal pay and legislation might be needed.³ Hitherto, legislation was regarded as an interference in free, unfettered collective bargaining. The 1963 TUC conference called upon a future Labour

¹ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 277.

² Anne Godwin, in her presidential address at the 1962 TUC Congress, commented on the remarkable growth in non-manual workers (TUC Annual Conference Report, 1962, p. 77).

³ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1961, p. 340.

government to ratify the International Labour Organization convention on equal pay. Boston viewed this as the admission of failure by the unions to make substantial gains through traditional bargaining machinery.⁴ An unpredictable event that moved the equal pay campaign forward was the 1968 strike by women workers at Ford's Dagenham plant, led by Rose Borland. Although the industrial action was over grading rather than equal pay, it led directly to the setting up of the National Joint Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights, which organised a mass equal pay demonstration in 1969. Christina Page from USDAW commented, at that year's TUC women's conference, 'suddenly women have become news ... never so many press reporters at conference ... a growing sign of the militancy and determination to receive better wages'.⁵ The combination of a measure of success in the public sector, a growing female membership, the union acknowledgement that government legislation was required, and the militancy of the machinists at Ford's moved equal pay up the agenda of the trade union movement, with a breakthrough, if not a comprehensive result, coming with Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act in 1970.

Another issue which remained on the TUC agenda, but which did not proceed in a linear fashion, was the debate around the existence of the TUC women's conference. Debates on the abolition of the women's conference took place in 1961 and 1969. The arguments for and against identified in the previous chapter were reiterated. The 1961 motion claimed that the women's conference: 'fosters an artificial and undesirable division of the activities of Congress'.⁶ In the reply for the General Council, Miss E. McCullough was less than robust in defending the women's conference. She reminded conference that it was 'not so much a women's conference as a conference catering for women workers ... some unions send male delegates ... and we are very glad to have them'.⁷ Conference voted to retain the women's conference. In 1969, the debate ended with a different outcome. The motion asking for the General Council to examine the purpose of and need for separate arrangements and to report back with recommendations was carried against the wishes of the General Council. Alan Fisher, general secretary of NUPE, in replying for the General

⁴ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 266.

⁵ TUC Women's Conference Report, 1969, p. 45.

⁶ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1961, p. 338.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339. As with the women's conference, the women's advisory committee, from the outset had not been women only. In the 1960s, the committee consisted of five women elected from the women's conference and eight appointed by the General Council, which included the two women in the reserved seats.

Council, laid out clearly why separate organisations should remain: equality for women had not been achieved, only two women were on the General Council, and that because of reserved seats, and the women's conference allowed women from different unions to debate issues relevant to women members and potential members.⁸ The decade ended with uncertainty over the future of the women's conference, and with no indication of how women were to become more involved at the TUC Congress.⁹

The under-representation of women at all levels in both the TUC and the individual unions persisted and was confirmed by the 1967 survey of trade union organisation among women undertaken by the TUC women's advisory committee. What was different was the acknowledgement for the first time that the low level of organisation among female workers was not the fault of the women, a pervasive attitude identified in the previous chapter. This change was reflected in the evidence of the TUC to the Donovan Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations:

Where men are well organised in a particular plant, generally women were too. The fact that the proportion of women in employment who belong to trade unions is only about half of that of men is mainly to be accounted for by differences in their industrial and occupational distribution.¹⁰

Recognition of the disadvantaged position of women in the workplace came with the publication of the TUC Industrial Charter for Women in 1963.¹¹ Lewenhak viewed this as a new phase in the battle for women's equality in the workplace.¹² Boston, while welcoming the charter, pointed out the limitations. There were no references to childcare, maternity rights or equality for women in sick pay and pension schemes.¹³ The charter originated at the TUC women's conference, being proposed by the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers. The continuing existence of the women's conference and the women's advisory committee provided women activists with an indirect route into the General Council and the possibility of some progress for women workers.

⁸ TUC Conference Report, 1969, p. 590.

⁹ The advocates for the abolition of the women's conference in 1969 did not fare well in this regard. The Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) had 20 delegates of whom four were women; the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) had only one woman out of a delegation of 20, neither union anywhere near proportionality.

¹⁰ TUC Report, 1967, p. 28.

¹¹ The charter contained six demands: equal pay, equal opportunities for promotion for women, apprenticeship for girls, improved opportunities for training and retraining for older women returners and special provision for the health and welfare of women at work.

¹² Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 276.

¹³ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 268.

The 1960s ended with some advances for women workers on equal pay, uncertainty as to the existence of the women's structures at the TUC, continuing under-representation of women at all levels within the trade union movement but also a TUC charter of demands to improve women's position in the workplace.

USDAW in the 1960s mirrored the struggles of women trade unionists elsewhere in the campaign for equal pay. Richardson pointed out that the first debates on equal pay appeared early in the history of the two retail unions. It escalated in the 1930s and continued consistently on the union agenda thereafter. He noted that between 1930 and 1976 there were more than 40 resolutions.¹⁴ USDAW women in the period up to 1960 had made their voices heard on the issue inside the union, at the TUC and at the Women's TUC. Esther Martin, a union official in the Midlands, commented at the 1947 USDAW conference: 'Women are fighting for something more than money, it is a question of status.'¹⁵ An example of the attitude of some of the men in the union was contained in a letter to the union's journal. Mr H. Hayes, a Co-op worker, wrote:

I believe that the majority of female assistants secretly prefer the status quo, because it gives them an excuse for avoiding the heavy, dirty or unwanted jobs which are part of a day's work in any shop ... equal pay would cause a great deal of discontent among the majority of our male membership.

Annie MacDonald at USDAW's 1952 conference expressed frustration over the endless delay: 'I hope it's not like socialism that I expected in our time.'¹⁶ There was criticism of the employers, but also of the Labour Party. Frances Dean at the 1949 TUC said: 'Employers are preparing for an attack on the wages and conditions of workers ... and there is one paltry sentence in the Labour Party programme ... the application of the principle when the nation's economic circumstances allow it.'¹⁷

The campaign for equal pay continued unabated in USDAW in the 1960s. The issue was pursued with more vigour and persistence. The 1961 conference was presented with a

¹⁴ Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 324.

¹⁵ Martin was a notable fighter for women. Originally with the Warehouse Workers Union, she came into NUDAW with Mary Bamber. Lewenhak reports that she successfully resisted USDAW's attempts to dismiss her because of her married status. Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 210.

¹⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1952, p. 67. MacDonald had been a member of the union since 1910. She remarked in 1967: 'for 70 years I have been in the Labour movement and I have a card to prove it signed by Keir Hardie' (USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1967, p. 86).

¹⁷ TUC Annual Conference Report 1949, p. 481; *The New Dawn*, 1952, p. 479.

report on equal pay, which was the result of a motion from Irene Shears from London Co-op in 1960. Lewenhak described Shears as ‘diminutive, even mouselike’, a constant advocate for equal pay who ‘in most unmouselike terms crisply castigated the executive council and members for their failure to actively pursue equal pay claims’.¹⁸ Shears was the only woman member of the union’s executive from 1962 to 1969. The report was presented on behalf of the executive by Edna Hanes, the only woman on the executive at that time. A long-time champion of equal pay, she identified the gap between principle and practice and claimed that, while there had been some progress, much remained to be done. She pointed to the achievement of equal pay for women civil servants and teachers. ‘So, if our women are really in earnest ... they should demonstrate actively, and as a first step, I appeal to our women to take a more active interest in the trade union.’¹⁹ The report was strongly criticised by Christina Page, a shop manageress, a member of the communist party and not afraid to ruffle feathers. At the rostrum, she tore up the report: ‘It is nothing but a waste of time and energy and money ... It is full of excuses ... It might be better if we went on strike and perhaps we could get some action.’²⁰ It is noteworthy that Page did not aim her attacks on the contents of Hanes’s speech: ‘I welcome Edna’s remarks in contrast with this document.’²¹

Shears, Hanes, Page and Macdonald were articulate, challenging women. They were all shop manageresses and the pay inequity would have been part of their everyday work experience.

Senior USDAW officials responding to demands for equal pay supported the idea in principle but demonstrated irritation and hostility to what they regarded as unrealistic

¹⁸ Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 272.

¹⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1961, p. 79. Hanes as a young shop worker made a priority of working with and for women. In the 1930s, she was chair of the local women’s committee of Leeds Trades Council, and elected to USDAW’s executive in 1950. When receiving the TUC Women’s Gold Badge in 1963, she commented: ‘I feel that I have been privileged to follow, however haltingly, in the footsteps of people such as Mary MacArthur, Julia Varley, Margaret Bondfield and Ellen Wilkinson who did so much to obtain for women ... a rightful place in the scheme of things’ (TUC Annual Conference Report, 1963, p. 315).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84. Page had pointed out at the 1956 conference that the Co-op agreement increased the differential between men’s and women’s rates from 45 shillings to 50 shillings and sixpence and that similar differentials had been agreed in other grades (Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 261). Annie MacDonald in the 1967 debate on equal pay referred to an advert in the Co-op newspaper with £15 a week for the male manager and £13.10 for a female manageress (USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1967, p. 87).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

expectations. Joe Hiscock, assistant general secretary, in replying to the debate on the rate for the job in 1962, commented:

so charming a delegate as Mrs Page. I only wish she would have a little closer appreciation of the problems of negotiators. True that over the last 4/5 years the proportion of women's rates to men has dropped ... what is one to do if there is an opportunity of getting an extra 3 or 4 shillings for the men ... is one to say the offer we have had for women must be the same for men?²²

Again a less than robust approach to negotiating equal pay is demonstrated in the reply of Alf Allen, general secretary, in 1963. 'Members would not thank them if they turned down the offer of another 2 or 3 shillings for men because they could not push up the female increase as well.'²³ There were some men who championed the equal pay cause, notably Chris Norwood, who said of the leadership and delegates, 'They spoke as men not as trade unionists ... we debate the conditions of men who are in the minority in our membership.'²⁴ In the 1969 debate, he put forward a motion which included: 'ensuring that no wage settlements are accepted unless they contain proportionately greater increases for women than for men'.²⁵ This proposal was rejected by the executive and by the delegates, overwhelmingly male. Yet another motion calling for militant action where necessary was accepted. This might be construed as the triumph of rhetoric over the implementation of practical steps to achieving equal pay. Another instance of acceptance in principle but without substance could be the summing up for the executive on equal pay by John Phillips, assistant general secretary: 'there is a change in the air ... equal pay not something that will happen at some unidentified point in time, but as a reality in the not-too distant future'.²⁶

Under-representation of women in USDAW corresponded to the pattern that existed elsewhere in the trade union movement. All the senior officials and heads of departments were men. In the divisions, there were but a handful of women full-time officers. The 16-member national executive never had more than two women in any one year throughout the 1960s, as identified in Table 3.1.

²² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1962, p. 72.

²³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1963, p. 326.

²⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1964, p. 95. Norwood was elected Labour MP for Norwich South in 1964. He stood down in 1970.

²⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1969, p. 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Table 3.1: USDAW National Executive Women's Representation 1960–1970

<i>USDAW National Executive Women's Representation 1960–1970</i>		
1960–61	1 woman	Edna Hanes
1961–62	2 women	Edna Hanes, Irene Shears
1962–65	1 woman	Irene Shears
1965–69	2 women	Irene Shears, Christina Page
1970	1 woman	Christina Page

Source: Richardson, *A Union of Many Trades, The History of USDAW*, p. 323.

On the eight divisional councils, each with ten elected members, there was a slight advance on the 1950s, but still the highest number of women divisional councillors nationally, out of the 80 was six.²⁷ USDAW delegations to the TUC contained only a handful of women.

Table 3.2: USDAW Delegations to the TUC in the 1960s

<i>USDAW Delegations to the TUC in the 1960s</i>		
Year	Total delegation	Women delegates
1960	36	2
1961	36	4
1962	35	2
1963	35	3
1964	36	2
1965	35	4
1966	35	3
1967	35	2
1968	35	2
1969	35	3

Source: TUC Conference Reports 1960–69

²⁷ Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 323.

USDAW, unlike some of the other unions affiliated to the TUC, did not experience a growth in membership in the 1960s. The Report of the Committee of Investigation on Membership Recruitment and Losses presented to the 1965 USDAW conference highlighted the turnover in retail and bemoaned the decline in the Co-op membership. The Co-op membership was 356,000 in 1962 and had dropped to 336,000 by 1967.²⁸ Taylor noted that the labour force in the Co-ops fell by nearly a quarter between 1966 and 1971, and the number of shops almost halved.²⁹ Dick Seabrook, USDAW President, identified the main difficulties as two-fold: the rapid rate of labour turnover and ‘continuing growth in the number of female employees and those working part-time’.³⁰ Another President Rodney Hanes, three years later, continued on the same theme. The issue was: ‘the problem of arousing the interests of married women many of whom are part-time’.³¹ USDAW’s static membership was referred to in the Donovan Commission Research Paper, ‘Trade Union Structure and Government’. It pointed out that: ‘shifts in composition in the labour force in distribution towards a high proportion of part-time workers has sharply affected USDAW’s growth and intensified its recruitment problems.’³² It would appear that blaming the women, a dominant strand identified in the previous chapter, still held sway. There were women who rejected this view. Miss P. Samuels at the 1962 USDAW conference said: ‘Do not blame the women ... look at the platform ... how many women have we ever had representing us there?’³³ Mrs B. Briggs at the 1960 annual conference claimed that an energetic pursuit of equal pay would make a difference: ‘I feel if we are to get into our union all the thousands of unorganised women we must give serious attention to this problem.’³⁴ Opportunities did exist in the non-Co-op sector with the growth of the multiples, but membership in that sector was pitifully small. Although the majority of employees in this sector were women, there does not appear to have been any specific campaigns to recruit women in non-Co-op retail outlets. It was a much more difficult task to organise in this sector. Not only were closed shop arrangements not the norm, there was often no company agreement with the union. A success on this front came in 1961 when the women in the Woolworth stores in parts of South Wales came out on strike and achieved improved pay and a recognition agreement.

²⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1967, p. 33.

²⁹ Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 394.

³⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report 1965, p. 4.

³¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1967, p. 6.

³² Donovan Commission, Research Paper 5, *Trade Union Structure and Government* (HMSO, 1967) p. 11.

³³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1962, p. 71.

³⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1960, p. 57.

The dearth of women delegates to annual conferences arguably contributed to the lack of women's issues on the agenda, with the notable exception of the equal pay campaign. An increase in family allowances to help the low paid was raised by Edna Hanes in 1967.³⁵ A motion calling for 'positive action in support of the drive for equal rights for women' was put forward by Mrs V. Williamson from Nottingham Co-op. She argued that women should be equal citizens in their own right and expressed discontent at their lack of training, their lower pay and inferior jobs and not being regarded as equal guardians of their children.³⁶ There were no specific proposals. The motion was formally seconded, and carried by conference. Although the resolution was vague, it does indicate that there were women in the union willing to speak up on the inequalities faced by women and that, despite the obstacles, these voices were occasionally heard at USDAW conferences.³⁷ Again, as in earlier decades, the TUC Women's Conferences depicted USDAW women participating in a wider range of debates and being involved in the TUC women's advisory committee. Throughout the 1960s, USDAW had a representative elected by the TUC women's conference to sit on the women's advisory committee. At the beginning of the 1960s, the position was held by USDAW official Amy Wild, followed by Ethel Harris. Equal pay dominated the agenda, and year on year USDAW women contributed to these debates. They also spoke on opportunities for girls and women in education, on training boards, about cervical cancer screening, on health and safety in shops, on supporting women immigrants, and on the boycott of South African goods. On the organisation of women in trade unions, USDAW delegate P. Hunt commented, 'the problem is one of the dominant male'.³⁸

In the 1960s, USDAW women continued to campaign for equal pay with vigour but limited success. They remained under-represented at every level in the union. A few women activists challenged the leadership, but even fewer reached the union's national executive. Almost undetected, there were USDAW women participating and contributing to a wider women's agenda at the TUC women's conferences. The union did not follow the TUC lead in introducing their own charter for women workers. There were no proposals or debates on how to improve women's participation and representation within USDAW.

³⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1967, p. 93.

³⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1969, p. 95.

³⁷ The barriers to women's participation in USDAW will be dealt with in a later chapter.

³⁸ TUC Women's Conference Report, 1960, p. 20.

The 1960s ended with uncertainty around the continued existence of the TUC women's conference. A resolution to disband it had been remitted for the consideration of the General Council. A decade later in 1979 the TUC conference agreed a ten-point charter on 'Equality for Women in Trade Unions': 'to secure greater integration of women within unions'.³⁹ The charter was not announced with a fanfare, but with words of caution from Bill Keys on behalf of the General Council. 'Charters are not an Aladdin's lamp which we can just rub and all the problems go away ... women must not leave the problems to just a few vocal women.'⁴⁰ Cockburn, commenting on the charter, noted that it: 'acknowledged for the first time the uncomfortable truth that male colleagues, as well as bosses, had an adverse bearing on women trade unionists'.⁴¹ At the 1970 TUC, there was a reluctant acceptance that the women's conference should be retained. Ten years on, Congress organised a Special Conference on Positive Action held in the November after the TUC conference. Coote and Kellner remarked on the atmosphere at the conference. 'The delegates were in no doubt about the need for special measures; the speeches were all about which measures they should adopt and what lessons could be learned from the experiences of others.' Throughout the 1960s, as for decades before, the issues of equal pay dominated. In the 1970s, a wider agenda on women's rights developed. The Abortion Rights March in 1979 organised by the TUC was not only highly successful, drawing in women from beyond the trade union movement, but was also the first rally organised by the TUC on a non-work issue.

The advance of women in the trade unions in the 1970s was not the smooth linear progression that these landmarks might suggest. A much more complex process was at work. The defending and extending of the women's structures, the acceptance of positive action to improve the position of women in the unions – these were not achieved without struggle, were not attained without the influence and impact of a broad range of factors which included the increase of women in trade unions, union competition for female members and the re-emergence of feminism.

Attempts to disband the women's conference in the 1970s reiterated the arguments of earlier decades. Such a conference was divisive, discriminatory and could prevent women

³⁹ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1979, p. 591.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 455

⁴¹ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 12.

participating in the mainstream TUC conference. The repeated position of the women's advisory committee was that the conference should remain until women had achieved greater equality, for instance when the proportion of women delegates to the TUC more adequately reflected women's membership in the affiliated unions. As the decade progressed, the arguments for retaining the women's conference were put across with more vigour and confidence. For example, Marie Patterson, TGWU and TUC General Council member, as fraternal delegate to the 1977 STUC conference, declared: 'In my view the present upsurge of interest by and on behalf of women is probably the least appropriate ever time to demolish so well established a platform.'⁴² This marked a shift in her position from 1969, when she spoke in favour of examining the need for the women's conference. This could be considered as a sign of a growing awareness of women's issues and women's rights. 1975, the International Year of Women, had witnessed the implementation of the 1970 Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act and the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission.⁴³ The existence of the women's advisory committee and women's conference provided a vehicle for protest for women trade unionists, a catalyst for changes in women's representation within trade unions and for a widening agenda on women's issues. The women's conference throughout the 1970s argued for an increase in reserved seats for women on the General Council and an increase in the number elected to the women's advisory committee. It was agreed at the 1977 TUC conference to have three women on the General Council, up from two, and to have eight women elected to the WAC instead of five. The culmination of this activity was the TUC Charter on Equality for Women in Trade Unions in 1979, as described above. Childcare, maternity rights, family planning and abortion were on the women's conference agenda in the 1970s. Without these women's structures, it is difficult to envisage how these issues would have reached the attention of the General Council.

A contributory factor to more attention being paid to trade union women was arguably the continuing increase in women members. In 1971, the TUC Women's Conference reported that female membership was the highest ever, standing at 23% of the total membership.⁴⁴ Cockburn pointed out that in the period 1968–78 union membership grew from 8.7 million

⁴² STUC Annual Conference Report, 1977, p. 613.

⁴³ The scope of the Sex Discrimination Act included employment, training, education, housing and the provision of goods and services. In the 1970s, women obtained a legal right to maternity pay and greater rights in divorce proceedings.

⁴⁴ TUC Women's Conference Report, 1972, p. 42. The increase was partly due to the affiliation of the National Union of Teachers.

to 11.9 million, and within that female membership grew from 1.7 to 3.5 million.⁴⁵ Future potential for growth lay in attracting women workers, and this provided an incentive for some unions to put women's issues and measures to improve women's participation on their agendas. The Table 3.3 below illustrates the growth in women's membership, with spectacular increases in the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS), the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) and NUPE.

Table 3.3: Unions with Largest Increase in Women's Membership

<i>Unions with largest increase in women's membership</i>				
Union	1968 000s	1978 000s	Increase 000s	% Increase
NUPE	136.0	457.4	321.4	236
NALGO	132.1	318.8	186.7	141
TGWU	194.7	317.9	123.2	63
COHSE	38.9	159.4	120.5	310
NUGMW	199.9	318.2	118.3	59
USDAW	155.6	270.5	114.9	74
ASTMS	9.4	77.2	67.8	721
CPSA	100.0	158.8	58.8	59
AUEW ¹ (E.S.) ²	97.4	148.3	50.9	52
APEX ³	38.7	83.7	45.0	116

Source: Hunt and Adams, *Women, Work and Trade Unions*, p. 14.

Notes

1. Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
2. Engineering Section
3. Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff

Debates around the continuance of the TUC women's conference were similar to those of the 1960s. Increase in female membership had also been a feature, but this had escalated in the 1970s. A factor not in evidence in the 1960s was resurgent feminism.

⁴⁵ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 6.

Feminist writers have been in no doubt about the reasons for the advance of women trade unionists. Ledwith and Colgan claimed: ‘Pushed by resolutions from feminists and socialist women during the 1970s and 1980s, the TUC women’s structures increased their profile and activity.’⁴⁶ Coote and Campbell argued that: ‘as feminist influence grew it became increasingly hard to deny that ... women could make progress unless special measures were made to shift the entrenched patterns of discrimination’.⁴⁷ Beale commented that: ‘Ideas from the Women’s Liberation Movement made a considerable impact and that this came into the unions through radical women in white collar unions.’⁴⁸ Others take a more nuanced view, giving credit to women active in an earlier period. Lawrence recognised that: ‘the feminising of the labour movement was built upon decades of work by women trade unionists’.⁴⁹ Hunt recalled the feminists within the Suffragette movement and also brought out the indirect links between the women’s movement and trade unions through the involvement of individuals in umbrella organisations such as the National Abortion Campaign.⁵⁰ The consensus was that feminists did have an impact, but views on the extent of this influence varied. Rowbotham commented that there were different feminist approaches, some choosing to participate within trade unions, others remaining outside but supporting union campaigns such as those on abortion and childcare.⁵¹

There is more unanimity around the failure of feminists to connect with working-class women trade unionists. Cavendish in her study of factory workers argued that the women’s movement has been relatively unable to appeal to industrial women workers because of the emphasis on alternative lifestyles.⁵²

Progress for women was uneven and inconsistent across the unions. The under-representation of women within union structures stubbornly persisted.⁵³ As Pat Turner from the GMB Union commented at the 1975 TUC: ‘the position of women in our movement very largely mirrors their position in industry ... the majority of active women

⁴⁶ Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 160.

⁴⁸ Beale, *Getting it Together*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Lawrence, *Gender and Trade Unions*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ West (ed.), *Women, Work and the Labour Movement*, p. 161.

⁵¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past Is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s* (Penguin, London, 1985) p. 215.

⁵² Ruth Cavendish, *Women on the Line* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982) p. 135.

⁵³ See Appendix 1.

are effectively constrained at lower levels of leadership'.⁵⁴ Although the momentum was in favour of measures for greater integration, positive action was viewed by some as more rhetoric than reality. Charles pointed out that resolutions and policies on women in the 1970s in some cases were token gestures to give the appearance of supporting women workers while in reality little changed below the surface.⁵⁵ Sweeping, radical changes were unlikely to be achieved in ten years. Nonetheless, this period was a significant advance on that journey, especially when looked at from the perspective of the 1960s. Breitenbach noted that, despite the continuance of barriers to the participation and representation of women trade unionists, the 1970s witnessed some improvements in their position.⁵⁶ Her concluding sentence could be used to sum up the decade: 'If many goals remain yet to be won, the struggle at least is underway.'⁵⁷ Women's issues were pushed mainly by women activists, but were not a top priority for the trade union movement. The attempts by governments, both Tory and Labour, to introduce incomes policies dominated the debates at the TUC, causing dissent and division within union ranks. Strikes, from that of the miners in 1972 to Grunwick in 1976-77 to the Winter of Discontent in 1979, with many in between, brought the unions into conflict with employers and government, and led to an image being created of over-powerful, militant unions. Less than accurate in reality, it nonetheless provided the media with the basis for strong anti-union publicity. It was against this background that the achievements in developing structures for women in trade unions were obtained.

During the 1970s, USDAW made no changes to the union's structure and did not introduce any special measures to improve the representation or to increase the participation of women members in the organisation. The union did not follow the TUC's slow journey in the direction of positive action. It was even further removed from unions like NUPE and AUEW Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), who were not only committed to the principle of positive discrimination, but were taking action to implement it. Breitenbach commented that unions could make progress on equality for their women members through negotiations to improve their terms and conditions at work and by

⁵⁴ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1975, p. 393.

⁵⁵ Nicola Charles, 'Women and Trade Unions', pp. 160-185, in West (ed.), *Women, Work and the Labour Movement*, p. 171.

⁵⁶ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

strategies to improve women's representation within the unions.⁵⁸ USDAW's policies, in this decade, never moved beyond the first category.

Some of the factors put forward to explain the rise of women's structures in other unions were present in USDAW, but did not have the same impact. There was both an increase in female membership and clear evidence of under-representation at all levels of the union's structure. Steady growth in the union's numerical strength was recorded, from 316,000 at the start of the decade to 470,000 at the end. The downward trend of the 1960s had been reversed. This was in spite of the ongoing decline in co-operative employment.⁵⁹ Within this overall picture, women became a larger proportion, starting the decade at over 50% for the first time, and by 1978 forming 60% of the total membership.⁶⁰ The union's strategy was two-fold: negotiate national agreements with major retail companies and widen the catchment area by diversifying into other trade groups.⁶¹ Richardson noted that industrial action in this period was: 'less concerned with wages, more with recognition, the closed shop or with general conditions'.⁶² The retail agreements brought in more women members, and, where a closed shop existed, especially on industrial sites, even more women were drawn in. Newer areas such as mail order companies – Littlewoods and Empire Stores – were predominantly staffed by women.

There were some attempts to target potential women members, the most significant of which was the Charter of Rights for Working Women, published in 1975. The 12-point action programme included equal pay for work of equal value, greater opportunities for training for girls and women returning to work, improved maternity and pension rights and adequate childcare.⁶³ Recognition was given to the dual roles of women, at home and at work. In the charter, there was as much emphasis on the need for legislation as for union negotiations. The reason for the action programme is identified as part of International Women's Year: 'and to mark it the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers is

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁹ The 1974 USDAW conference noted the fall in co-op members from 170,464 in 1970 to 138,053 three years later – see Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁶¹ Retail agreements were signed with TESCO, British Home Stores, Woolworth, Fine Fare, Burton, Lewis's and Selfridges among others. Developing trade groups included food processing, transport, milk, confectionery, biscuits, mail order and chemicals. The 'shop workers union' had moved well beyond its roots.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 291. Two examples of successful strike action for a closed shop were at the tea firm Twining and the Crosse and Blackwell site at Peterhead.

⁶³ See Appendix 2 for USDAW's 12-point action programme.

campaigning for a major extension of rights for working women'.⁶⁴ The union may also have been influenced by the TUC Charter on Women's Rights and similar charters being published by other unions. USDAW's charter was a significant staging post on the road to greater equality for women workers, but written pledges do not guarantee implementation. There was also within the document an indication that women were to blame for their disadvantaged position through their failure to join the union: 'for too long women have not recognised the help available to them through trade unions in dealing with their general problems as workers and their particular problems in the workplace'.⁶⁵

Inequality within the union is given only cursory recognition: 'We need to have as many active women members at all levels proportionately to the total number of women.'⁶⁶ There were no action points on how the union would increase women's participation and representation.

Under-representation of women within USDAW mirrored that existing in other unions. In 1979, with over 60% of the membership female, the position was as follows:

Table 3.4: USDAW Women's Representation 1979

USDAW: Women's Representation 1979		
	Total	Women
Executive Council	16	3
Divisional Councils	90	22
National Officials	9	0
Full-time Officials	120	8
Heads of Departments	7	1

Source: Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 228.

From 1973 to April 1979, there had been only one woman on the executive – Christina Page. The one head of department was Diana Jeuda of the research department.

⁶⁴ USDAW Rights for Working Women Charter, 1975, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The issue of women's structures featured rarely in the debates at the union's annual conferences in the 1970s. USDAW had no women's structures and therefore no proposals to abolish them. Neither were there campaigns to establish a women's conference or committees. Where the issue did emerge was firstly in calls in 1975 to disband the TUC women's conference and, secondly, in 1978 a motion requesting that the union no longer participate in the Labour Party's women's conference.⁶⁷

The call to abolish the TUC women's conference expressed the view: 'while campaigning for the elimination of discrimination and supporting equality of treatment between the sexes, it is anomalous to continue a separate advisory conference for women workers and calls upon the General Council to abolish it'.⁶⁸ The arguments deployed were no different from those at the TUC: that the industrial problems of women should be dealt with by the movement as a whole and that to remove the women's conference would lead to greater unity and strength. Comments from delegates included suggestions that women's conferences were: 'an instrument to appease the struggles of working-class women', 'were only sweeteners for women', 'holding special conferences for women ... caused discrimination against men'.⁶⁹ All these comments came from women delegates.

The one speaker against the proposition, a woman, was not a young rebel, nor part of the feminist resurgence, but a long-serving member of staff, first as an office clerk and then as a full-time official – Joyce Riddiough. Riddiough argued that the time was not yet right; equal opportunities had not been achieved. She continued:

To me, it would be paradoxical if, in International Women's Year when USDAW led the field by producing 'Rights for Working Women', we should then make a policy decision calling for the abolition of the TUC Conference of Unions catering for Women Workers which is the means of providing the legitimate voice of women workers.⁷⁰

The reply to the debate from Alf Allen, general secretary, on behalf of the Executive, came down in support of abolition. This was done in a less than certain manner, acknowledging that the continuance of the women's conference had 'a good deal to be said for it' and that

⁶⁷ USDAW was affiliated to the TUC and the Labour Party, and participated in their women's conferences.

⁶⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1975, p. 130.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Riddiough was the union's representative on the TUC women's advisory committee in the 1970s through to her retirement in 1986.

‘the proposition does not say we should get rid of it tomorrow, next week, next year’.⁷¹ The proposition was carried by a large majority. This conference decision formed the basis of the union’s proposition to the 1975 TUC, urging that the TUC women’s conference be disbanded. It could be construed that this indicated the strength of feeling of the union on the issue, but this is not easy to reconcile with the union’s behaviour at conference. The motion was remitted without any contribution from an USDAW delegate. The case was not put.

In the 1978 debate not to take part in the National Conference of Labour Women, there were only three contributors, all men. The proposition was withdrawn. The motion came from the Manchester Central branch, which had placed the proposal to disband the TUC women’s conference on the 1975 agenda. There is nothing to explain why it was not asking for the Labour Women’s conference to be abolished, as it had with the TUC women’s conference. What is noteworthy was the change in the position of the executive as articulated by the general secretary, Alf Allen. Allen observed:

Previously it was felt that if you continued women’s conferences in an organisation that was calling for equal treatment everywhere, then you were subscribing to some sort of discrimination ... Now, the practical world, which is where we have to live – this is the Labour Party and the same thing is being said at the TUC ... that there is value to them in these women’s conferences being continued.⁷²

Allen’s reply was hesitant, not particularly coherent. This was at odds with the normally assured, confident performances of a man at the head of the union, and a member of the TUC General Council from 1962. The rationale behind the position could be the importance of being with the majority view, of not sitting on the sidelines. The phrases used are telling: ‘there is no purpose really in cutting off your limbs so that you are not able to take part bodily in the discussions ... if there are other trade union views being ventilated, ours should be there too’.⁷³

There was a very different motion put forward at USDAW’s 1973 conference, which was far ahead of its time, a forerunner. The proposition called for a critical examination of the union’s attitude to women because of the high percentage of female membership, and the

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁷² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1978, p. 43.

⁷³ Ibid.

low level of participation. It went on to recommend that the Executive Council appoint a female National Officer with special responsibility for women members. The mover was Mrs Wainman, from the Boots industrial branch in Nottingham. The seconder was from the same branch. Wainman emphasised that, in the trades covered by the union, there was an enormous potential to recruit women which: ‘we shall not even come close to realising unless those women who are already members are given every possible encouragement and opportunity to take an active part in union affairs at all levels’.⁷⁴ Antagonism to a National Women’s Officer came through strongly. The essence of the opposition was two-fold: appointments ought to be made on the basis of one’s capabilities and not on one’s sex; and men have fought for women’s rights and know what women want. These comments received applause from the conference. The motion was referred to the executive council with a promise from the general secretary that it would be looked at seriously. The proposal disappeared without trace. What prompted the Boots industrial branch to put the proposal on the agenda is unknown. Wainman does not feature in any other annual conferences in the 1970s, and her speech gave no indication of a specific political stance. Her assault on the merit argument was incisive:

Some will criticise the females because of their apparent apathy and lack of participation in union affairs ... the real fault lies firstly with the society which has created and still encourages such attitudes and secondly with the leaders who have failed to show the way out of this enslaving environment.⁷⁵

Equal pay, as with the TUC and other unions, was the dominant issue concerning women debated at USDAW conferences in the 1970s. The issue had moved on; it was now about implementation of the Equal Pay Act. Edna Hanes, former executive council member, at the 1970 USDAW conference recognised that the forthcoming equality legislation would have little impact on the wages: ‘of those women who perform work which had always been regarded as traditional women’s work’.⁷⁶ She urged negotiators to secure the proper rate for the job through job evaluation. Equal pay debates brought to the surface examples of sexist prejudice in the workplace. A male delegate disapproved of the ‘cribbing of the male membership. Time and time again I have heard them say “what right have you to get more money for women than I get”’.⁷⁷ At senior level, senior officials placed the blame on the women. Dick Seabrook, presiding at the 1972 conference, referred to ‘the battle to win

⁷⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1973, p. 29.

⁷⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1973, p. 29.

⁷⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1970, p. 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

for women their rightful place in the world of work ... can never succeed until the women themselves are fully committed to this struggle with us'.⁷⁸ Added to this was the view that: 'women in their thousands are still outside the trade union movement ... are riding on the backs of our achievements'.⁷⁹ This was a reference to USDAW's key role on wages councils which determined minimum terms and conditions in sectors where the union organised. John Phillips, assistant general secretary, pointed out that: 'three quarters of those women on whose behalf we will be required to negotiate under the legislation are not even union members'.⁸⁰ There was no recognition that the failure of women to join the union might in some measure be attributed to the organisation's attitude to women workers. This illustrated the longevity of the view that women themselves are the problem, not the union, its structures or the male membership.

As with earlier decades, it was at the TUC Women's Conferences where there were indications of a more active advocacy of women's rights by USDAW delegates. In the first half of the 1970s, USDAW women spoke out strongly in favour of the TUC Women's Conference. In 1971 Frances Dean declared:

no guarantee that if we were to abandon this conference would get greater opportunities within the trade union movement ... on behalf of our delegation hope that the women's conference will continue to exist until the day when we have achieved real equality within the trade union movement.⁸¹

In 1972, Christina Page, then on the national executive, and leader of the union's delegation stated that the union 'was absolutely unanimous in support of the Women's Conference.' She continued that she: 'would not be here today if I had not had the opportunity years ago of coming to this conference'.⁸² In 1975, Page again supported retention. She observed that its abolition would not guarantee that more women would be delegates to Congress, and noted that: 'The TUC has no power whatever to force affiliated unions to increase their delegations of women.'⁸³ The union's position on the women's conference was changed by the 1975 USDAW annual conference, which had voted in

⁷⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1972, p. 54.

⁷⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1971, p. 53.

⁸⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1970, p. 80.

⁸¹ TUC Women's Annual Conference, 1971, p. 45.

⁸² TUC Women's Annual Conference, 1972, p. 75.

⁸³ TUC Women's Annual Conference, 1975, p. 126. From 1976 there were no longer verbatim reports from the women's conference. The reports thereafter only indicated who spoke in the debates, and whether for or against a motion/composite. This is a loss for researchers who can no longer gauge the atmosphere of the debate, nor, more significantly, read the original arguments and spot the telling phrases.

favour of abolition. In the absence of a union policy on women's conferences, the USDAW delegation to the TUC women's conference was free to come to its own view, which up until 1975 was unequivocally in favour. Thereafter the USDAW women could no longer articulate this position; they had to abide by union policy, which was in favour of abolition. The USDAW participants to the TUC women's conferences, in the second half of the 1970s did not participate in debates on women's structures.

The influence of feminism is a recurring theme in the literature on the development of women's structures in 1970s, but would appear to have had little influence on USDAW. This could be put forward as a partial explanation for the union's lack of movement on the issue in this period. A glimpse of how some women in USDAW regarded feminism can be discerned from the comment of Betty Wardle in 1974: 'Many women do not come forward in our union because they feel they will be associated with extreme elements in women's lib.'⁸⁴ Wardle was elected to the union's executive in 1979. An alternative view was provided by veteran activist and communist campaigner Frances Dean. In response to an American researcher interviewing her in the mid-1980s, she said of the women's movement that it was: 'middle-class, academic ... that's the main problem ... got to get real women concerned ... real women who want to do something about conditions facing them'.⁸⁵

The contribution of Audrey Wise at the 1971 USDAW conference was at odds with this pattern of disassociation. She said: 'You had better be careful; I am associated very strongly with the Women's Liberation movement. I am past the time when I look kindly and benignly on the usual sort of frivolity attached to women's questions.'⁸⁶ She had spoken at the first Women's Liberation Conference in Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970 and described herself there as a bridge between the women's and the trade union movements. Wise was a regular speaker at USDAW annual conferences throughout the 1960s on issues such as redistribution of wealth, public ownership, unilateral nuclear disarmament, and workers' control, taking positions well to the Left of the union's hierarchy. There was no specific focus on women, and no participation in the 1960s in the ongoing debates on equal pay. Rowbotham, who had invited her to the Ruskin conference,

⁸⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1974, p. 25.

⁸⁵ Tape 327, Working-Class Movement Library, Salford.

⁸⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1971, p. 78.

depicted her as an official in USDAW who: ‘had a lot of experience as a trade union organiser among women’.⁸⁷ This was misleading. Wise was a political activist with a union affiliation. She had no track record in USDAW on recruitment and no experience of USDAW negotiations. At the 1971 USDAW annual conference, she deplored the efforts of Christina Page, executive council member, as inadequate and deplorable. Page, as demonstrated earlier, was one of the union’s leading campaigners on equal pay, within USDAW and at the TUC and TUC Women’s Conferences.⁸⁸ Wise’s comments may have been an indication of her lack of awareness of the activities of USDAW women in this period. It may be that Wise attracted the attention of the Women’s Liberation Movement more for her left-wing views than her links with working-class women in trade unions. As a standard-bearer for feminism, her impact on USDAW women at this time was virtually non-existent. She no longer featured in the 1970s USDAW conferences after 1972. She was pursuing a political career and became Labour MP for Coventry in 1974.⁸⁹

Possibly a more appropriate way to consider feminism in USDAW in the 1970s is to look beyond the confines of the Women’s Movement in the 1960s/1970s to the definition of Meehan: ‘If feminism is defined as the quest for a sexually just society, many people share at least some of the goals even though they disavow the label.’⁹⁰ Women activists like Shears, MacDonald, Page, Hanes and Riddiough kept women’s issues on the agenda throughout the 1950s and into the 1970s. They were not acquiescent; they pushed for women’s equality as far as possible in the environment in which they operated. They could be encompassed by the description of Ledwith and Colgan of traditional trade union women who: ‘typically pursue an approach to equality within ... union structures and traditions’.⁹¹ USDAW women activists were equal rights campaigners aware of the barriers placed in the way of women’s involvement as expressed by Irene Shears in 1971 on the difficulties faced by married women:

It is not easy for them to play an active part when it means being away from home ... I wonder how many men here are prepared to do the household chores and

⁸⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s* (Penguin, London, 1989) p. 166. She described Wise as a link between labour and liberation.

⁸⁸ Boston and Lewenhak, leading researchers on trade union women in this period, acknowledge Page’s contribution to the equal pay cause. Wise does not appear in their publications.

⁸⁹ In the mid-1980s, Wise became involved in USDAW’s women’s conference. She was elected first women President of USDAW in 1991.

⁹⁰ E. Meehan, ‘British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s’ pp. 189-204, in Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, p. 189.

⁹¹ Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*, p. 125.

when necessary look after the children so that the wife can play her part in trade union work.⁹²

Discriminatory behaviour was identified by Joyce Riddiough: ‘Women are not competing on level terms with men. I am afraid there is still prejudice reigning in many men’s hearts.’⁹³ Hanes, involved from the 1930s, at her last conference as a delegate referred to progress being slow but real, and quoted Shelley: ‘The seeds ye sow another reaps.’⁹⁴

Another perspective on how women in USDAW were perceived in the 1970s is Richardson’s history of USDAW, published in 1979. He gave but brief acknowledgement to women’s issues in the 1970s. However, in a possible recognition of the growing attention being paid to women workers in general, he included a ten-page chapter on women in USDAW, which was inserted near the end of the book. This concentrated on the involvement of women in earlier days and gave a cursory glance towards equal pay. Useful information was provided on the representation of women at different levels in the union. No reference is made to the 1975 USDAW Charter for Working Women or debates on women’s structures. These were nowhere near the forefront of the union’s agenda. The key debates at conference were similar to the TUC: incomes policies from Tory and Labour governments and industrial relations legislation. The debates on wages and economic policy were lengthy, with a plethora of propositions coming from different political perspectives.⁹⁵ Women speakers were absent from these debates, with the notable exceptions of the aforementioned Audrey Wise and Dot Gibson of the Workers Revolutionary Party.⁹⁶

In the 1970s, USDAW increased the number of women in membership but made no inroads into improving their participation or representation. There were, as in previous decades, a few women with a national profile who challenged and campaigned for women members, notably on the issue of equal pay. The TUC Women’s Conference demonstrated that there were other women activists in USDAW prepared to speak up on women’s issues.

⁹² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1971, p. 78.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁹⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1970, p. 74.

⁹⁵ David McGibbon, retiring executive councillor, remarked in 1975: ‘I had been to a number of conferences, and there are usually people representing fourteen brands of socialism handing out leaflets to you. Everyone thinks the other thirteen are a shower of bloody twisters.’ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1975, p. 139.

⁹⁶ Dot Gibson is now the President of the National Pensioners Convention. Her predecessors were Jack Jones, TGWU, and Rodney Bickerstaffe, NUPE.

Second-wave feminism would appear to have had little impact on USDAW women activists.

The Rights for Working Women Charter in 1975 was an indication of USDAW paying some attention to women workers, and this may have been influenced by what was happening at the TUC and other unions and to the growing awareness of women's inequality in society. On women's structures in trade unions, USDAW supported the abolition of the TUC women's conference but voted to retain involvement in the Labour women's conference, with the general secretary successfully arguing that the union remain in the mainstream rather than be on the sidelines. Within USDAW, with the exception of the motion to appoint a National Women's Officer, which was not implemented, there was no movement on women's structures. There was no recognition of a problem and therefore no impetus to find a solution. Nonetheless, as has been demonstrated, in the 1960s and 1970s some USDAW women activists, however unsuccessfully, spoke up for equality for women in the union, and made the case for equal rights for women workers and women as trade unionists.

Chapter 4: In the Beginning ... The Advent of Women in USDAW Structures: 1980–85

In the early 1980s, the union was unequivocally male dominated. The overwhelming majority of officials at national and local level were men. The executive council members, and the shop stewards and conveners who represented members in the workplace, at the bargaining table, and at the decision-making annual conference, were male. Men were the face of the union, both internally and externally; men controlled all the levers of power. Yet, following a decade of inaction on measures to facilitate women's involvement in USDAW, the early years of the 1980s witnessed a flurry of activity. By 1985 the union had in place national and divisional women's committees, an annual women's conference, and a women's officer. What were the factors that led to this transformation in the union's structures and to the higher priority given to women's issues? This chapter will consider the reasons behind this transformation.

During the 1970s, USDAW made no changes to the union's structure and did not introduce any special measures to improve the representation of women or to increase the participation of women members in the organisation. In 1980, Hunt and Adams identified equality measures already taken by unions.¹ The increase in women's membership of trade unions in the 1970s, as highlighted in Chapter 3, Table 3.3, was a contributory factor to the introduction and development of special measures to improve the participation and representation of women members.² Women workers continued to be a potential growth area for union membership and, as more women trade unionists became more active and more vocal, their demands could not be entirely ignored. The list below illustrates the range and diversity of special measures for women undertaken by individual unions. The only category in which USDAW featured was that of publicity and information.

- *Special Committees*: to advise on policy matters and/or with special responsibility for organisation of women members. (NATFHE (National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education), NALGO, COHSE, NUJ (National Union of Journalists), AUEW(TASS – Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section), NUT, BIFU, ASTMS).

¹ Hunt and Adams, *Women, Work and Trade Union Organisation*, p. 17.

² Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, p. 209.

- *Giving officials and/or research officers special responsibility for women:* (TGWU, GMWU (General and Municipal Workers Union – previously GMB), AUEW (TASS), NUT, BIFU, COHSE).
- *Special Conferences:* (AUEW Engineering Section, GMWU, TGWU, COHSE).
- *Special Education Facilities:* special courses for women, special arrangements to enable them to attend, re-design of general union courses to include sections on equality (NUPE, AUEW(TASS), APEX, TGWU, GMWU, BIFU, COHSE).
- *Publicity and information:* pamphlets, recruitment literature, policy statements on equality. Special articles or concern for women's issues in union journals. (USDAW, GMWU, TGWU, AUEW(TASS), NUJ, COHSE, ACTT (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians), APEX).
- *Increasing women's representation:* Reserved seats for women on national committees. (COHSE, TWU (Transport Workers Union), TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs Association), AUEW(TASS), NUPE).
- *Training of full-time officers:* Special training conferences, materials for full-time officers on equality legislation and negotiating guidelines on maternity, equal pay, equal opportunities, etc. (GMWU, ASTMS, AUEW(TASS), EEPTU (Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union)).
- *Crèche facilities:* All parents, but women in particular, have difficulty in attending conferences, residential course, evening meetings. A number of unions now provide crèche facilities in an attempt to overcome this problem. (NATFHE, ASTMS, AUEW (TASS), COHSE).

The union was not being pushed in the direction of special measures through conference decisions, despite the presence of women such as Christina Page, Joyce Riddiough, Edna Hanes, Irene Shears and Annie MacDonald, who had kept women and women's issues on USDAW's agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. As Lawrence acknowledged, the feminising of the unions was not solely the result of the upsurge of activity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but was built on decades of struggle by women trade unionists.³ Page, against the grain of union policy, had argued for special measures for women in 1975. She said: 'for a period of time there must be positive discrimination in favour of women if we are to bring

³ Lawrence, *Gender and the Trade Unions*, p. 1.

about complete equality of opportunity'.⁴ These were generalised comments and no specific action was identified. Riddiough had argued for the continuance of the TUC women's conference, in defiance of USDAW's executive council, not an easy position for a full-time official to take. She was still standing up for women workers in the years immediately before her retirement in 1986. At the 1984 TUC conference, she attacked the idea that women worked for pin money. 'What double standards! Do you say that a man's unacceptably low pay suddenly becomes acceptable if he has a working wife? And what about all the women who are now solely responsible for themselves and their families?'⁵ However, there was no groundswell, no grassroots campaign, no feminist upsurge from within the union.

In a trawl of the agenda propositions in 1980 for issues of particular importance to women, the only one that stood out was the one on abortion. This was not a debate initiated by women in defence of a women's right to choose, but rather a proposal to allow USDAW delegates to TUC and Labour Party conferences to have a free vote, an individual and not a collective response. The women opposing the proposal spoke with passion. One described her experience of a backstreet abortion; another reminded conference that pro-choice was Labour Party policy, and that the USDAW delegation to the 1979 TUC had supported that position. The proposition was lost. USDAW delegates to the TUC and Labour Party would continue to vote as a bloc in support of a woman's right to choose. This debate illustrated, that, as in the 1970s, although largely hidden from view, there were some women in USDAW willing and able to speak out on issues that affected them.

There was little sign of movement at the first annual conference of the new decade. In a debate calling for a youth committee and conference, the union's opposition to separate structures was confirmed. General secretary Bill Whatley stated:

The union's policy has always been one of encouraging all members, young and old, white or black, men or women to become fully involved in the mainstream of the union's activities and structure at every level and not to split the union's membership into separate youth, women or any other section.⁶

He argued that to hive them off into separate structures would reduce rather than enhance influence.

⁴ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1975, p. 394.

⁵ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 581.

⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1980, p. 75.

The drive for union members has been cited as a contributory factor in the emergence of Women in USDAW structures. Bernadette Hillon, who became the union's women's officer in 1985, articulated this view. She commented that the setting up of the Women in USDAW structures was: 'not just out of the goodness of its heart: its leaders sensed that the future lay in recruiting low-paid and often part-time women workers'.⁷ This was endorsed in an Inland Revenue Staff Federation survey, which stated:

USDAW see their potential membership coming primarily from the female workforce. So promoting the involvement of women has not always been seen as an idealist, philosophical or fringe activity ... it is necessary to the growth and survival of the union.⁸

Following a period of growth in union membership in the 1970s, with the high point in 1979, the new decade began a downward spiral. The figures below highlight the decline.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Membership</u>
1979	470,019
1980	450,287
1981	437,864
1982	417,241
1983	403,446
1984	392,307
1985	385,455

Source: USDAW Annual Conference Reports, 1979–1985.

As union president Syd Tierney observed at the 1984 conference, 'our membership recedes where the recession bites'.⁹ The policies of Tory governments, including attacks on the closed shop, exacerbated the situation. In 1982, almost 60% of USDAW's membership was covered by closed shop agreements, and their elimination would, according to the general secretary, mean: 'a return to the rule of the jungle'.¹⁰ The election of a Tory government in 1979 created a hostile environment for trade unions, with the proliferation

⁷ Anna Coote and Polly Pattullo, *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1990) p. 155.

⁸ IRSF, *Best Practice and Realistic Expectations: The Role of Women in IRSF* (IRSF, London, 1986) p. 14.

⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 5.

¹⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1982, p. 111.

of anti-union legislation and relentlessly rising unemployment. Thatcher regarded the unions as the enemy within. USDAW's President, in his opening address to the 1985 conference, observed that the Tories were bringing in: 'laws designed to oppress us politically, economically and socially'.¹¹

Changes in the retail sector presented additional obstacles to recruitment. Extended trading hours were changing the composition of the workforce. Predominantly female, the balance was moving inexorably towards part-time rather than full-time working. Part-time workers in retail were more difficult to organise. With less entitlement to breaks, part-time workers were less likely to be found in store canteens where they could be approached by shop stewards. As Pat Phillips, a full-time official in Cardiff, commented, 'Shops have shifted to a skeleton staff of full-timers, boosted by part-time or casual workers in peak hours and peak periods.'¹² This theme is elaborated on by Marge Carey, a full-time official from Liverpool:

difficulties of recruitment are enormous because of the different hours that people work. We cannot get hold of women because they only work three or four hours a day, and they do not have teabreaks. They are very hard to get to. If the deregulation of shops goes ahead, it will be worse again and we will have a bigger pool of part-time labour.¹³

The harsh legislative climate, the growing recession and the falling membership forced USDAW to look more closely at potential growth areas previously ignored, specifically part-time women workers in retail. Cockburn commented that unions were slowly coming to the realisation that, if they were to survive into the next century, there needed to be a different, more active approach to women.¹⁴ She recognised that unions in the years of growth were slow to recruit part-timers and could be hostile to them. In USDAW, an example of this came from a contribution at the 1979 annual conference from Mike Lunn, a delegate from Manchester:

The use of part-time labour cannot be condoned for very much longer. Part-time work is holding this union back ... I do not like to see proposals on the agenda strengthening the rights of part-timers when we should be strengthening the rights of full-timers.¹⁵

¹¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 3.

¹² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1983, p. 41.

¹³ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 3.

¹⁴ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 7.

¹⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1979, p. 95.

Lunn was appointed a full-time official in the early 1980s.

The importance of recruitment and the link with the women's structures was later illustrated in the terms of reference of the national women's committee, which was required to: 'consider ways of attracting women into membership of USDAW'.¹⁶ Further, the remit of the officer for women's affairs was: 'to work as part of the union's recruiting effort to develop and extend current activity designed to attract women into membership of USDAW'.¹⁷ It was a persistent theme. Margaret Calvert, executive councillor, in presenting the Women in USDAW report in 1988, was unequivocal 'recruitment is our number one task'.¹⁸

The need to recruit more women workers to stem the decline in union membership encouraged the leadership to place more emphasis on the issues facing women members. At the 1980 annual conference, the general secretary, in introducing the executive council statement on wages and economic policy, in a brief passage acknowledged: 'that this union is responsible for a substantial number of women members. They too find their employment prospects under attack. Part-time workers are having their hours reduced ... jobs are threatened.'¹⁹ He further recognised that the withdrawal of services by local authorities such as nursery provision, school meals and home helps for elderly relatives, placed an even greater burden on women. Again at the 1981 TUC conference, general secretary Bill Whatley moved the composite on full employment for women, and emphasised a women's right to work. The front page of *DAWN*, the union's journal, proclaimed: 'Bill stands up for Women Workers'.²⁰ He continued this theme at the USDAW conference the following year, where he stated: 'The right to work is inalienable and indivisible, as valid for women as men.'²¹ Leaflets on issues of particular relevance to women were produced to present a more positive image to potential women members. The strapline became 'USDAW the Union that fights for Women's Rights'. A folder prepared for delegates to the 1983 annual conference placed emphasis on the issues faced by women at work, with information on equal pay, equal opportunities, sexual harassment and women with dependants. These aimed not only to provide valuable information for members and

¹⁶ Second Report of the Women in USDAW Working Party, 1984, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 159.

¹⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1980, p. 45.

²⁰ *DAWN*, October 1981, front page.

²¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1982, p. 142.

negotiators but to be a useful recruiting tool demonstrating the union's commitment to women workers.

Acknowledgement of the necessity to recruit more women, including part-timers, and to give a higher profile to issues relevant to women did not by itself inevitably lead to the introduction of women's structures. Other factors were at play. Bill Whatley became the general secretary in 1979, a member of the TUC General Council, and of the TUC women's committee, where he joined USDAW official Joyce Riddiough, an elected member of the committee. In this capacity, he attended the TUC women's conference, where executive councillor Christina Page had been leading the USDAW delegation for a number of years. It is not outwith the bounds of possibility that this union leader, with a co-operative background and no known track record as a campaigner for women in USDAW, was in some small measure influenced by his involvement in the TUC women's structures.

At the TUC, and within individual unions, women were speaking out, challenging and demanding changes in union policies and structures. Extending the representation of women within the TUC remained a key objective and it met with some success. In 1981, reserved seats for women on the General Council increased from two to five. In the same year, the number of women elected to the women's advisory committee went up from eight to ten. In 1982, the first issue of the *TUC Women Workers Bulletin* was produced. The TUC Women's Conference increased in size and influence. Unions such as NALGO and the NUT in the 1980s changed their policies from abstention to participation in the TUC women's conference. Women in the unions kept the issue of discrimination on the agenda and continued to demand that more be done. Ms P. Lemon from the NUT commented: 'be warned, we are organised and organising, ignore us at your peril'.²² Ms T. Linsley from TSSA demanded change within the movement so that women:

could come to Congress and not feel like gatecrashers at a stag party ... you cannot wish for a Paul Daniels magic wand and then conjure up your women at mealtimes and bedtimes and then make them disappear for the rest of the time so you can go off to your traditional masculine pursuits.²³

²² TUC Annual Conference Report, 1982, p. 610.

²³ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1983, p. 546

The under-representation of women in the unions that the activists highlighted is demonstrated in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Women's Representation in Selected Unions

Union	Membership			Executive Members		Full time Officials		TUC Delegates	
	Total	F	%F	Total	F	Total	F	Total	F
APEX (Professional, Executive, Clerical, Computer)	150,000	77,000	51%	15	1(8)	55	2(28)	15	4(8)
ASTMS (Technical, Managerial)	472,000	82,000	17%	24	2(4)	63	6(11)	30	3(5)
BIFU (Banking, Insurance, Finance)	132,000	64,000	49%	27	3(13)	41	6(20)	20	3(10)
GMWU (General & Municipal)	956,000	327,000	34%	40	0(14)	243	13(83)	73	3 (25)
NALGO (Local Govt Officers)	705,000	356,000	50%	70	14(35)	165	11(83)	72	15 (36)
NUPE (Public Employees)	700,000	470,000	67%	26	8(17)	150	7(101)	32	10 (22)
NUT (Teachers)	258,000	170,000	66%	44	4(29)	110	17(73)	36	7(24)
NUTGW (Tailor & Garment)	117,000	108,000	92%	15	5(14)	47	9(43)	17	7(16)
TGWU (Transport & General)	2,070,000	330,000	16%	39	0(6)	600	6(96)	85	6(14)
USDAW (Shop, Distributive Allied)	462,000	281,000	63%	16	3(10)	162	13 (102)	38	8(24)
TOTALS	6,022,000	2,265,000	38%	316	40 (150)	1,636	90 (640)	418	66 (174)

Source: Anna Coote and Peter Kellner, *Hear This Brother: Women Workers and Union Power* (New Statesman, London, 1984) p. 11.

Note: Figures in brackets show how many women there would be if they were represented according to their share of the membership.

The TUC 1979 Charter on Equality for Women Within Trade Unions was put forward as a way to tackle the persistent under-representation of women throughout the trade union movement and to increase the participation of women in the unions. The Charter emerged from the TUC Women's Conference, and was debated and approved by the TUC Congress and commended by the General Council to all union executives. The aim was to secure greater integration of women members. Individual unions were requested to examine their structures to identify barriers to participation and implement measures to overcome them. Recommendations for structural reforms to promote internal democracy included establishing women's committees, appointing women's officers, initiating women-only courses and making union meetings more accessible to women.²⁴ The charter was intended to complement the earlier TUC Charter on Trade Union Aims for Women Workers, which concentrated on employment issues. Cockburn recognised the significance of the equality charter, because it acknowledged the adverse impact on women workers of the actions of male trade unionists as well as managers.²⁵ Coote and Campbell claimed that it provided legitimacy for positive action measures.²⁶ The importance of the charter is consistently acknowledged in the historiography of women in trade unions. The commitment to monitor the impact of the charter required unions to report back to the TUC on action taken. Summaries of the responses published by the TUC, although not identifying individual unions, indicated a general trend towards positive measures for women.

Coote and Campbell noted that women's structures in trade unions were pioneered by white-collar unions in the 1970s and began to be taken up by blue-collar unions in the 1980s. They referred to this trend as 'a momentum that was not to be easily stopped'.²⁷ The TGWU, in the early 1980s, voted to establish a national women's committee and women's advisory committees in all the regions. NUPE, which already had reserved seats for women on the executive, in 1982 appointed a women's officer and established women's committees in all the divisions. The Equal Opportunities Commission also encouraged positive action. The 1983 EOC report proposed that unions affiliated to the TUC, who had not already done so, should consider appointing women's officers, and setting up women's committees.

²⁴ The proposals of the 1979 charter are detailed in Appendix 3. The charter drew on the work of the women's committees of the European TUC (ETUC) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

²⁵ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 9.

²⁶ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 170.

²⁷ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 174–5.

In this climate, it is not unreasonable to assume that USDAW – a major union – would be reluctant to stand on the sidelines and would be more inclined to be part of the mainstream in considering the possibility of internal measures to involve more women. As Taylor, writing in 1980, commented, USDAW: ‘... invariably backs the Labour leadership and the TUC line’.²⁸

A Women in USDAW Working Party was established in 1982, composed of a mixture of full-time officials and lay members. In introducing the Women in USDAW statement to conference, the general secretary put forward the rationale behind the working party:

if we don’t increase the activity of women members, we are fighting with one hand tied behind our backs ... without the support of women many of our general battles will be lost ... if policy bodies and indeed negotiating bodies are almost entirely dominated by men, can we really be sure that we are reflecting the interests of women members?²⁹

He explained why the union needed to change direction:

The executive council hoped and believed that, given time, legislation might provide the springboard for significant change, but regrettably this has not happened and there is no sign that by leaving it the position will improve ... In the past ... some men and women have argued that the opportunities are there for all who want them ... in the past I may have had some sympathy with them.³⁰

He reiterated his position the following year. ‘We are at last slowly and painfully moving away from the old-fashioned and unhelpful view that women are their own worst enemies.’³¹

How far the conversion was genuine and how far prompted by the needs of the union rather than its women members is difficult to determine. The general secretary Bill Whatley did make other public comments that allow for a measure of scepticism. He veered away from a pro-women position at the 1984 conference. Speaking in the wages and economic debate on the inadequacies of the Equal Pay Act, he commented: ‘...we have not got it properly introduced as far as our members are concerned. I am sorry to say that

²⁸ Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 396.

²⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1982, p. 143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1983, p. 106.

part of it is the women's fault. They may not like that.'³² A probable explanation for this inconsistency is that it was an unscripted response in reply to a debate, whereas the previous two quotes were part of the introduction to the Women in USDAW debates. These comments were most likely to have been written by the head of the research department Diana Jeuda, who was secretary to the Women in USDAW working party. A further example of an off-the-cuff remark which was not in line with the pro-women statements was the general secretary's comments at the 1985 annual conference in response to a female delegate critical of the delay in appointing a women's officer. He said:

The only thing that worries me is that because of the high level of activity among the women members of USDAW, we will soon have a demand to set up a working party for men who are beginning to feel rather put upon.³³

This is at variance with the self-congratulatory tone adopted in his introduction to the Women in USDAW debate in 1984. 'We are almost pioneers in the field; other unions have been involved in some activity on behalf of women, we have done it in depth.'³⁴ Again the contrast is between scripted comment and spontaneous remarks. Cockburn has observed that it is easier to shift the structures than the practices of unions.³⁵ As well as inconsistent comments from the general secretary on women in the union, there were sexist comments from male delegates at the rostrum. A factory convener, in a debate on the need for a statutory maximum temperature, spoke of how he 'told the women to take their dresses off. I am often called a male chauvinist so that does not worry me ... I like a bit of leg as much as anyone'.³⁶ A woman delegate in the Women in USDAW debate in 1984, speaking at the rostrum for the first time, acknowledged the support of her husband and wished there were more men like him. There was laughter and cries from the hall, 'wish there were more women like you'³⁷ – a reference to her appearance rather than an acknowledgement that men should encourage women's union activity. Some male delegates also displayed their lack of interest and possibly hostility to women by leaving the conference floor when the Women in USDAW debate began, prompting one of the women delegates to make a contribution to the debate decrying the male delegate behaviour. Ms E. Gordon said that men 'can walk out of conference, but they cannot walk

³² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 112.

³³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 12.

³⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 135.

³⁵ Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change*, p. 249.

³⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 12.

³⁷ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 130.

away from this issue; it is here and it is here to stay'.³⁸ Maureen Leahy, a full-time official and a member of the Women in USDAW Working Party, responded to one such exodus: 'I would remind you that we are talking about an issue which reflects the majority of our membership and not a minority.'³⁹

The union was not being pushed in the direction of women's structures by conference decisions. It was not responding to demands for women's committees and a women's conference for USDAW, because there were none. The initiative came from the union leadership. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including the need to recruit, the growing awareness within the trade union movement of women's inequality, the push from women activists at the TUC for positive action measures and the desire of USDAW to remain part of the mainstream of unions affiliated to the TUC.

The Women in USDAW structures were introduced through a series of executive statements to annual conferences from 1982 to 1985. These were a crucial part of the jigsaw, which culminated in a comprehensive women's structure. The statements were carefully crafted, non-threatening, step by step, drawing the union into acceptance of positive action. The first Women in USDAW report in 1982 concentrated on the irrefutable facts of women's inequality in the workplace, and only in the final section did it refer to inequality within the union. It noted that there were two women out of 76 divisional councillors, and 9 women in a total of 139 negotiating officers.⁴⁰ The final paragraph commented that the Working Party:

will consider what further steps are needed to increase the participation of women in the democratic process of the union and whether or not the TUC Charter on Equality for Women Within Trade Unions suggests whether further action might be needed.⁴¹

The reference to the TUC charter provided legitimacy for an examination of the union's structure, while helping to fulfil the union's requirement to report back to the TUC on progress. The ensuing reports consistently linked into the recommendations outlined in the charter. For example, USDAW commissioned a survey in 1983, in line with the charter action point which proposed that unions examine how their organisations work and

³⁸ Ibid., p. 133

³⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

⁴⁰ Women in USDAW Report, 1982, p. 9.

⁴¹ Women in USDAW Report, 1982, p. 10.

whether this prevented women from reaching the decision-making bodies. USDAW's survey was to establish the degree of participation by women in union activities and to identify barriers to their involvement. The project was carried out by the Sociology Department of Cardiff University, led by Teresa Rees, who had undertaken work for NALGO on equal opportunities. A questionnaire was circulated to all of the union's branch secretaries.⁴² The survey concluded that the existing structures at branch level constituted a serious obstacle to women's participation.⁴³ It was observed that some branch meetings were held infrequently, and those that did take place were badly attended. Most USDAW branches were not single sites, but geographically spread, covering a number of workplaces. Over 80% of branch meetings were held after work or in the evenings. As one branch secretary in the survey commented:

The administration of the union is geared towards male convenience ... evening meetings, often in licensed premises ... while men do not have the same amount of domestic duties as a woman. It is not enough to say that it is a democratic organisation and that women have the same chance as men to be involved.⁴⁴

Richardson, a historian of USDAW, described the branch as the bedrock of the union.⁴⁵ In USDAW, the branch is the stepping stone to greater union involvement: delegates to annual and divisional councils are determined there, propositions to the union's national conference, as well as delegates, are decided there, as are elections to the divisional council. This is also where nominations to the TUC and Labour Party conferences are put forward and voted on. The then rule stipulating a 50% attendance to be eligible to stand for these positions eliminated many women from participation in activities beyond the workplace. Rees claimed that the organisation of branch meetings was the first stage in 'filtering out' women's involvement in the union.⁴⁶ The USDAW survey into the operation of branches, in large measure, substantiated this viewpoint.

The findings of the Rees survey confirm those of the much smaller sample carried out by Stageman in 1978, which was partly funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission. The study was based on the experiences of women trade unionists in six union branches across four unions in Hull: NUPE, NALGO, TGWU and USDAW. Of the two USDAW branches

⁴² Rees in the survey equated branch secretaries with shop stewards. This was not necessarily the case. Branch secretaries could also be retired members or full-time union officials.

⁴³ A summary of the findings of the branch survey is at Appendix 4.

⁴⁴ Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*, p. 95.

⁴⁵ Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 329.

⁴⁶ Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*, p. 101.

included, one was in the retail sector and the other, Northern Dairies, an industrial branch. Her investigations highlighted that women's attendance at branch meetings was hampered by home and family responsibilities and the times of and venues for meetings. For those women who were able to attend, a lack of confidence and knowledge of how the union worked, along with sexist behaviour, provided further hurdles.⁴⁷ She recorded sexist behaviour at the Northern Dairies branch of USDAW, where attempts by women shop stewards to raise an issue concerning temporary lay-offs for women members were initially ignored, the item was pushed to the end of the agenda, and when it was reached for discussion, the overwhelming majority of the male membership of the branch walked out.⁴⁸ The findings of the Rees survey commissioned by USDAW, taken along with Stageman's research, counter the argument that women can make it on their own without structural change to the union.

This need for change is taken up in the 1984 Women in USDAW report, which proposed the introduction of women's structures:

For many years, and with the best of motives, the union has expressed grave doubts about pursuing policies that in any way distinguished between women and men trade unionists. However, such an approach has provided very little in the way of significantly improving the number of women active in every level of the union. The Working Party therefore felt it desirable to consider what other courses of action might be open to the union.⁴⁹

In line with the 1979 Equality Charter, national and divisional women's committees were established. The executive council also proposed an annual women's conference and an officer for women's affairs. The union journal was revamped, with care to be taken to avoid sexist language. Childcare facilities were provided at annual conferences, and provision at other conferences was to be investigated. Women-only courses were initiated, following the penultimate charter recommendation. As the union acknowledged, the charter was 'a particularly helpful framework for discussion'.⁵⁰ All the ten action points were addressed.

⁴⁷ Stageman, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 122. Ledwith and Colgan identified a similar range of factors contributing to women's under-representation in *Women in Organisations*, p. 154. The specific problems encountered by women in attending and participating in union branches was widely recognised in the literature on women in trade unions.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ Women in USDAW Report, 1984, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Women in USDAW Report, 1983, p. 3.

Only one recommendation was rejected, that of reserved seats for women. This measure had been consistently opposed by the union. The position can be traced back to the early days of the shop assistants' union. As Drake noted: 'shop assistants, although keen feminists, have always rejected any proposals of their union for reserving places to women on committees or management'.⁵¹ Marge Carey, union official, while welcoming the Women in USDAW structures, commented: 'glad that the report does not give quota seats ... would not like men to say I was there because I was a woman'.⁵² This stance was endorsed by Syd Tierney in his presidential address a few years later. 'Women in USDAW have never demanded privileged treatment or special places on established bodies.'⁵³ The union was unwilling to consider reserved seats for USDAW but diverged from this position when it came to the women's seats on the TUC General Council. USDAW, albeit unsuccessfully, had put women activists forward for this position, with the nominee in the early 1980s being Christina Page. A nomination from the union for a TUC women's seat required no change to the union's internal structures, and if elected could have provided a supportive voice for the general secretary, who was a member of the General Council.

The only other recommendation which, although not rejected, was not put into practice, was that time off be negotiated without loss of pay to attend branch meetings. The implementation of this was problematic for the union. As Rees had pointed out in the survey of USDAW branch secretaries, the majority of branches were not single site and meetings were held after work or in the evenings. In retail, where the majority of female members worked, time off for branch meetings was a non-starter. Yvonne Dymond, a delegate to USDAW's 1983 conference, injected a note of realism into the debate: 'it is not possible to hold meetings during the day unless we close all the shops'.⁵⁴ Furthermore, even if possible, branch meetings in work-time would have disadvantaged part-time workers who did not work at that specific time.⁵⁵ In the 1984 Women in USDAW report, the practical difficulties for women in attending branch meetings were acknowledged, but action consisted of: 'a circular has been sent to branches reminding them of the need to make branch meetings as accessible as possible'.⁵⁶ Although identified as a major stumbling block to women's participation, the branch structure remained untouched, intact.

⁵¹ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 214.

⁵² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 31.

⁵³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 4.

⁵⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1983, p. 105.

⁵⁵ The Equality Charter made no mention of part-time workers.

⁵⁶ Women in USDAW Report, 1984, p. 6.

A further unacknowledged problem with the branch structure, which affected both women and men, was the inability of branch officials in widely scattered branches to contact members to inform them of branch meetings. A union report in 1965 commented: ‘Conveying information from the branch to the rank-and-file member is the fundamental problem that today challenges the union.’⁵⁷ A planned membership survey by Rees, to take place in 1984 after the branch secretary survey, floundered because there was no efficient way of distributing questionnaires to members. Neither the union’s head office nor branch secretaries had up-to-date records of the addresses and workplaces of members. Tory legislation in the 1980s requiring postal elections for senior union officials and for strike ballots forced unions to computerise their membership records.

A new dimension to the union’s annual conference to emerge during the process towards the implementation of the Women in USDAW structures was the introduction of an agenda item entitled Women in USDAW. This provided an opportunity for delegates to respond to the executive council statements. Here was an early indication of how the Women in USDAW structures could provide additional opportunities for women to participate. This can be demonstrated by a comparison between women’s involvement in the 1980 and 1984 annual conferences. USDAW women activists had not argued for women’s structures. It is unlikely to have been a priority for working-class women. Yet when Women in USDAW became an agenda item at annual conferences there was a noticeable increase in women speakers. A space had been created that allowed more women to have a voice. At the 1980 conference, there was no Women in USDAW debate, no propositions on part-time workers or other issues specifically related to women, with the exception of abortion. Out of a total of 160 speakers, over a four-day conference, there were 22 women. In 1984, there were 36 women speakers out of 151, with 19 of the women speaking in the Women in USDAW debate. With the exception of veteran activist Christina Page, the women speakers were not arguing about the intricacies of the newly proposed women’s structures.⁵⁸ It was a more generalised support for a greater say for women. A noticeable feature of this debate, apart from the number of women speakers, was the range of participants – from full-time officials, to lay members of the Women in USDAW Working Party, to women speaking for the first time. Some made short contributions, sometimes only a few sentences. Speaking at a USDAW conference could be a daunting process, with almost a thousand

⁵⁷ Richardson, *The History of USDAW*, p. 263.

⁵⁸ Page argued for elections to the divisional women’s committees and reserved seats on the executive – USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 132. This will be discussed further in the next sections.

delegates, and hundreds more visitors. A pattern was set for future conferences. A number of the women who took part in the 1984 debate went on to take up key roles in the union. Two of the women became divisional officers, the first women to be appointed at that level; two activists became full-time officials and two others were elected to the union's national executive. Where issues concerning women were on the agenda, more women came forward. President Syd Tierney made reference to the increase in female participation: 'What we have witnessed this morning is a spectacle of what women can do in debate when they decide to come to the rostrum.'⁵⁹ The Women in USDAW debates in the 1980s became a reference point for those who sought to highlight the pool of largely unrealised talent and potential among women members.

The Women in USDAW structures were not proclaimed with any fanfare, not hailed as a breakthrough for women, but were presented as: 'a useful extension to union democracy that in no way undermines the union's formal structures'.⁶⁰ The new measures would 'supplement and not replace the union's normal activities. All the proposals should be viewed against this background'.⁶¹ The general secretary, in advocating support for the proposals, described them as 'new approaches to add to traditional ways'.⁶² He argued that the new structures were not just about women members but about the survival and development of the union.

USDAW's need to recruit more women members, full-time and part-time workers, to survive and grow was indisputable at the beginning of the 1980s. The harsh economic and hostile political environment pushed the union into consideration of new ways of bringing more women into the organisation. The TUC's ongoing campaigns for greater equality for women in the workplace and in the unions, in particular the 1979 Equality Charter, created a climate in which positive action became more acceptable. From this combination emerged the Women in USDAW structures. Particular reference in this development should be made to the Women in USDAW Reports 1982–1985, which nudged the union into acceptance of women's structures. These changes were consistently portrayed as mainstream, non-threatening, adhering to TUC policies, and above all in USDAW's long-term interests. It is not unreasonable to speculate that this achievement can in some

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

measure be attributed to Diana Jeuda, research officer, based at the union's head office in Manchester. She acted as secretary to the Women in USDAW Working Party, produced the reports and wrote the speeches for the general secretary. She was well versed in the wider labour movement and at this time was vice-president of the women's committee of the International Federation of Free Trade Unions.⁶³ Whatley recognised the role she had played: 'I would like to pay particular tribute to Mrs Diana Jeuda of the research department who has played a big part in the preparation of most of the documentation that we have within the committee.'⁶⁴

USDAW entered the second half of the 1980s with a fully fledged women's structure. The general secretary declared at the 1985 conference: 'What we have done is set up a structure that is permanent.'⁶⁵ Yet introducing women's structures does not itself lead to a transformation of women's position, does not make inevitable strides forward for women or changes in long-established attitudes. Compliance with the TUC Equality Charter did not guarantee success. As Bill Keys, in presenting the charter to Congress on behalf of the General Council, said: 'Charters are no Aladdin's lamp which we can just rub and all the problems go away. They are working plans for each and every union.'⁶⁶ The overwhelming consensus in the literature is that, despite reservations, women's structures within trade unions were not only useful but necessary to achieve greater equality for women.

Structural changes to increase women's participation were recommended in the 1979 charter, but how and what was to be put in place was left to individual unions to determine. In USDAW, national and divisional women's committees and a women's conference were established, and a women's officer appointed in 1985. An analysis of the specific structures introduced by USDAW, and the rationale behind the choices made, may help to ascertain how far the structures selected had the potential to make progress towards equality for women in USDAW.⁶⁷

⁶³ Jeuda had been the Head of the Research Department since 1968, when she was a young graduate with no previous involvement in the trade union movement. Until the appointment of Kate O'Neil as legal officer in the early 1980s, Jeuda was the only woman in a senior position at head office. She was politically active and was Labour's candidate in the 1971 Macclesfield by-election, where there was a narrow win for the Tory candidate in what had been a safe Tory seat. She was elected to the Labour Party national executive as the USDAW nominee in the late 1980s, the first woman in the trade union section.

⁶⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 169.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁶⁶ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1979, p. 455.

⁶⁷ The terms of reference for the Women in USDAW structures are at Appendix 5.

The national women's committee was not set apart from the union's structure, and was not women only. This mirrored the mixed male/female composition of the TUC women's committee. The key terms of reference were to keep under review issues of particular importance to women, to consider ways of attracting women into membership and to increase the participation of women in the affairs of the union. The general secretary and the President sat on the committee, with two members of the executive council. Organising staff were represented by a local and a national official, and backup was provided by the research and education officers. In addition there was the women's officer and an innovation was the inclusion of the chairs of the divisional women's committees. This hybrid ensured that the women's agenda was discussed by those at the most senior level. This fitted in with one of the strategies for success identified by Cockburn – that the women's committee should be at a senior level, involving the male leadership to ensure its status and authority.⁶⁸ The USDAW structure gave status and authority to the national women's committee but it had the potential to restrict activities, circumscribing what was sanctioned, inhibiting the voices of the women members. The gap between the senior officials and the women from the workplaces was enormous, and there was always the possibility that their voices would not be raised, heard or listened to.⁶⁹

The existence of the national women's committee gave a higher profile to women members and their issues. The annual conference agenda was broadened to discuss and debate the Women in USDAW report and to highlight the campaigns being undertaken at national and divisional levels. This in turn encouraged more women to go to the rostrum to add their experiences and put forward their ideas. The practice also developed whereby the chair of the national women's committee, who was also a member of the national executive, presented the report to the conference. These women were not paid officials but working women, such as Margaret Calvert, convener at a mail order depot in Preston, who shared the experiences of many USDAW women:

I can tell you and I don't mind admitting it there has been many a time when I have hidden behind the door because I did not know who was knocking and I have been behind with my bills.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 232.

⁶⁹ Aldred, *Women At Work*, p. 157.

⁷⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 143.

The pattern up until then had been for the general secretary or his deputy to present executive council reports to conference. An exception, referred to earlier, was when Edna Hanes, executive councillor, gave the report on equal pay in 1961. This was a goodwill gesture as she was about to retire, and had been at times the only woman on the executive.

The Women in USDAW national committee, which had its first meeting in March 1985, was located at the most senior level of the union hierarchy, putting women and issues relevant to them high on the union's agenda. A women's officer was appointed to coordinate and develop the activities of the women's committees. Divisional integration was accomplished through the involvement of the chairs of the divisional women's committees. This formula provided the potential for the improvement of the position of women in USDAW, but the role that the union leadership would play would be a significant factor in what could be achieved.

The divisional women's committees consisted initially of six members – subsequently increased to eight – selected by the divisional council.⁷¹ Who was to be appointed was guided by a letter to divisional officers from the general secretary. Branches were invited to nominate a suitable person, man or woman. Why men were to be eligible was not explained. It may have been the personal preference of the general secretary or fear about a backlash if women-only spaces were created. Two men were part of the Midlands committee at the first women's conference in March 1985. They disappeared without trace the following year. Divisional women's committees became and remained women only.

It was appointment and not election of divisional committee members that was to generate discussion at the annual conference. The general secretary in his letter had urged that the widest possible interests be represented – co-op, multiple trades, manufacturing. This was unexceptional, but the next guideline was different. He wrote: 'where possible people selected should be those who do not already hold office within the union ... who are not necessarily active within the union, except possibly at branch level'.⁷² The issue of elections was raised at the 1985 and 1986 annual conferences. Christina Page, former executive councillor, advocated elections, noting that with the current system: 'Our

⁷¹ The union was divided into eight geographical areas called divisions. Divisional councils were made up of ten lay members, mostly men, elected by branches to oversee the work of the Division. They were mainly activists who had experience and involvement beyond their own workplace.

⁷² Letter from general secretary to divisional Officers, 18 October, 1984.

Divisional Councils could be accused of favouritism.⁷³ More voices were raised against selection the following year. Pauline Foulkes, a member of the north-west women's committee was: 'disappointed that the document makes no mention of election ... would be seen as the ultimate recognition of the women's committees'.⁷⁴ The issue of election versus selection for divisional women's committees was discussed at the women's conference in 1986. This was not a decision-making conference. However the arguments for and against, as identified by the members of the divisional committees, were clearly laid out in the report:

On the one hand elections would mean:

- Greater accountability
- Wider awareness of the existence of the committees
- Elimination of the argument that women's committees are not truly representative

On the other hand, selection means:

- Unknown and currently inactive women have the opportunity to be selected, to the committees
- The committees can be selected to take account of the spread of membership
- The system does not involve factional voting behaviour

There was no consensus and it was apparent that this issue would be subject to continuing discussion and debate.⁷⁵

The union hierarchy obfuscated on the elections for divisional women's committees. In 1985, in reply to Page, the President said: 'I am sure that this will be a matter that is taken on board'.⁷⁶ The general secretary indicated that the union: 'will make a decision when rule review next year'⁷⁷ but this did not happen. The new general secretary Garfield Davies commented in 1986: 'perhaps going to look at it ... don't want to get bogged down in

⁷³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 12.

⁷⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 105. Page was defeated in the 1983 executive council elections and as a delegate was able to speak more freely. As an executive councillor she would not have participated in conference debates.

⁷⁵ Women in USDAW Conference Report, 1986, p. 12.

⁷⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.168.

unnecessary constitutional debates'.⁷⁸ The Women in USDAW report presented to the 1987 conference noted that the executive council was: 'to look at the different options, consider practicalities ... the process to start in the autumn'.⁷⁹ The following year, it was reported that the review was to continue. Thereafter the issue vanished from the conference agenda. Divisional councils, predominantly male, retained control of the composition of the divisional women's committees. Furthermore the divisional officers, all men, had the power to select from among the organising staff who would be the co-ordinator of the women's committee. The woman official was allocated to the role, regardless of her views for or against Women in USDAW structures.⁸⁰

At the same time, and not necessarily as an intended outcome, this process would give opportunities to less active women to demonstrate their potential, to be at the forefront of campaigns, to deploy their organisational skills, to move into the mainstream, to become key conference speakers, to influence union policies. This was particularly the case for those women who became divisional chairs. They became members of the national women's committee, reporting on divisional activities, and helping to formulate the national work programme.⁸¹ An election process may have bypassed some of these women who, even if they were shop stewards, were unlikely to have branch involvement or a divisional profile. Nonetheless, power was retained in the hands of the men at divisional level. This could, though not inevitably, be a brake on the activities of the divisional women's committees.

As well as divisional women's committees, the other addition to the union's structure was the appointment of a women's officer.⁸² Here the union leadership sought to find a role and remit that did not disturb existing structures. The general secretary acknowledged this when explaining the delay in appointing the women's officer. 'We have some difficulty in deciding whether or not the person should be a department head ... or be a national officer.'⁸³

⁷⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 12.

⁷⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 16.

⁸⁰ It became the practice to allocate women as co-ordinators though this was never a recommendation from Central Office. The Scottish women's committee had male co-ordinators when there was no woman official.

⁸¹ This aspect will be developed in the next chapter, Women in Action in USDAW.

⁸² This was a new appointment in USDAW, but in AUCE the co-op workers union, in 1915, Ellen Wilkinson was appointed women's officer and she established a women's department.

⁸³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 169.

National officers were the senior negotiating officials dealing with the major national companies. There were only six in the union, all male. They were promoted from the organising staff in the divisions, and the post was open only to internal candidates.⁸⁴ The top two positions of deputy and general secretary had always come from the ranks of national officers. The appointment of a woman national officer had the potential to disrupt the existing structures. This had been identified in the debate in 1973 on such a post. Opposing the proposal, Mary Alcorn, a woman official, observed: ‘The national officer will be appointed from the female organising staff; there are approximately one hundred organisers, three of whom are female. A female has a one in three chance of getting promotion ... a male one in a 100.’⁸⁵ This, in her view, was discrimination against men. The alternative identified, and eventually selected, was a head of department, similar to the research and legal officers. This was an advisory, servicing role, providing information and back up for officials and representatives. Such appointments were internally and externally advertised.⁸⁶ Heads of departments were on the same grade, the same pay and conditions, as national officers, but they would not have been considered to have the same status or authority as national frontline negotiators.

Where the women’s officer’s role was different from the other heads of departments was in the co-ordination of committees at national and divisional levels. This would involve much more sustained contact with representatives in the divisions, and had the potential for developing women’s networks that had not existed before. Beale highlighted the significance of building such networks in countering the male dominance within unions.⁸⁷ Guidance, information, support and encouragement to women members and activists could be given, but the authority to determine who would be on the women’s committees, or who would be co-ordinators was not in the remit of the women’s officer. The success of the women’s officer would rest on the level of co-operation between her and the national and

⁸⁴ USDAW’s full-time officials were appointed from the membership. It was extremely rare for jobs to be opened up to outsiders. One such exception was Garfield Davies, who became general secretary in 1985. He had been an electrician at Port Talbot steelworks before his appointment to the organising staff in 1969.

⁸⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1973, p. 30.

⁸⁶ The job of USDAW’s women’s officer was advertised in *The Guardian* on 12 June 1985.

⁸⁷ Beale, *Getting It Together*, p. 101.

divisional officers – a delicate balance to maintain.⁸⁸ Two USDAW women officials applied for the post, but it was given to an external candidate Bernadette Hillon, who had worked in the GMB research department.

The final part of the women's structures was the Women's Conference. The title is in some ways an inaccurate description, a misnomer. 'Women's conference' conjures up a sizeable gathering of women from across the country, of debates and decisions. The USDAW women's conference was none of these things. It was a weekend meeting of the national and divisional women's committees, in all about 90 participants. There were no propositions, debates or votes. The Women in USDAW report noted that: '... in a departure from normal USDAW conference style, the meeting broke into discussion groups'.⁸⁹ It was a workshop format built around key themes. The report-back sessions provided opportunities for women members, in a supportive environment, to practise and develop the skills of speaking in public. The majority of the participants in the early years would never have attended any union conferences. The men on the national committee who attended generally chose not to be involved in the workshops. The general secretary and the President would address conference on the main challenges facing the union and how the activities of the women's committees were integral to the union's survival and growth. Ledwith and Colgan contended that: '... the influence of women's conferences are often constrained by their remit to produce a report to the supreme decision making bodies, rather than make direct recommendations or resolutions'.⁹⁰ USDAW's women's conference fitted this description. In this respect, it differed from the TUC and STUC women's conferences, which followed the traditional format of propositions and debates. Although advisory, these conferences became a focal point for the demands of women trade unionists for greater representation on the General Council and for more attention to be paid to women's issues. Motions passed by the delegates were considered by the General Council. This route was not available to USDAW women at the union's national women's conference.

⁸⁸ One of the terms of reference for the role was: 'to work with the National and Divisional officials to ensure that issues of particular importance to women members were identified, appropriate information gathered and policies developed'. Women in USDAW Report, 1985, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Women in USDAW Report, 1985, p. 2. Other national USDAW conferences, based around sectors such as retail, distribution and chemicals, did have debates. The successful motions were sent to the executive council for consideration, where they could be accepted, rejected or ignored.

⁹⁰ Ledwith and Colgan, *Women in Organisations*, p. 160.

The Women in USDAW structures had the potential to facilitate significant steps forward towards equality for women. Women's committees at national and divisional levels raised the profile of women throughout the union and put issues relevant to female members on the national agenda. As well as contributing to the union's recruitment campaigning and thus increasing the presence of women, activists would now have greater opportunities to be involved, and possibly to shape the union's campaigns. The national women's conference would bring women together from all parts of the country who could identify the key issues confronting women members and allow for women's networks to build across the union. Potential limitations included the power of the male hierarchy to determine the composition of the national and divisional committees, the lack of a direct locus in collective bargaining, highlighted by the fact that the women's officer was not a negotiating officer, and the inability of the women's conference to have a direct influence on the union's decision-making process, which was retained within the mainstream annual conference. As Breitenbach points out, structural changes by themselves will not radically alter women's position.⁹¹

What the women's committees would achieve, how they would operate, lay in the future. There was strong advice from Frances Dean, a veteran campaigner for women, on the committees: 'Make sure they are not relegated to fringe issues, not discussing major issues on policy which affect recruitment and well-being of women in this union'.⁹² From Marge Carey, union official, there was the hope that: 'These committees are going to be campaigning committees.'⁹³

⁹¹ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 75.

⁹² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 162.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

Chapter 5: Women in USDAW – in Action

By the end of 1985, the Women in USDAW structures were firmly in place. A national women's committee and divisional women's committees had been established, with the divisional chair becoming part of the national committee. An annual conference of the national and divisional committees was in place. Full-time officials had been allocated to coordinate the divisional committees, and the structure was completed with the appointment of a women's officer at national level. What would these structures, which had emerged without sustained campaigning by women activists for separate structures or outright hostility from the male hierarchy, achieve for women in the union, and for issues of most relevance to them? Kirton and Healy argued that women's structures are tolerated so long as they do not challenge male dominance.¹ Parker in her research into women's groups in USDAW concurred with this view. She referred to the comments of a few senior women in USDAW who contended that the acceptance of women's structures: 'was subject to the perceived complementarity of their aims with those of the union'.²

Recruitment was identified in the previous chapter as one of the factors contributing to the advent of USDAW's women's structures. It was embedded in the terms of reference of the women's structures. The need to increase women's membership was a persistent theme throughout the period 1985–1997. In 1986, Garfield Davies, general secretary, observed that: 'part-time women in retailing are going to form a major pool of recruitment potential in years to come'.³ A decade later, his successor Bill Connor, declared: 'USDAW's overriding priority is to recruit more women into the union.'⁴ Women in USDAW were equally adamant about the importance of bringing in female workers. Page, a campaigner for women from the 1960s, asserted at the 1986 conference: 'I see recruitment as one of the most essential things necessary for our women to be doing.'⁵ The theme continued year on year through to the 1997 Women in USDAW report – 'recruitment and organisation must be at the heart of all that the women's committees do'.⁶ Recruitment figures

¹ Kirton and Healy, *Women, Power and Trade Unions*, p. 359.

² Parker, *Women's Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 201. Parker conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with USDAW women officials and members, and a small group of men, throughout the UK between early 1998 and 2000. The research also looked at MSF where 65 interviews were undertaken.

³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 103.

⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1996, p. 60.

⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 105.

⁶ Women in USDAW Report, 1997, p. 9.

demonstrate why there was such a sense of urgency. The highest membership recorded by the union had been in 1979 – a figure of 470,017. This had fallen to 384,455 in 1985 and the decline continued, as illustrated by Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Membership of USDAW

1985	384,455
1986	381,894
1987	387,207
1989	375,207
1990	361,789
1991	342,482
1992	316,491
1993	299,495
1994	282,255
1995	283,255
1996	290,107
1997	293,470

Source: USDAW Annual Conference Reports, 1985–1997

The ongoing fall in membership can be attributed to a number of factors, including the continuing decline in the co-operative movement and the extended trading hours in the retail sector with an increase in atypical working, which posed problems for recruitment.

Government legislation exacerbated the situation, with the closed shop being abolished in 1992. The 1996 TUC highlighted the significant decrease across the trade union movement. In 1979, there were over 12 million union members affiliated to the TUC. By 1996, this had plummeted to under 3 million.⁷ Unlike other unions, especially those in the traditional heavy industries and the manufacturing sectors, USDAW had potential to grow. The service sector was expanding, with the increase mainly due to the growth of women working part-time. Hitherto, full-time workers had been the focus for recruitment, and it would require a turnaround in attitudes and approach for the union to reach out more

⁷ TUC Conference Report, 1996, p. 10.

effectively to women in retail. Audrey Wise, in her Presidential address in 1995, noted that the difficulties were increasing. ‘In retailing there is increased casualisation, great numbers working very short hours, with very short wages to match, temporary contracts, zero hours, complex shift patterns.’⁸

Reaching out to recruit and retain women members by highlighting issues of interest to them was the strategy adopted by the women’s committees, and was given the full endorsement of the union. The Women in USDAW report in 1986 outlined the task ahead: ‘The women’s committees will project our image that USDAW works for women, which will attract many non-unionised women workers in sectors in which we organise.’⁹ The activities of the women’s committees in the decade to follow complemented the work of the union elsewhere: ‘The women’s committees act as a direct line reaching members and potential members that USDAW’s traditional structures and ways of working may not be able to reach very easily.’¹⁰

1985–1997

Campaigning was identified from the beginning as a key activity. Marge Carey, union official, member of the national women’s committee and coordinator of the north-west divisional women’s committee, declared at the 1985 conference: ‘These committees are going to be campaigning committees, they are not going to sit and discuss what the problems are.’¹¹ USDAW’s women’s committees created an extensive catalogue of campaigning activities welcomed by the union hierarchy. Garfield Davies, general secretary, noted that: ‘Women’s committees have added a new layer of activity within the union enriching our involvement a thousand fold.’¹² Campaigning issues identified in the 1985 Women in USDAW report were already on the union’s agenda – attacks on wages councils, low pay, equal pay, part-time working – all issues that disproportionately hit women.

⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1995, p. 4. Bernadette Hillon, the women’s officer, described supermarkets with 350 workers and 183 different shifts, which created significant barriers to recruitment. Ursula Huws et al., *What Price Flexibility. The Casualisation of Women’s Employment* (Low Pay Unit, London, 1989) p. 34.

⁹ Women in USDAW Report, 1986, p. 10.

¹⁰ Women in USDAW Report, 1985, p. 16.

¹¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 163.

¹² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 59.

With the part-time workers campaign, women brought their own experiences and perspectives. Sheena Friery, a part-time worker from Glasgow, successfully argued for the launch of a campaign to recruit and organise part-time workers at the 1986 annual conference: ‘Part-time workers are a cheap, flexible workforce who are called in and thrown out whenever the employer wants ... they treat us like a tap to be turned on when the pressure grows.’¹³

The 1986 Women in USDAW report highlighted the extent of part-time working in retail, with 62% of employees in that sector working part-time.¹⁴ There were practical initiatives which enhanced the campaigning. The north-west women’s committee produced the union’s first-ever leaflet outlining part-time workers rights. It was subsequently taken up nationally. This proved an invaluable guide for part-time workers and their representatives. In Scotland, the women’s committee piloted a survey to elicit the views of part-time workers, members and non-members, towards the union. This was then carried out nationally. What was unique about this project was that the women’s committees took control of the process, distributing the questionnaires and involving women activists in interviewing in their workplaces. The process of listening to part-timers was as important as the results. The survey confirmed that the key issue was lack of communication from the union: the most common reason for not joining the union was that no one had asked. The main workplace problems were unilateral alteration of hours and lack of legal rights. The recruitment of part-time workers and an improvement in their legal status were priorities for the women’s committees from their inception.

Garfield Davies, general secretary, praised the women’s committees for being at the forefront in the fight against the attack on wages councils.¹⁵ When the Low Pay Working Party was set up, members of the women’s committee were included. The women contributed to campaigning activities around the country, with women activists often speaking from personal experience alongside senior male officials. For example, in September 1986, the Fight Poverty Pay Rally organised by the union in Glasgow had Alison Foreman, a Dundee shop worker and member of the Scottish women’s committee,

¹³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 111.

¹⁴ Women in USDAW Report, 1986, p. 4.

¹⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 104. The wages councils were abolished by a Tory government in 1993.

alongside the general secretary on the platform. Women in USDAW were working with other parts of the union; they were augmenting the union's campaigning agenda. This was the case when the union was required by Tory legislation to ballot their members on the retention of a political fund. Women, not necessarily activists, were drawn into the campaign to talk about why a political voice was necessary if the union was to campaign on issues important to women. In November 1985, union members voted overwhelmingly to retain a political fund. When divisional political committees were then set up, a member of the divisional women's committee was included.

Equal Pay had been on the union's agenda from the early days of the two unions which merged to form USDAW in 1947. It was, as demonstrated in earlier chapters, raised consistently by women activists, but pursued by male officials with less commitment. The first successful equal value case was brought by the GMB. Julia Hayward, a cook at Cammell Laird shipyards, compared herself with tradesmen. This proved an incentive to other women workers. In USDAW, it was Geraldine O'Sullivan, a Sainsbury checkout operator, who made the major breakthrough. The comparison was with a male warehouse operative. O'Sullivan, a member of the Southern divisional women's committee, was encouraged in her challenge by her local male official and the women's officer. The results were far reaching: '250,000 women in the retail sector were awarded increases of up to 10% through regrading negotiated by the shop worker's union, USDAW. Tesco, Sainsbury's and Morrison's were covered by the agreement.'¹⁶ The equal value campaign in Sainsbury brought together an issue relevant to women members and an increase in membership within the company. Upchurch and Donnelly report that, as a result of the 1987 Geraldine O'Sullivan case, as well as increased pay for checkout operators, USDAW received recognition in 23 new Sainsbury stores, and, in a five-month campaign in the company, recruited 1098 new members.¹⁷

Parker commented on the way in which women's groups transformed issues previously tagged as women's issues into issues for all members.¹⁸ In USDAW, mainly through the women's committees, newer campaigning issues specific to women began to emerge, such as women and health. A cancer-screening booklet entitled *Don't Trust to Luck ... There's*

¹⁶ TUC, *Campaigning to Close the Gap* (TUC, London, 2000) p. 22.

¹⁷ Martin Upchurch and Eddy Donnelly, 'Membership Patterns in USDAW 1980–1990, Survival as Success', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 23, No 1, Spring 1991, pp. 60–68, p. 67.

¹⁸ Parker, *Women's Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 36.

No Substitute for Cancer Screening was published in 1986. As the Women in USDAW report in 1996 commented, it: ‘provided vital information to encourage women to go for screening and resulted in this difficult and sensitive issue being discussed openly.’¹⁹ Women’s health became a trade union issue. As with women and health, the USDAW women’s committees followed the TUC lead in highlighting the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace, producing leaflets on the issue and encouraging members, male and female, to attend briefings and workshops dealing with the topic.

Domestic violence was first on the union’s conference agenda in 1987. Legislation was requested from a future Labour government to tackle the problem, then described as matrimonial abuse. The issue continued to be discussed throughout the following decade, with women delegates to conferences relating their own experiences. Funding for Women’s Aid was called for, as was support for Zero Tolerance, the public awareness campaign initiated in 1992 by Edinburgh Council’s women’s committee. The Midlands divisional women’s committee initiated a specific campaign to stop the deportation of USDAW member Hemlata Patel. She had come from India in 1986 to marry, and on suffering physical abuse from her husband had fled the marital home. The legal consequence of this was that she lost her right to remain in the UK. The national women’s committee persuaded the union’s executive to take up the issue. Hemlata Patel was eventually given permission to stay. Parker commented that violence against women came to be regarded not only as a domestic issue, but also a workplace and union issue.²⁰

The Women in USDAW report in 1997 identified the expanding range of issues taken up by the women’s committees, with pensions and rights for carers being added to maternity rights and the established issues of part-time work and casualisation, low and equal pay, women’s health, domestic violence and sexual harassment. For conference delegate Gloria Isham, speaking in 1997, the women’s committees: ‘are the vehicle within which women’s issues stay on the main agenda’.²¹

The recruitment and campaigning activities of the women’s committees were welcomed by the union. They resulted in a higher profile for USDAW women and for issues relevant to

¹⁹ Women in USDAW Report, 1996, p. 11.

²⁰ Parker, ‘Women’s Groups in British Trade Unions’, p. 35.

²¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1997, p. 85.

them. The Women in USDAW report and debate became an agenda item at annual conference, along with a Women in USDAW fringe meeting and stall. At divisional level, the women's committees organised branch and workplace visits, fringe meetings at divisional conferences, leafleting in city centres, distributing newsletters, speaking at labour movement rallies. From a handful of women speakers at annual conferences in the early 1980s and before, the number increased to around 40 in the 1990s. The women's officer Bernadette Hillon observed at the 1990 conference:

When the TUC want a woman to reach out to other women to talk about low pay or the poll tax they come to USDAW. When the Labour Party or the Low Pay Unit wants a woman to reach out to other women, they come to USDAW.²²

In 1988, the general secretary, on the impact of the women's committees on the union claimed that it: 'is epitomised by their central and increasing role in debates at this ADM [Annual Delegate Meeting], and indeed in our campaigns throughout the country'.²³ Later, in 1994, Bill Connor, as deputy general secretary responsible for the union's campaigning, noted: 'I can assure you that the input we receive from the women's committees has been greatly appreciated in developing and carrying forward this vital work.'²⁴ The recruitment and campaigning of the women's committees dovetailed into and augmented the union's strategy.

One of the outcomes of the establishment of the Women in USDAW structures that had not been anticipated was the significant expansion and development of the union's training and education provision. From the outset of the women's committees, education was identified as a key element. Marge Carey, union official, declared at the 1985 conference: 'Training gives knowledge and knowledge gives confidence ... the whole nub of this issue is education.'²⁵ In the discussion document presented by the education department to the first Women in USDAW conference in 1985, the aim was laid out in broad, non-specific terms: to provide an educational service which assisted the women's committees in the task of helping women members become more active at all levels of the union and so help to develop and sustain a strong unified organisation.

²² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 68.

²³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 171.

²⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 141

²⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 157.

The union core education and training provision at that stage was almost exclusively shop steward and health and safety representatives training.²⁶ Little attention, in the activities or the resources, was paid to issues specifically relevant to women members. This was not unique to USDAW, but was mirrored in the provision of individual unions and the TUC.

What emerged gradually and organically as a consequence of involvement with the women's committees was a range of issue-based workshops dealing with concerns identified by women, skills briefings to assist and encourage women to be involved in recruitment and campaigning, and informal get-togethers for women members. In addition, there was specific training for members of the women's committees in meeting skills, speaking in public and formulating propositions for conference. Briefing and workshops on key issues – equal pay, maternity rights, sexual harassment – were open to men as well as women, but the most innovative aspect was the introduction of women-only courses. The women-only courses started slowly. First held in 1984, there were five that year across the country in London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Dunfermline and Leeds.

This extension of educational opportunities focusing on women activists and members did not take place in a vacuum. External influences were significant. The 1979 TUC Equality Charter had encouraged individual unions to consider ways of involving women in union training.²⁷ The TUC General Council strategy was to include the women's perspective in the core provision. The *Working Women's Manual*, produced by the TUC, was designed to raise issues relevant to women on all trade union courses. The manual tackled head on, and raised for discussion, the question of why women were less involved than men:

Where women are not active in the union, blaming women is not the answer. Is it because of the way the union works? What issues are given priority? Do women have a real chance to voice their needs and opinions?²⁸

The updating and reprinting of the manual in 1991 was deemed necessary as: 'demographic changes will require all union reps to become more actively involved in negotiation issues of particular concern to women at work'.²⁹ This revised edition brought

²⁶ Since the 1975 Employment Protection Act, representatives had been entitled to paid time off for training relevant to the workplace. This was narrowly focused, giving the participants the skills and knowledge to recruit, negotiate, deal with grievances, and represent members at disciplinary hearings.

²⁷ Rowbotham stated that the 1979 charter provided a basis for expanding educational courses for women (Rowbotham, *A Century of Women*, p. 416).

²⁸ TUC *Working Women Manual*, (TUC, London, second edition, 1991) p. 93.

²⁹ TUC Report, 1990, p. 118.

the TUC into conflict with the Tory government, and this provides a reminder of the hostile economic and political environment in which the union movement had to operate. The TUC noted: ‘The Secretary of State took the view that the workbook misrepresented government policies over the past decade, was tendentious and not objective ... would not be prepared to provide grant to those courses where the workbook was used.’³⁰ The TUC complied; the workbook was withdrawn from the core courses. Government finance helped towards expenditure incurred by the TUC in meeting day-release course fees, course development and tutor training. Successive Tory governments progressively cut the grant and it ceased in 1996.

Women-only courses were pioneered by the TUC from 1980, and it was reported three years later that: ‘the response has not been uniform throughout the unions. This reflects the shortage of women tutors in certain areas, and perhaps a reluctance by some local trade union branches to recognise the importance of women workers to attend’.³¹

The need for more women tutors provided opportunities for socialist feminists to engage with trade union women. The key driver of women-only courses at the TUC, and the main author of the *Working Women Manual*, was Ruth Elliott, TUC education tutor. She was active in the women’s movement from the early 1970s and helped set up women’s groups in ASTMS, the white-collar union. Some feminists who became TUC tutors were actively involved in the union movement. Chris Aldred, TUC and Workers Educational Association (WEA) tutor and author of *Women at Work*, in the early 1980s was playing a leading role at the STUC conferences in attempts to extend and develop the role of the women’s conference. The influence of the women’s movement was evident in the design and delivery of training for women; it had an impact on both curriculum and practice.³²

The training opportunities for women in the union was promoted by the women’s committees and benefitted from the pioneering work done by the TUC and from the influx of feminist tutors. In USDAW, a review of union representatives’ training was undertaken

³⁰ TUC Report, 1991, p. 106.

³¹ *TUC Women Workers Bulletin*, No 3, March 1983, p. 11.

³² There were a number of strands to women’s education, from local informal learning to the women’s courses at universities. Barr commented: ‘Women’s education had many of the features of a popular education movement. Influenced by different feminisms ... alliances were built with community groups, with trade unions and the peace movement as well as the wider women’s movement.’ Jean Barr, *Liberating Knowledge* (NIACE, Leicester, 1999) p. 39.

to incorporate issues relevant to women. The Women in USDAW conference has already been mentioned, with its departure from the traditional format and the use of small discussion groups and report-back sessions. Broadening knowledge on key issues and the drawing up of realistic future plans were focal points.

A real change in what was available for women was made by going out to where the women workers were, at times that fitted in with their busy lives, and dealing with issues directly relevant to them. It was about listening to women, valuing their experiences and promoting a co-operative rather than a hierarchical approach. Many of the participants were low-paid, part-time shop and factory workers, failed by the formal, traditional education system. An activist, who became chair of the Scottish women's committee, describes her early experiences of women's briefings: 'The starting point was your own knowledge ... but you left knowing a lot more. Nobody had ever asked before. It took a while to realise you were being educated.'³³ Research into women-only courses in the MSF and TGWU endorsed this view, with: 'participation more notably informal with comments intersecting and interrupting each other ... the dialogue progressing in a much more organic way ... the tutor's role was to facilitate discussion'.³⁴

Women-only informal get-togethers were an innovative format in reaching out to members, drawing in those previously excluded. They included 'women and health' meetings, which proved immensely popular, with large numbers attending. These meetings normally took place in the evenings, and at weekends. They did not qualify for paid release, and their popularity suggested that the issues and the way they were dealt with struck a chord with women workers. Many of the women attending had never been at any kind of union meeting before. A tutor involved in the get-togethers talked of the: 'feisty, hilarious, articulate women'. She described the workshops as: 'providing a union meeting space, more imaginative, less procedural to make them feel different about the union'.³⁵

The Women in USDAW workshops initiated a link, a connection, between women workers, with no involvement in the women's movement, and feminist tutors, a

³³ Interview with Mary Paterson, 8 February 2008. Trade union education had become student centred with the active engagement of the learners, in contrast to the teacher-centred essentially passive accumulation of knowledge.

³⁴ Anne Marie Greene and Gill Kirton, 'Advancing Gender Equality: The Role of Women Only Trade Union Education', *Gender, Work and Organisation*, Vol 9, No 1, January 2002, p. 41.

³⁵ Interview with Catriona Burness, 1 February 2008.

relationship unlikely to have developed through any other activity. An USDAW activist echoed the views of many shop workers: ‘Feminism never came down my street. It missed my scheme completely ... as a single parent I was busy bringing up the girls and working in poverty.’³⁶ A feminist tutor recalls her experiences of working with USDAW women:

Feminists called it consciousness raising ... mapping out experience. For me it was fascinating to be with shop workers and assisting with the process of doing that. Saying what worked, what didn’t and why. Saying these are union matters ... not some fancy feminist ideas but really important to women workers.³⁷

‘Training for Action’ was the slogan, and the methods and materials deployed encouraged more women to become involved at the workplace and in wider union activities. Research into women-only courses concluded that they: ‘act as a vehicle for increasing women’s participation and improving their experience of unions’.³⁸ A female activist in USDAW, who later became a union official, recalled how the briefings had an impact: ‘Although I was a shop steward, it wasn’t until I went along to a workshop organised by the women’s committee that I really became involved in the union ... was all about women getting involved and making things happen.’³⁹ The workshops for activists were practical, not theoretical. A briefing on Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value did not dwell on the intricacies of the regulations but the reality in the workplace. The women would draw up lists of the tasks involved in their jobs, place these alongside those of the male workers and then consider the difference in pay and conditions and whether this felt fair. They were designed to link into the campaigns, to leave the participants better informed, to take the message out to others, and to agitate for negotiations on the issue. The training was enhanced by impressive publications: clear, jargon-free and illustrated with cartoons. There are, however, limits to how much learning can bring about change. There was a multiplicity of factors, and some substantial barriers to transforming learning into action. The women participants may have become more knowledgeable, more confident, have built networks, but obstacles remained back at the workplace. The convener, the shop stewards or the paid official might be reluctant, possibly hostile, to pursuing collective bargaining objectives that might disrupt established relationships and differentials

³⁶ Interview with Mary Paterson, 8 February 2008.

³⁷ Note from Kate Phillips, 24 February 2008, at the time a WEA and TUC tutor. She wrote the *Gender Manual* for the International Confederation of Trade Unions.

³⁸ Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy, ‘Shaping Union and Gender Inequalities: A Case Study of Women Only Trade Union Courses’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 42, No 2, June 2004, p. 303.

³⁹ Women in USDAW Newsletter, 2001, p. 6.

advantageous to male workers. A Scottish union official, previously convenor at Halls food manufacturing factory, commented:

The women reporting back on a workshop on equal pay negotiations, their arguments fell on deaf ears. We felt it was not relevant to our workplace. The employer was reluctant to buy into it, as it would cost them money. The butchers and bakers threatened to walk out if it was followed up.⁴⁰

Recruitment and campaigning were welcomed and encouraged; the development and extension of the education and training provision, though not predicted, was incorporated. Involvement of Women in USDAW in the collective bargaining agenda was less straightforward, containing the potential for tension to develop between different parts of the union's structure. In the early 1980s, few USDAW women were involved in national or local bargaining committees. There were no women national officers and only a handful of local officials. This had the result that issues central to women's working lives – low pay, part-time working, maternity rights – were less likely to be raised, or if contained in the original wage claim, would be the first to fall off in the compromises to reach an agreement. On collective bargaining, Parker argued that USDAW's women's committees contributed to widening the union agenda. Their concerns have been increasingly acknowledged, though not necessarily prioritised.⁴¹ Cockburn contended that it is easier to shift the structures than the practices of unions, and that collective bargaining in particular was resistant to change, a view echoed by Campbell and by Cunnison and Stageman in their research.⁴² Cockburn attributed this failure to put women's issues high on the collective bargaining agenda in part to lack of women both as full-time officials and members of negotiating committees, a view echoed by both Kirton and Heery and Kelly.⁴³ A survey of progress towards equality, conducted by the women's committee of the south-east region of the TUC (SERTUC), put forward the view that equality for women required

⁴⁰ Interview with union official, 6 February 2008.

⁴¹ Parker, 'Women's Groups in British Trade Unions', p. 39.

⁴² Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change*, p. 249. Bea Campbell concurred with this view, highlighting the difficulties in challenging the male dominance of collective bargaining (Bea Campbell, 'Feminism and Class Politics: A Round-Table Discussion', pp. 13-20, in *Feminist Review*, No 23, 1986, p. 25.) Cunnison and Stageman identified that control of the negotiating agenda gave men advantageous financial outcomes – Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, p. 47.

⁴³ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 111. Kirton argues that the absence of women from the union hierarchy enables negotiators to ignore women's issues. Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 19. Heery and Kelly demonstrated that women officials made a difference and that they prioritised women's issues such as equal pay, part-time working and maternity leave in collective bargaining. Edmund Heery and John Kelly, 'A Cracking Job for a Woman – a Profile of Women Trade Union Officers', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 20, No 3, pp. 192–202, 1989, p. 201.

both women's issues to be prioritised in the negotiating process and women to be represented at all levels in the union.⁴⁴

The need for women's issues to be high on the bargaining agenda, and women to be at the bargaining table, have been identified as key requisites in the achievement of equality for women in trade unions. The question to be addressed is, what role did the USDAW women's committees play in making progress on these two fronts in the period 1985–97? Garfield Davies, general secretary, responding to the Women in USDAW debate in 1989, declared: 'No longer can we tinker with the traditional collective bargaining agenda built on the model of a full-time permanent worker with few responsibilities who is ready and available for work at the employer's demand.'⁴⁵ The union was able to point to equal value success in retail initiated by the Geraldine O'Sullivan case in Sainsbury in 1987. Louie Woolston, chair of the national women's committee, announced in 1987 that over 60% of the union's female membership was covered by cancer screening arrangements.⁴⁶ The Women in USDAW report in 1987 intimated that the work ahead included the development of a system to monitor progress in collective bargaining.⁴⁷ The report continued: 'It is necessary for the women's officer to begin discussions with the national negotiators to consider how to build up a picture of the pattern of women's employment and remunerative package.'⁴⁸ The Women in USDAW report the following year emphasised the need to get more women involved in collective bargaining. 'Women are more likely to become active in the union if they perceive that their participation will have a real impact on collective bargaining priorities.'⁴⁹ Women activists were putting forward issues relevant to women at the union's annual conferences. However, reports from the national women's committee on the importance of women's issues being on the bargaining agenda and women's speeches on women's issues at USDAW conferences did not necessarily translate into negotiating objectives or achievements, where women were not directly involved in negotiations. Where there was local bargaining, men predominated as the negotiators; at national level, all the negotiators were men. The existence of a women's officer did not inevitably improve the bargaining position of women members. Cunnison and Stageman pointed out that the remit of union women officers was generally to advise

⁴⁴ *Still Moving Towards Equality in Trade Unions* (SERTUC, London, 1989) p. 5.

⁴⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1989, p. 152.

⁴⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 109.

⁴⁷ Women in USDAW Report, 1987, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Women in USDAW Report, 1988, p. 14.

rather than to negotiate, and that they lacked the status and authority to enforce their advice.⁵⁰ USDAW had specifically taken the decision not to make the women's officer a national negotiating official, but a head of department with no direct focus in collective bargaining. The Women in USDAW report for 1997 commented that one of the tasks ahead was: 'to continue to assist with the development of the collective bargaining agenda with the production and publicising of a model agreement on cancer screening ... and targets for the improvement of maternity and paternity rights'.⁵¹ This does not indicate a direct involvement in collective bargaining, nor does the report record any specific achievements in collective bargaining where the women's committees played a role.

On recruitment and campaigning, where the activities of the women's committees complemented the union's agenda, women activists were widely praised. The broader issue is whether the women's committees were accepted wholeheartedly or whether there was hostility or resistance to their existence in the period 1985–97. Moira Dutton, from Wigan Mail Order branch and Chair of the north-west divisional women's committee, commented in 1986: 'The public support for the women's committees is tremendous, but when we talk to some people socially it is obvious that we have not convinced them entirely.'⁵² Glimmers of antagonism to the Women in USDAW structures appeared at annual conferences. One indication was the frequency of comments from women delegates about the number of empty seats in the hall when the Women in USDAW report and debate were taking place. Ann Sykes, at the 1997 conference, remarked: 'many men time and time again getting up and walking out of conference'.⁵³ A more overt challenge came in 1990 with a proposition at annual conference to abolish women's conferences and committees within the union, the TUC and the Labour Party. The mover, Mr D. J. Baker, from the Boots Industrial branch in Nottingham, asked: 'are we not doing our members a disservice by thinking positive discrimination is necessary?' He spoke of the: 'dangers of sectionalising the union ... where does it end ... black, gay, even a men's section'.⁵⁴ One delegate claimed that 'many members feel that the women's conference is just a talking

⁵⁰ Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, p. 232. In 1981, Joyce Winsett, President of NUPE, opposed the introduction of a women's officer because the role was not linked to collective bargaining where, she argued, progress was to be made on women's issues. See Stephen Williams and R. H. Fryer, *Leadership and Democracy, The History of the National Union of Public Employees*, Vol 2, 1928–1993 (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2011) p. 389.

⁵¹ Women in USDAW Report, 1997, p. 9.

⁵² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 106.

⁵³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1997, p. 85.

⁵⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 62.

shop for middle-aged women'.⁵⁵ The proposal was lost overwhelmingly. Delegates, in a spirited defence, lauded the achievements of the women's committees. For some it was an appropriate time to acknowledge a conversion. Pat Buttle, a former member of the executive council and prominent member of the union's broad Left, as well as a prodigious campaigner, declared: 'When women's committees were first formed I can tell you I was strongly opposed to them, and I am quite pleased to stand here today and say I was wrong.'⁵⁶ Earlier, in presenting the Women in USDAW report to conference, Sylvia Callicott, chair of the national women's committee, said: 'it was with a degree of reluctance that I accepted the responsibility of taking over the chair of the national women's committee'.⁵⁷ She went on to explain how her doubts and concerns had disappeared. Active engagement with the work of the women's committee had convinced her of their relevance and value.

In 1993, there was a proposition to expand the terms of reference of the women's committees to become equality committees which would cover 'all those who are discriminated against in the workplace, black or white, male or female, able-bodied or handicapped'.⁵⁸

The mover's view that there was no difference between the different types of discrimination was challenged by women activists, one of whom claimed that this proposal was 'trying in a back-door way to get rid of the women's committees'.⁵⁹ The motion was defeated. The general secretary spoke in favour of retaining the existing structures: 'There are important distinctions to be drawn between the nature of different forms of discrimination. These differences need to be reflected in the structural mechanisms which the union develops to tackle the various forms of discrimination.'⁶⁰

The issues of reserved seats and quotas for women were on the agenda of the 1994 USDAW conference agenda. The mover, Frank Smith from the Glasgow Bakers branch, opposed quotas and declared that there should be: 'no guaranteed place for anybody

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁷ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 59.

⁵⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1993, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

anywhere'. Women: 'should stand on their own abilities'.⁶¹ Mr B. McCormack, from Oxford Co-op, said: 'The fascist thought police of political correctness has resulted in the imposition of positive discrimination ... it is something I do not want to see this union dragged into.'⁶² The union had no plans to introduce reserved seats for women. USDAW had consistently opposed such a measure. What lay behind the debate was the requirement from both the TUC and the Labour Party that union delegations should reflect the male/female membership ratio. Those against this measure considered the plan an interference with the free choice of branches in union elections to external conferences. The proposition was defeated, but there was a significant minority for rejection of proportionality.⁶³ This could indicate a reluctance to endorse any measures to promote women's equality which involved changes to the union's existing structures. Proportionality for the TUC and Labour Party conferences, initially opposed by the executive council, was agreed in 1996. Failure to adhere to the requirement could have resulted in USDAW delegations being excluded from the conferences. With the change to union rules for the TUC and Labour Party conferences, each division had to elect one man and one woman, with an additional woman from the three largest divisions.

The Women in USDAW structures were consistently presented as adding a layer of activity without any alteration to the existing arrangements. Briskin and McDermott asserted that continued success for women's structures depended on a strategic balance between autonomy from the structures and integration into the structures.⁶⁴ On separate organising in USDAW, Margaret Calvert, chair of the national women's committee, emphasised: 'Women in USDAW are not a separate part of the union. We are a cog in the wheel that is USDAW.'⁶⁵ Sylvia Callicott, in opening the Women in USDAW debate in 1990, commented on the additional experiences and perspectives that the women's committees had brought to the union. She added: 'we have not done this by working in isolation, but through working with other parts of the union.'⁶⁶ Harrington, in her research into the participation of women trade unionists at local level, commented that USDAW women activists in South Wales had an ambivalent attitude to separate structures, and

⁶¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 153.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁶³ On a card vote, 61,634 voted against quotas and reserved seats with 123,523 in favour.

⁶⁴ Briskin and McDermott, *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 94.

⁶⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1989, p. 143.

⁶⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 60.

were: ‘uncomfortable with the ideology of separatism’.⁶⁷ An USDAW interviewee said: ‘we should be advocating women and women’s contribution and promote them as trade unionists ... as part of society on an equal basis.’⁶⁸ Harrington linked the lack of enthusiasm for separate organising with the rejection of feminism by the USDAW women interviewed. She observed that: ‘At national level there appeared to be an explicit “feminist” agenda which is regarded by many women at divisional level as separatist.’⁶⁹ As identified in previous chapters, feminism did not attract many working-class women. Harrington noted that although the USDAW women were unenthusiastic about separate organising, the women’s committee in South Wales did encourage women to become and remain active. It could be argued that the women were willing to utilise the structures to advance the mainstream union agenda.

On integration, the second strand of Briskin’s formula for successful women’s structures, there was a constant refrain within USDAW from both women activists and senior officials. Louie Woolston, chair of the national women’s committee, commented at the 1987 conference: ‘Rather than separating women in the union the role of Women in USDAW has been to strengthen and reinvigorate the union by drawing in previously inactive members into participation.’⁷⁰ Maureen Madden, vice-chair of the national women’s committee, opening the Women in USDAW debate in 1993, said: ‘The women’s committees are an integral part of the structure of our union ... working very closely with other parts of the union.’⁷¹ Bill Connor, deputy general secretary in 1994, observed that: ‘The USDAW women’s committees are an integral part of the structure of our union.’⁷²

This rhetoric of integration did not necessarily reflect an enhancement of the power of the women in the union. Rees argued that inclusion of women may not bring progress if unions envisage the role of women as supporting the existing structures rather than introducing

⁶⁷ Jane Harrington, *Sisters Organising – the Future for Trade Unions?* Paper presented to the Future of Work Conference, 11 July 2001, p. 16. Between 1992 and 1994, Harrington interviewed 14 USDAW women activists in South Wales, including six from the divisional women’s committee, the female divisional officer and the woman co-ordinator of the committee.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Harrington, *Women’s Local Level Trade Union Participation*, p. 115. Harrington noted the friction between the divisional officer Pat Phillips and the feminist women’s officer Bernadette Hillon, which resulted in a refusal to allow her research to be extended to other women activists in the division. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 109.

⁷¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1993, p. 49.

⁷² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 140.

changes to the organisation to reduce the unequal representation of women and enhance their bargaining position.⁷³ The Women in USDAW structures had not been designed to transform the union, and were consistently referred to as an add-on. Control over the composition of the women's committees still resided with male divisional officers and male-dominated divisional councils. At the 1995 annual conference, Moira MacDonald, chair of the north-west divisional women's committee, referring to Jean Hornby, a member of that committee for a number of years, said: 'express my disappointment at the fact that she was not selected again to sit on the committee. The branch has not heard the reason why.'⁷⁴ Parker quoted a member of the Midlands divisional women's committee: 'Women wouldn't be encouraged to stand again if they caused waves.'⁷⁵ The women's conference could put forward recommendations, but these could be ignored or rejected by the executive council. This is not to deny, or to diminish, the achievements of the women's committees from 1985 to 1997, but to recognise that transformation of the structures to advance women's priorities and participation was not on the agenda and was not advocated by either the USDAW women activists or the male hierarchy.

The Women in USDAW structures did not operate in a vacuum and were not isolated from internal union divisions. As John Monks, newly appointed TUC general secretary, commented in 1994: 'some unions still locked into old-fashioned political battles, of factional fighting each other within the union and not making the union start kicking some of those outside kicking us'.⁷⁶ One of the factors that may have caused the union hierarchy to look at the women's committees in a less benign way was the unexpected election of Audrey Wise MP as union President when Syd Tierney retired in 1991, having held the position for 14 years. Wise was the first woman President in USDAW, and the first to be neither a union official nor a member of the executive council. Associated with the union's broad Left, she defeated the establishment candidate against the odds. The Left in the union was in the minority, and in the executive elections taking place in 1991 won only two out of the 16 seats.⁷⁷ Regarded as a maverick by USDAW's senior officials and

⁷³ Rees, *Women and the Labour Market*, p. 85.

⁷⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1995, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Jane Parker, 'We're on the Road to Somewhere, Women's Groups in Unions', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 34, No 2, 2003, p. 177.

⁷⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 53.

⁷⁷ Wise, referred to in the previous chapter, had been an USDAW member for more than 30 years, involved in the political and economic debates in the 1960s and 1970s, usually challenging the union leadership. A member of the Labour Party Executive from 1981 to 1987, unsuccessful parliamentary candidate in 1993, she was elected MP for Preston in 1987. She was an USDAW-sponsored MP.

executive council, and criticised by them for not consistently toeing the Labour Party line, she was an unlikely candidate to emerge as USDAW President. One explanation that gained currency in the union was that Wise's victory had been brought about by women's votes.

Wise had made no contributions to the Women in USDAW debates in the period 1980–85 when the women's structures were being discussed and established. Her involvement with the women's committees came about by accident. The national women's committee report in 1987 noted that Wise had stepped in, at short notice, for Joan Ruddock MP, as the keynote speaker at the first Women in USDAW fringe meeting at annual conference. Her subsequent request to the executive council to attend the USDAW national women's conference was agreed.⁷⁸ She attended every year thereafter. At the 1990 USDAW conference, she argued for the retention of the women's committees, and commented on the increase in the number of women on the executive and as delegates to conference, comparing this with her first USDAW conference in 1959.⁷⁹

While the union hierarchy, with decades of union involvement, perceived Wise through the prism of her oppositional stance in the 1960s and 1970s, it appears that women activists in the 1990s, new to involvement, viewed Wise differently. Pauline Foulkes, a member of the north-west women's committee, speaking at the 1987 annual conference about the contribution from Wise at the fringe meeting, said: 'It all came from the heart. What she felt came out with all the compassion and sentiment I like to hear ... with everything she said, I just felt that I wanted to jump up and say 'Yes, I agree ... It was great.'⁸⁰ At the women's conference, Wise had the opportunity to talk informally to the participants to build up a rapport. She was able to link industrial and political issues in a way that related to women's lives. For example, Wise, as a member of the Select Committee on Health, had initiated an enquiry into maternity which changed the way care was delivered, with more choices for women and a more central role for midwives. Wise was described as 'immensely influential in encouraging women to take their proper place in union activity'.⁸¹ A change in rules governing union elections introduced by the Tory government in 1987 may have given Wise a boost. Individuals now had a vote, whereas in

⁷⁸ National Women's Committee Report, 1987, p. 4.

⁷⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 66.

⁸⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 115.

⁸¹ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 830.

the past a small handful of activists, usually men, had decided how the total branch vote would be cast. Women who had met Wise could now persuade women in their workplace to vote for her. Before that, many of the women would not have been involved in the election, and might not even have known that it was taking place. In 1991, as a consequence of becoming President, Wise was also chair of the national women's committee.

The animosity between the general secretary and Wise intensified when Wise was re-elected in 1994. A delegate to conference commented on: 'the two main members of this organisation, whose symbol is "Unity is Strength" trying to score points off one another'. At that conference, Maureen Madden, executive councillor and ally of Wise, was denied the opportunity to present the Women in USDAW report to conference, which as vice-chair of the women's committee, she had done for the previous two years.⁸² It was presented by Bill Connor, deputy general secretary. No explanation was given for the change. A female delegate commented: 'Bill Connor said that women's voices should be heard at all levels and I am rather puzzled why this document is being moved by a man.'⁸³ When some women left the hall when Connor began the presentation of the Women in USDAW report, he commented: 'we do not need that kind of self-indulgent posturing.'⁸⁴

The Presidential election of 1997 witnessed a change in tactics by the union hierarchy. The favoured establishment candidate had been Jeff Broome, executive councillor, but he was replaced by Marge Carey, divisional officer. She had been involved in Women in USDAW structures from the beginning as co-ordinator of the first north-west women's committee and on the national women's committee as an official in the 1980s. She pioneered the part-time workers leaflet and agreements for cancer screening. Her entry into the fray against Wise guaranteed a split in the women's vote. Carey was elected President. Her advantage to the union hierarchy was that she was a union employee and loyal to the newly elected general secretary Bill Connor. They were both from Liverpool and had worked together as activists and officials. It is reasonable to assume that a female candidate would not have been put forward by the union establishment if the sitting President had not been a woman.

⁸² Wise was chair of the committee but, as she was presiding over conference, the presentation in 1992 and 1993 fell to the vice-chair.

⁸³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 151

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The focus until now has been on the achievements of the Women in USDAW structures – the recruitment, the campaigning, the increased awareness and knowledge of women activists, the higher profile for women and women’s issues. The limitations imposed by the lack of female involvement in collective bargaining where women’s issues could be advanced and the constraints of the existing union rules and practices have been recognised. The union hierarchy displayed no inclination to consider changes to the Women in USDAW structures that might have more effectively integrated women into the union.⁸⁵

Beyond USDAW, what was happening with women’s structures? Within the TUC, changes continued to be advocated by women activists. ‘Advisory’ was removed from the women’s committee title in 1986. In 1989, a review of the structure of the TUC General Council resulted in the introduction of an element of automaticity. Unions with more than one seat on the General Council and more than 100,000 members, were required to allocate at least one seat to a woman.⁸⁶ By 1991, there were 16 women on the General Council, up from six in 1988. In 1990, the 1979 TUC Equality for Women Charter was updated to include the recommendation that women should be represented on decision-making bodies in proportion to their membership. In 1992, it was agreed that five resolutions from the women’s conference would be put on the TUC conference agenda for debate, ensuring that women’s issues would be raised and policies debated. Men were excluded in the same year, making it a women-only conference for the first time in its history. An indication that progress on women’s participation was not linear or uncontested is provided by the voting on that initiative, with 142 votes for women-only conferences and 120 against.⁸⁷ Reservations about women-only spaces persisted. Elsewhere, serious financial problems, caused by declining membership, were forcing unions to consider mergers. One outcome of these discussions was the necessity to look at designing new structures for the combined unions, and this involved looking at the rules and practices that existed on the involvement of women members. For example, the merger of NUPE, NALGO and COHSE to form UNISON in 1993 brought about a commitment to proportionality, that women should be represented in line with their percentage of the members. As Cockburn, and others observe, changes in structures are not enough to bring about equality for women, but they are useful

⁸⁵ The only change in the period 1985–97 was the increase in the membership of divisional women’s committees from six to eight in 1987.

⁸⁶ Smaller unions balloted for four reserved seats for women.

⁸⁷ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 361.

and necessary steps on the road. The position of women within the trade union movement had advanced considerably, when compared with previous decades, but the movement was still male-dominated. The title of the 1997 SERTUC report into progress for women in trade unions described the situation as ‘Inching Towards Equality, Extremely Slowly’.⁸⁸

Although USDAW itself made no changes to the women’s structures, the union was affected by the measures implemented by the TUC. The automaticity rule ensured that an USDAW woman would be a member of the TUC General Council along with the general secretary. This had not happened before, despite USDAW consistently nominating for the reserved seats for women. The seat was taken by Bernadette Hillon, women’s officer. The TUC requirement on proportionality in delegations resulted in USDAW changing its voting procedures to ensure more women were elected. The TUC 1979 Equality Charter had played a significant part in the establishment of the Women in USDAW structures, and now the changes introduced by the TUC placed an USDAW woman on the General Council and increased the number of women on TUC delegations. USDAW did not replicate the positive action of the TUC; nonetheless, these measures had an impact on the participation of USDAW women beyond the union.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Southern and Eastern Regional TUC, *Inching Towards Equality, Extremely Slowly* (TUC, London, 1997).

⁸⁹ The Labour Party rule change on proportionality in 1991, as with the TUC change, ensured increased female involvement. The Labour Party, like the TUC, in the 1985–97 period was introducing changes to enhance the representation and participation of women. As with the TUC, the drive for change came from campaigning activists from the 1970s onwards. The additional factor was the need to win women’s votes. Labour’s support for positive action for women was a key part of the party’s electoral strategy. See S. Perrigo in Gerard Taylor (ed.), *The Impact of New Labour* (Palgrave and MacMillan, London, 1999) p. 162; Russell, *Building New Labour*, p. 107. Measures included internal party quotas at all levels and all-women shortlists for Parliamentary selections. USDAW supported both these measures at Labour Party conferences. This was more to do with loyalty to the Labour Party than to a belief in positive action, a strategy not in evidence inside the union.

Table 5.2 below provides some insights into the position of women in USDAW from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s:

Table 5.2: Women's Representation in USDAW 1989–1996

	Women as % of members	Women as % of conference delegates	Women as % of executive	Women as % of FTOs	Women as % of national FTOs
1989	61	25	32	17	0
1991	59	38	59	27	0
1994	60	40	60	21	0
1995–96	59	42	62	19	0

Source: Parker, 'Women's Groups in British Trade Unions', p. 28.

The increase in women attending USDAW's annual conference indicated a greater involvement of women at local level, and helps to explain the rise in women speakers and women's issues on the agenda. The number of women on the national executive was a significant shift. In 1991, there were eight women on the executive and a woman President. This increased to ten in 1996. It is difficult to give a categorical explanation for this. Influences at work included the change in the voting system from branch to individual votes; the higher visibility of women at annual conferences and in campaigns; the increase in retail women shop stewards as a result of company agreements; and possibly an awakening consciousness brought about by the activities of the women's committees. The number of women as full-time officials remained stubbornly low. This dearth of female officers had been a persistent feature within USDAW, and can be viewed as a constraint on women's progress in the workplace as women officials were much more likely to pursue issues of specific reference to women. There were no women national officers until 1997, when Val Pugh was the first female to be appointed. She had been the first chair of the Midlands women's committee and became a full-time official in 1988. A few other women

with involvement in the Women in USDAW structures were also appointed in this period, providing encouraging signs for the future.

Most progress had been made at national executive level, but Sylvia Callicott, chair of the national women's committee, commented in 1991: 'In our delight at the executive council election results we must not lose sight of the fact that the executive council is but one small part of the structure of this union.'⁹⁰ The presence of women at national level does not necessarily indicate or bring power. The power, status and authority in USDAW resided less with an executive composed of lay members meeting monthly, and more with the national officers, deputy and general secretary. As Eddie Dunion, a delegate to the 1997 annual conference, pointed out: 'the majority of this union are women ... the hierarchical positions occupied by men does not reflect true membership'.⁹¹ Furthermore, Kirton pointed out that, where women, as in USDAW, are elected by both men and women, they do not necessarily speak for, or pursue issues of specific relevance to women.⁹²

Progress for women in USDAW between 1985 and 1997 was uneven. Women were actively involved in the union's recruitment and campaigning activities, and women-only courses increased the awareness and knowledge of women members and activists of issues relevant to their workplaces and beyond. There was a plethora of Women in USDAW publications. More women were speaking on issues for women at local and national conferences. More women were on the national executive, the first woman president was elected and the first woman national officer appointed. The Women in USDAW structures did not operate in a vacuum. They were impacted in a negative way by the internal divisions in USDAW, specifically the animosity between the general secretary and the President Audrey Wise. External factors, such as the pro-women measures of the TUC, were more positive, with the first woman from USDAW on the TUC General Council, and more women on USDAW delegations to the TUC.

In comparison with the 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s, significant progress had been made. Yet the number of women officials remained stubbornly low and the barriers identified as constraints on women's participation, notably the branch structure, remained

⁹⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1991, p. 58.

⁹¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1997, p. 85.

⁹² Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 23. Similar points are made in Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, pp. 167–8.

unaltered. The key negotiators in local workplaces and with national companies continued to be overwhelmingly men. Parker's conclusion on the activities of the Women in USDAW committees, based on the interviews she conducted in the late 1990s, was that: 'they had not brought about any significant change to the patriarchal nature of the union'.⁹³ It could, however, be argued that a firm basis for further progress for USDAW women had been laid.

By the end of 1997, a new leadership in USDAW was in place – Bill Connor, general secretary, John Hannett, deputy general secretary, and Marge Carey as President. All three were from Liverpool, and had been union activists and then officials in the city. Connor and Hannett became national officials, and then general secretary and deputy general secretary respectively. They endorsed the Women in USDAW structures, in line with USDAW policy. Carey became a divisional officer, the most senior position in the north-west division. She had been involved in the women's structures from the beginning and was a co-ordinator of the divisional women's committee. She had just been elected President, having stood against the union's first woman President Audrey Wise. Labour had won the 1997 general election by a landslide after 18 years of Tory governments. What these changes would mean for women in USDAW constitutes the next phase of the Women in USDAW structures.

Things Can Only Get Better? 1998–2004

Marge Carey in her first Presidential address to USDAW's annual conference in 1998 reflected an optimism about the union's new leadership team, which coincided with the return of a Labour government after 18 years of the Tory Party in power. She commented: 'we have a new Labour government; a new leadership team ... Conference the team is right, the climate is right and we must maximise our potential in representing our members and recruiting non-members.'⁹⁴ This was in contrast to the period 1991 to 1997, which had been one of hostility between the then President Audrey Wise MP and the general secretary Garfield Davies. The change was captured by a delegate to conference: 'appreciate the unity and solidarity shown by the platform ... does make a refreshing

⁹³ Parker, *Women's Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 188.

⁹⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1998, p. 5.

change'.⁹⁵ Promising fairness not favours, Labour in office potentially provided a more supportive environment for USDAW, and the trade union movement, to reverse the sharp decline in membership and bargaining influence.

Where did the Women in USDAW structures fit into the new environment? Did the activities and campaigns of the national and divisional women's committees continue or change? Was there a different emphasis in the period 1998 to 2004?

The national and divisional women's committees remained unchanged throughout this period. The evidence from the union literature indicates that the Women in USDAW activities continued – the recruitment, the workplace visits, the briefings, the weekend schools, the fringe meetings at national and divisional conferences, the campaigning. The USDAW women's committees newsletter in January 2001 encouraging women to put themselves forward for divisional women's committees reflected the continuity:

You will get the opportunity to visit different workplaces, join in recruitment and leafleting activities in your Division and take part in workshops on the issues that affect you ... Most of all, you will be able to help not only yourself, but lots of other women to get involved and all levels in the union.⁹⁶

There was no direct challenge to the existence of the Women in USDAW structures, but the opposition to positive discrimination remained. This surfaced at the 2001 conference debate on women-only shortlists for the selection of Labour Party parliamentary candidates. The mover Cara Peattie, calling for their re-introduction, observed: 'Women-only shortlists are not ideal but they are the only effective way of redressing the balance and ensuring that women candidates are actually selected.'⁹⁷ The male response rehearsed arguments deployed in previous debates. One male delegate declared: 'let us stick to our policy of having equality for everybody ... Ladies you do yourselves a disservice ... you are more than able, you do not need all-women shortlists.'⁹⁸ The debate also included a brief contribution from a first-time delegate Denise Price, from Twining's tea factory. She spoke of being very nervous, and commented: 'I work in a big factory which is completely

⁹⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1998, p. 24. Bill Connor, general secretary, the following year made reference to the earlier acrimonious situation: 'arguments between the President and the general secretary in past years often been like Punch and Judy', USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 108.

⁹⁶ USDAW Women's Committee Newsletter, January 2001, p. 1.

⁹⁷ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2001, p. 164.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 169–70.

ruled by men ... vote for ... get more women in top positions because we deserve it'.⁹⁹ The resolution was carried, possibly more due to loyalty to the Labour Party than a belief in positive measures to advance Labour women politicians.

While the Women in USDAW committee structure remained intact, there were some changes. The USDAW 1998 annual conference did not have a Women in USDAW report presented to conference. This had been a feature of the conference from the beginning of the women's committees and had provided delegates with an opportunity to comment on the work of the women's committees, both on the activities already undertaken and those planned for the year ahead. The Women in USDAW report could be discussed back in the branches after its endorsement at conference. As well as no Women in USDAW report, there was no discrete timetabled Women in USDAW debate, which had previously grouped together motions of specific relevance to women members. As illustrated earlier, the Women in USDAW debate and report had provided a focal point for women activists and a starting point for new women delegates to speak about the work of the women's committees and about women's issues. No reference was made, or explanation given, as to why both the Women in USDAW report and debate had disappeared from the conference agenda. Neither was ever reinstated, despite the fact that the terms of reference for the national women's committee, agreed in 1985, had included the provision of a Women in USDAW report. They stated that the national women's committee should: 'report annually to the Executive Council in time for such a report to be presented to ADM each year'.¹⁰⁰ What was briefly mentioned from the rostrum was the imminent departure of the women's officer Bernadette Hillon to take up a position as a senior equal opportunities adviser at the Department of Education and Employment.¹⁰¹ At the 1999 USDAW annual conference, it was announced: 'We have appointed a women and equalities officer to take that important area of work into the mainstream, into your structures, into your agenda as you daily face the employer.'¹⁰² No details of the position were given at this stage. It emerged later that the position was both downgraded and extended to encompass a broader equality remit, taking on the race relations work which up till then had been undertaken by the union's

⁹⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2001, p. 170.

¹⁰⁰ Women in USDAW Report, 1985, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ A potential area for further research might be why some women's officers in trade unions in the 1990s left, while others remained. An avenue to explore might be whether the educated middle-class women, who were external appointments were more likely to move on. This was the case with Bernadette Hillon, USDAW, Judith Hunt, TASS, Maureen O'Hara, TGWU, and Diana Covey, AEU. On the other hand, those who came through the union ranks, such as Margaret Prosser and Maureen Rooney, remained.

¹⁰² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 69.

education officer.¹⁰³ The role was no longer at departmental head level, no longer on a par with national officers, the union's senior negotiators. The women and equalities officer would now report to the head of the research department, and would no longer be part of the senior management team. She would no longer represent the union, alongside the general secretary, on the General Council. This position was given to the new President, Marge Carey, a close ally of the general secretary. These changes are possibly linked to the high profile that had been obtained by the departing women's officer Bernadette Hillon, both inside the union and in the wider labour movement as a member of the TUC General Council and the Equal Opportunities Commission. As indicated earlier, Harrington, in her interviews with USDAW women in South Wales, identified tensions between the women activists and officials in the area and the women's officer on account of her feminism, which was at variance with the more traditional approach to union involvement.¹⁰⁴ These views were possibly shared by others in the union. Bill Connor, general secretary, was to say later of Marge Carey that she was: 'a champion of women's rights without being a tick-box feminist'.¹⁰⁵ This comment indicated an unease with feminism and women like Bernadette Hillon, and may have contributed to the downgrading of the woman's officer role and the removal of the possibility of any further incumbent achieving a high profile within and beyond the union. Kirton and Healy argue that women trade unionists who subscribe to feminist views and who are willing to challenge the union are less acceptable to the male union hierarchy than women activists like the USDAW women in South Wales, who adhered to a more traditional approach based around class unity.¹⁰⁶ Parker, in her interviews with USDAW women officials, commented that several were of the view that those who questioned or challenged received less encouragement and support than those who supported the status quo.¹⁰⁷ The post of women and equalities officer was not advertised externally, as the previous position had been. The successful candidate was an existing member of the union's research team: a known quantity to the union leadership.

There was continuity with the Women in USDAW structures remaining largely intact. There was change with the downgrading of the women's officer role and the disappearance

¹⁰³ The union's work on race was less developed than that on women. A race relations committee had been established in 1987, but there were no divisional structures. There was an annual black members weekend rather than a conference. There were sporadic workshops for black and Asian members, and race awareness briefings for officials and activists.

¹⁰⁴ Harrington, *Sisters Organising*.

¹⁰⁵ *Independent* Marge Carey obituary, 10 February, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Kirton and Healy, *Gender, Democracy and Leadership*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁷ Parker, *Women's Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 106.

of the Women in USDAW report and debate at the annual conference. There was also challenge from women officials to the male-dominated hierarchy. For the first time since the creation of USDAW in 1947, women challenged for the top two official positions, general secretary and deputy general secretary.

The general secretary election of 2003 witnessed two very different women standing against the male deputy general secretary for the post. They were Val Pugh, the union's first woman national officer, and Maureen Madden, a member of the union's executive council and a prominent member of the Left grouping in the union. Pugh, as identified earlier, had a track record of involvement in Women in USDAW. Her election literature contained elements attractive to women members. Mention is made of her previous work as a part-time sales assistant, and how she knew what it was like to juggle life, to hold down a much-needed job, work all hours and still do the best for her family. Pugh had the endorsement of the former research officer Diana Jeuda, who was identified in earlier chapters as being instrumental in the establishment of women's structures in USDAW. Irene Radigan, the newest national officer, was also closely associated with her campaign. Radigan had been involved with the divisional women's committee when an activist in Scotland. Madden was an activist, not an official or industrial negotiator. Her appeal was to left-wing members of the union, and was not women specific. In her election literature, she claimed that USDAW had had been a bosses' union for too long, and she would not be a general secretary who worked for knighthoods or peerages.¹⁰⁸ Hannett, the union's deputy general secretary, made no specific mention of women in his election material. The election was by individual postal ballot, as required by legislation.

Table 5.3: General Secretary Election 2003

General Secretary Election 2003		
Candidate	Branch Nominations	Vote
John Hannett, Deputy General Secretary	270	19,063
Val Pugh, National Officer	9	13,729
Maureen Madden, Executive Councillor	25	12,313

The result can be interpreted in a number of ways, but with a turnout of 14% this requires caution. The high individual vote for the female candidates suggests that there was no

¹⁰⁸ This was a reference to the two previous general secretaries, who became a lord and a knight respectively.

aversion to voting for women candidates. It raises the prospect that, if there had been one male and one female candidate, there would have been a woman general secretary. This needs to be put alongside the strong probability that members holding left-wing views were voting for Madden as the Left candidate rather than the woman candidate. The election did, however, provide choices between women. The branch nominations obtained by each candidate highlighted that the overwhelming number went to the male candidate. This reflects the position outlined in an earlier chapter of the unrepresentative nature of the branch structures, of the control of block votes by a handful of activists, predominantly men, and the effective exclusion and non-participation of thousands of individual members, mainly women. This election result gives credence to the view that women standing in union elections are in a more advantageous position if voting is individual rather than by branches. The successful candidate, the deputy general secretary, fitted Cockburn's scenario: '... seniority and time serving are carefully observed in the trade union movement ... the one waiting in line ... known as Buggins' turn. Buggins is usually a man.'¹⁰⁹ Possibly the most significant aspects of the election were not only the challenge from women, but also the strength of the vote in favour of the women. This argument stands up, even when considering the votes for the women candidates separately against the man.

The second female challenge for a senior position took place the following year for the deputy general secretary, the post vacated by John Hannett to take on the role of general secretary. There were different aspects to this election: there were only two candidates; both were senior officials, the woman a national officer, the man a divisional officer. It was a branch vote, not an individual vote. The result was as follows:

Table 5.4: Deputy General Secretary Election 2004

Deputy General Secretary Election 2004		
Candidate	Position	Vote
Pauline Foulkes	National Officer	102,329
Paddy Lillis	Divisional Officer	131,768

¹⁰⁹ Cockburn, *Strategies for Gender Democracy*, p. 58.

The turnout of 70% on a branch vote gives no indication of how the majority of members felt about the candidates, as only branch activists would have participated. The two candidates were union loyalists, held similar views and were both mainstream Labour Party supporters. Foulkes had been involved in the Women in USDAW structures from their inception in the 1980s. She had been a member and then chair of the north-west divisional women's committee and then co-ordinator on becoming a full-time official. Both were on the same grade within the union's hierarchy, but their work was different. Foulkes as a national officer negotiated with major companies and was based at Central Office in Manchester; Lillis ran the South Wales and Western Division and was located in Cardiff. With no policy or political differences, the advantage in the election was with a national officer. As a negotiator with national companies, contact with activists across the country was involved. A national officer's remit allowed for interaction with all levels within the union: addressing divisional conferences, participating in nationwide residential company-specific events, intervening at the union's national conference to clarify or explain. A divisional officer was in charge of a geographical patch, responsible for overseeing the work of an area, but without a national profile. More significantly, the post of deputy general secretary had always been filled from the pool of national officers, sometimes competing against one another. Foulkes had an additional advantage. She was a national officer for Tesco members, the largest by far of any grouping in the union.¹¹⁰ In the two previous elections for deputy general secretary, the then national officers Connor and Hannett both had responsibility for the Tesco membership. These perceived advantages failed to secure the deputy general secretary post for the woman candidate. The disadvantage for the women candidate was that this election was a branch-based rather than an individual vote. Branches, as discussed earlier, tended to be dominated by male activists, and in some cases male officials acted as branch secretaries. Briskin referred to the unwillingness to let women share power and commented on how some of the resistance to women organising inside unions has been the potential challenge for the leadership roles.¹¹¹ It is not unreasonable to speculate that the failure of a well-qualified, experienced woman candidate to come through in the election process can in some measure be attributed to the persistence of patriarchal attitudes.

¹¹⁰ This position had previously been held by national officer Irene Radigan, the close ally of Val Pugh, the candidate for general secretary. There was speculation that she was moved from this position because of her upfront support for Pugh, and to lessen her chances should she challenge for the top positions.

¹¹¹ Briskin and McDermott, *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 101.

Recruitment for the union and for the women's committees remained the pre-eminent activity. This reflected the priority given to increasing membership throughout the trade union movement to reverse the sharp decline of the past two decades. Tory governments had been a factor, as USDAW recognised: 'we've spent an entire generation battling against the odds ... swamped by anti-worker and anti-union legislation.'¹¹² It was to be an uphill struggle to increase union membership. A TUC report estimated that it would take over 200 years to reach again the 1970s membership figures.¹¹³

USDAW's specific difficulties were highlighted by the TUC: 'USDAW is faced with the challenge of having a very high labour turnover in retail ... this means that it has to recruit around 80,000 members each year to keep a stable membership figure.'¹¹⁴ In the years 1979 to 2001, USDAW lost 40% of its membership.¹¹⁵ In her Presidential address to the 2001 conference that followed, Marge Carey commented on the hurdles:

the industries in which we represent and organise are moving more and more towards seven day, 24 hour operations across a whole range of employees ... full-time, part-time, casual and temporary ... gaining access difficult.¹¹⁶

John Hannett, deputy general secretary, highlighted that: 'There will be no red carpets rolled out for us in big business board rooms. No one is going to hand us anything on a plate, and new recruits are not just going to join us unless we work at it.'¹¹⁷ A further factor was that general unions with contracting membership were in search of new opportunities for recruitment in retail, as Bill Connor at the 1999 USDAW conference acknowledged:

other general unions have set their sights on our sector. They are prepared to compete with us in non-organised sites. They are prepared to compete with us in organised sites. And they are prepared to issue literature attacking our union where we have sole recognition.¹¹⁸

For women in USDAW, recruitment remained the dominant element of their work. As the 2001 Women in USDAW newsletter noted, everything they did was centred on recruiting

¹¹² USDAW Executive Statement on New Unionism, 2001, p. 1.

¹¹³ Jane Holgate and Melanie Simms, *The Impact of the Organising Academy on the Union Movement* (TUC, London, 2008) p. 24.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ USDAW Executive Council Statement on Building A Stronger Union, Recruitment and Organisation for the 21st Century, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2001, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1998, p. 54.

¹¹⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 56.

new members and involving other women in the union.¹¹⁹ Previous recruitment drives centred on bringing in women workers, particularly those who worked part-time. The women's committees had been a main focus for recruitment activities, as they reached out to unorganised women with a range of leaflets and booklets on issues relevant to women workers. Post-1997, recruitment was less focused on the women's committees, on women as a separate category, with more emphasis on groups of youth, black, Asian, agency and migrant workers. At the 2002 USDAW conference, Marge Carey in her presidential address acknowledged this: 'To recruit more members ... have to be more women-friendly, more in tune with black and Asian members and minority groups'.¹²⁰ Young workers were also a target group. The low union density among young workers was mentioned by Ian McCartney MP when addressing the 1999 USDAW conference. He noted that only two out of ten young workers were union members.¹²¹ It was estimated that 250,000 young people were working in retail. The potential for USDAW to improve membership within that age group was enormous. The union's literature began to reflect USDAW's interest in this area. In 2003, the TUC Equality Audit reported that USDAW had: 'organised a series of local get-togethers for black and Asian members with the aim of developing their confidence to recruit colleagues'.¹²² USDAW spread the net wider to encompass agency and migrant workers who were becoming a more significant percentage in the union's workplaces, in particular in distribution and food manufacturing.¹²³ The union began to provide recruitment literature in a number of languages and, through the USDAW Lifelong Learning programme, arranged free English language classes as a way of attracting migrant workers into the union.¹²⁴ As the executive council noted, the union needed to develop: 'new techniques and new ways of working to recruit successfully'.¹²⁵ In this, USDAW was following the lead given by the TUC. The union participated in the New Unionism project, specifically the TUC Organising Academy, which was established in

¹¹⁹ Women in USDAW newsletter, 2001, p. 3.

¹²⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2002, p. 3.

¹²¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 33.

¹²² TUC Equality Audit, 2003, p. 17.

¹²³ Scottish examples of this change in the composition in the workforce in the late 1990s/early 2000s were the Tesco distribution centre at Livingston and Halls, a food manufacturing factory in West Lothian.

¹²⁴ Lifelong Learning was financed by the Labour government through the Union Learning Fund (ULF). The aim was to promote workplace learning, though this did not require to be vocational. USDAW's share of the ULF allowed the union to have seven full-time lifelong learning officers and a national co-ordinator. Lifelong learning became a regular feature of USDAW conferences and events.

¹²⁵ USDAW Executive Council statement on Building a Stronger Union, Recruitment and Organisation for the 21st Century, p. 1.

1997.¹²⁶ The aim of the Organising Academy was to: ‘target new groups of workers under-represented in unions ... young, black and ethnic minority workers ... to a lesser extent women workers’.¹²⁷ This objective of diversifying recruitment activities was to be achieved through a 12-month programme which identified, trained and supported dedicated recruiters who were assigned to work full-time with a trade union. USDAW took on four trainees in the first year of the Organising Academy and more in subsequent years. In 2003, USDAW established its own Organising Academy, where union activists were given six months’ unpaid release from their companies to concentrate on recruitment in workplaces identified by USDAW.¹²⁸

While the TUC and USDAW Organising Academies were about recruitment and not structures, they were part of a broader agenda on equalities developing within trade unions, reflecting the more diverse workforce. In 2003, the first TUC Equality Audit contained reports on unions’ strategies not only for women members, but also black, disabled, LGBT and young members. For some unions, this involved the creation of committees for different disadvantaged groups. Chapter 7 will deal with the issue of separate women’s structures and general equalities structures at the TUC and within USDAW.

Women in USDAW continued to participate in recruitment activities. The national women’s conference maintained a focus on the issue; divisional women’s committees still linked in with divisional recruitment strategies. Women activists were encouraged to participate in the Organising Academy, with Frances O’Grady addressing the women’s conference in 1998. The change was that women non-members were no longer the key priority, as the union developed initiatives to attract a more diverse workforce including young, black and Asian, agency and migrant workers.

Women in USDAW continued their campaigning activities on specific issues relevant to women workers, notably on part-time workers and on maternity rights. On part-time working, women faced problems similar to previous generations but their numbers were

¹²⁶ The first Director of the TUC Organising Academy was Frances O’Grady, who went on to become the first woman general secretary of the TUC.

¹²⁷ Holgate and Sims, *The Impact of the Organising Academy*, p. 5.

¹²⁸ The union met the loss of earnings and expenses for those seconded to the Organising Academy. At the end of the six months, the dedicated recruiters returned to their original jobs.

increasing. One in three USDAW members now worked part-time.¹²⁹ Working conditions were highlighted by Christine Green, a Tesco worker from Wales: ‘Retailing is becoming more and more stressful with increasing demands ... extended hours, part-time workers given fewer and fewer hours, flexible contracts, the lot.’¹³⁰ Sally Neale, at the 2000 USDAW conference, commented: ‘As a part-timer, you are expected to do extra work at a minute’s notice. This is not always possible if you have young children, and most part-timers are in low-paid jobs and can do with the extra money.’¹³¹ The role of the Women in USDAW committees in campaigning for part-timers was acknowledged by the union. ‘We have designed and resourced our structures through our women’s committees for example, specifically to address issues of particular concern to part-time workers.’¹³²

Maternity rights remained to the fore for the women’s committees, who built on the pioneering work of the previous decade. A survey on pregnancy questioned 1,200 USDAW women, and the results demonstrated ongoing discrimination. ‘I was told by one manager that I was having a baby and not dying and to get on with it.’ ‘I had to do part of a shift, leave at the last minute for an ante-natal appointment and then return and make up the time.’¹³³ The evidence gathered by the union was passed on to the Equal Opportunities Commission and the government as part of the campaign to improve maternity rights. For members and activists, an informative, accessible Maternity Rights Pack was produced.¹³⁴

One issue that all but fell off the union’s agenda was equal pay. From 1998 to 2006, there was only one proposition at annual conference. It was in 2003, in support of the TUC Close the Gap campaign; the proposition was moved, formally seconded, there were no speakers, and it was carried. This was not an indication that equal pay had become a reality for women workers. As the Women and Work Commission pointed out in 2006, the pay and opportunity gap for women remained, as did the difficulties of combining work and family life. The evidence of the Fawcett Society to the Commission noted that: ‘Women’s employment continues to be concentrated in poorly paid areas, ... predominantly ... caring, cleaning, catering and cash registers ... traditionally done by women ... seen as

¹²⁹ USDAW Executive Council statement on Part-Time Work New Regulations, 2000, p. 20.

¹³⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1998, p. 103.

¹³¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2000, p. 132.

¹³² USDAW Executive Council Statement, Part-Time Work, New Regulations, 2000, p. 2.

¹³³ Quotes from two of the USDAW women in the survey. *Arena*, September/October, 2004, p. 8.

¹³⁴ The pack contained seven leaflets, dealing with extra money for mothers and babies, sickness, redundancy, leave and pay, returning to work, post-natal depression, and miscarriage and stillbirth.

natural rather than acquired'.¹³⁵ USDAW's pursuit of equal values cases was not in evidence.

The change with the maternity rights campaign, and other issues of specific relevance to women, was that they became subsumed into broader-based union campaigning around family-friendly policies, work–life balance, and parents and carers. New campaigning to address emerging issues was introduced, such as Respect for Shopworkers and Protect Christmas Day. As with recruitment, the emphasis specifically on women diminished. The women's dimension in the campaigns was significant, but they were not branded as Women in USDAW. In the carers' debate at the 2002 conference, there were seven speakers, six of them speaking from personal experience. In the 2003 debate on care of the elderly, all six speakers were female. The 'family' became the motto, rather than 'women'. In 2004, the union launched a Parents and Carers campaign, which became the overarching framework for the union's campaigning activities. John Hannah, general secretary, at the 2005 annual conference described the Parents and Carers campaign as: 'an inclusive campaign' which 'goes to the heart of what is important to each and every one of our members'.¹³⁶

The advent of the Labour government in 1997 changed the nature of campaigning within the trade union movement, from opposing Tory attacks on unions to welcoming the workers' rights introduced by Labour and the Party's signing up to the European Union Social Chapter.¹³⁷ The TUC increasingly evoked the terminology of fairness at work, family-friendly policies and work–life balance. USDAW's campaigning mirrored this agenda. At the 2004 TUC Congress, the union's general secretary moved the composite on Parents, Carers and Work–Life Balance.

The relationship between the trade union movement and the Labour Party in this period was complex, welcoming enhanced workers' rights and opportunities to expand membership, but critical of the limitations and constraints that some Labour policies contained. The 1999 STUC Annual Report captured that ambivalence: 'Neither as much as

¹³⁵ Women and Work Commission, *Shaping A Fairer Future* (Department of Trade and Industry, London, 2006) p. 5

¹³⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 22.

¹³⁷ Legislation was introduced related to European Union Directives on Parental Leave, Part-Time Work and Working Time.

the trade union movement wanted – and we will continue to campaign for significant improvements – but they are a huge step forward for trade union rights’.¹³⁸ Taylor, who described the TUC’s attitude to the New Labour government as complicated, referred to comments by John Monks, TUC general secretary, at a Fairness at Work conference in 1998, who compared the ‘kid-glove’ approach to employers with the hostile attitude to the unions.¹³⁹ USDAW’s initial reaction was of optimism. The general secretary observed in 1999: ‘We are now back in business at the heart of a new partnership between ourselves and progressive employers.’¹⁴⁰ A more critical appraisal was to emerge. On Labour’s Part-Time Workers regulations, USDAW submitted a highly critical response, claiming that they: ‘fall a long way short in relation to the spirit and the letter of the Part-Time Work Directive’.¹⁴¹ The general secretary stated that: ‘They should listen to their friends rather than their new friends in the business community.’¹⁴²

The voices of women in USDAW echoed those from the TUC and their own union in challenging Labour’s policies. The women spoke from their direct experience of the omissions and the flaws. Debra Cairns, a delegate to the 2000 USDAW conference, called for the national minimum wage to have one adult rate at 18, rather than two bands with a lower rate for those aged 18 to 21.¹⁴³ With specific reference to her son, she commented: ‘If these people are old enough to vote ... then they are old enough to get the minimum wage to support a family.’¹⁴⁴ USDAW women expressed dissatisfaction with Labour’s policies for women juggling the demands of family life and work. Margaret McCall on family-friendly policies observed: ‘I welcome the family-friendly policies such as parental leave, domestic leave for emergencies ... Realistically speaking for parental leave and domestic leave to be really effective it has to be paid.’¹⁴⁵ Pat Buttle, USDAW activist, remarked on receiving the TUC Women’s Gold Badge:

¹³⁸ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 3.

¹³⁹ Robert Taylor, *From the General Strike to New Unionism* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2000) p. 266.

¹⁴⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ USDAW Executive Council Statement on Part-Time Work New Regulations, 2000, p. 5.

¹⁴² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2000, p. 79.

¹⁴³ When the national minimum wage was introduced in April 1999, it was set at £3.60 an hour for those over 21, £3 an hour for 18 to 21-year olds, and no rate for those aged 16 or 17. USDAW consistently argued for a significantly higher rate, with an adult rate at 18, and a lower rate for those aged 16 or 17. The latter was introduced in 2004.

¹⁴⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2000, p. 86.

¹⁴⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 203.

We have heard a lot about flexibility and casualisation. As a low-paid worker all my working life, I do not want flexibility; I want security of employment and I want a decent standard of living ... let us have proper working conditions and proper protection at work.¹⁴⁶

The critical interventions from women in USDAW were echoed in the literature on the Labour government and women. Pugh remarked on the disillusionment among women that emerged with the attack on lone parent benefits and the failure to introduce the promised Minister for Women.¹⁴⁷ Lovenduski observed that opinion polls demonstrated that women were less satisfied than men with the Labour government.¹⁴⁸

For Women in USDAW, campaigning continued on some issues specific to women such as part-time working and maternity rights, but in the main their campaigning issues were not stand-alone Women in USDAW, but part of a broader-based campaigning strategy. The women, as indicated above, were not averse to challenging Labour's agenda when policies were deemed unfavourable to the women they represented.

In the period 1998 to 2004, individual USDAW women played a part not only in improving the working lives of women in their own union but also beyond. These achievements concerned challenging existing maternity rights and Sunday working in retail. The first was prompted by Janet Greaves, USDAW member and Kwik-Save worker in Durham. She was unwell on her due date to return to work after maternity leave, and continued to be so after the four-week postponement allowed in the maternity rights legislation in operation in the 1990s. She was dismissed, as the law entitled her employer to do. Greaves, with the support of the union's legal department, challenged the ruling at an industrial tribunal. She lost her case. She then proceeded to the higher court, the Employment Appeal Tribunal, and again lost. As the law then stood, the tribunal judges had no alternative but to throw out the case. The next stage in the proceedings was the Court of Appeal in 1998. Here the judges determined that the law was discriminatory and required to be changed. Greaves, because of her willingness to stand out against the prevailing law, helped to bring about a change in maternity rights that meant a woman

¹⁴⁶ TUC Annual Conference Report, 1997, p. 117. She concluded: 'accept with great pride and it will be accepted on behalf of all women in USDAW'.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-59* (MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2000) p. 350.

¹⁴⁸ Joni Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics* (Polity, Cambridge, 2005) p. 151.

could not be dismissed if she was physically unable to return to work at the end of her maternity leave. A woman was to be treated in the same way as a man who was off sick.

The second case concerned USDAW members who worked in Argos stores in Scotland. The 2003 STUC annual report commented on: ‘... the behaviour of retail giant Argos which has recently sacked a number of employees who refused to accept unilateral changes to their contracts obliging them to work on Sundays’.¹⁴⁹ The Sunday Trading Act 1994 had made working on Sundays voluntary. No such protection existed in Scotland.¹⁵⁰ The union’s campaign was fronted by a group of USDAW women members who were dismissed, and who were vociferous in their demands to secure parity for Scottish retail workers on the issue of Sunday working. Helen Liddell MP, then Secretary of State for Scotland, supported the campaign, and David Cairns, MP for Greenock and Port Glasgow, brought in a private member’s bill which ended the disparity, and entitled Scottish retail workers to opt out of Sunday working. USDAW’s President acknowledged the contribution of the female Argos members: ‘Our thirteen members who stuck to their guns in the face of a lot of pressure deserve a really big thank you for their determination. They made the campaign possible.’¹⁵¹ Passing reference in union conference reports and publications was made to these USDAW women campaigners at the time. Recognition of their contributions is now much less in evidence.

What was happening with women’s representation within the union? Table 5.5 for 1998 and 2005 demonstrates continuing uneven progress.

¹⁴⁹ STUC Annual Conference Report, 2003, p. 34.

¹⁵⁰ There was no legislation in Scotland closing shops on Sundays as there had been in England and Wales. Sunday opening was permitted, with no legal provisions for workers’ protection.

¹⁵¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2003, p. 5.

Table 5.5: USDAW Officials by Gender 1998 and 2005

	Women in USDAW					
	1998			2005		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Central Officials	4	0	4	4	0	4
Executive Council	8	8	16	6	9	15
Divisional Councils	57	23	80	28	43	71
National Officers	4	2	6	2	5	7
Heads of Department	6	1	7	5	2	7
Divisional Officers	7	1	8	7	0	7
Deputy Divisional Officers	7	1	8	7	1	8
Area Organisers	62	25	87	66	26	92

The positions identified in Table 5.5 were all paid officials, with the exception of the executive and divisional councils, which were composed of elected lay members. By 2005, in these two activists' roles, proportionality had been achieved. This had been reached without quotas or reserved seats. This increase continued the trend identified in the earlier section.

Within the paid officials' structure, the increase in female national officers is most noticeable. This is the level just below general secretary and deputy general secretary. It was from this cohort of national officials that, for the first time since the creation of USDAW in 1947, USDAW women challenged for the top two officials' positions. The position most resistant to change remained that of the local union official.

The under-representation of women within the union structure was not unique to USDAW, as the 2004 SERTUC report demonstrates. Table 5.6 highlights that, across a number of unions, the full-time officer post was most adrift from proportionality.

Table 5.6: Women as Full-time Officers

Women as Full-time Officers		
Union	% of Women	% of Women Officers
NUT	76%	12%
UNISON	72%	36%
NASUWT	68%	41%
PCS	60%	37%
USDAW	60%	37%
GMB	40%	14%
TGWU	21%	7%

Source: SERTUC report, 2004, p. ix

Note: NASUWT – National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers; PCS – Public and Commercial Services Union.

The TUC report on the Organising Academy, which sought to broaden the base of the full-time officer ranks, offered a partial explanation:

Traditional routes into union jobs have been through an ‘apprentice system’ from lay rep to branch official to full-time officer, and this system had tended to reproduce a culture of male and often middle-aged domination, in the generalist officer corps of unions.¹⁵²

It can be argued that the position of women in USDAW, and in the trade union movement was reflected in the structures of power in society generally. An EOC report in 2004 noted that:

women’s and men’s lives may be changing, but Britain’s decision makers, are not. Almost 30 years since the SDA (Sex Discrimination Act) was passed there are still far fewer women than men in positions of power and influence. Sex equality is far from sorted.¹⁵³

The report argues that the under-representation of women in the public, political and business life in Britain, has to be attributed to more than women’s caring responsibilities, and that discrimination was a factor.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² TUC, *The Impact of the Organising Academy*, p. 10.

¹⁵³ EOC, *Sex and Power: Who Runs Britain?* (EOC, Manchester, 2004) p. 2. The report pointed out that women constitute only 7% of the senior judiciary, 9% of the top business leaders, 12% of university chancellors, 13% of local authority chief executives and 18% of members of Parliament.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

What had changed for women in trade unions between 2000 and 2004? The SERTUC report concluded: ‘The short answer is very little ... when reading these pages, you may think that there is some complacency demonstrated in terms of women ... is enough being done to maintain advances already achieved?’¹⁵⁵ Trade union women argued that not enough was being done, that equality for women should be higher on the agenda. A motion submitted by the GMB to the TUC conference in 2004, claimed that:

The trade union movement is failing to attract sufficient new recruits amongst working women and believes that the TUC must take urgent action to assist affiliates to recruit women members by addressing the issues of relevance to women members.¹⁵⁶

It also referred to the continuing discrimination against women on issues such as pay, pensions, training and promotion.

On moving the composite on A Fair Deal for Women at the 2004 TUC, Jane Carolan of UNISON commented: ‘The women’s agenda cannot be treated as the equivalent of the desirable but not quite essential decking on the patio ... quite nice but not necessary.’¹⁵⁷

For women in USDAW, the period 1998 to 2004 contained elements of continuity, of change and of challenge. Continuity was maintained with the virtually intact Women in USDAW structures. There were still national and divisional women’s committees and a women’s conference. Women were still a key part of the union’s recruitment and campaigning agendas. Continuity also meant the persistence of the under-representation of women at full-time officer level, and the concentration of USDAW women in the workplace in low-paid part-time jobs. Change came with the advent of a Labour government, bringing in the national minimum wage, and improvements – albeit regarded as insufficient – in rights for part-time workers and maternity leave and pay. Change also came with the downgrading of the women’s officer post, and the additional remit of equalities. The emphasis on recruitment and organisation veered away from an almost exclusive concentration on female non-members to a more diverse approach, targeting young, black, Asian, agency and migrant workers. There was a gradual refocusing of

¹⁵⁵ SERTUC Report, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ TUC Conference Report, 2004, p. 8.

¹⁵⁷ TUC Annual Conference Report, 2004, p. 141. The motion was seconded by Diane Holland, TGWU Women’s Officer.

campaigns away from women-specific issues to broader-based activities, such as the Parents and Carers campaign. Challenge, though unsuccessful, came from the USDAW women officials who stood for election to the two most senior positions in the union. Challenge that did succeed came from the Kwik-Save woman member who refused to accept the unfairness of the maternity laws, and from the Argos members who campaigned to bring in an opt-out from Sunday working for Scottish retail workers.

‘Are we moving forward, backward or not at all?’ was the question posed in the 2000 SERTUC report.¹⁵⁸ It could equally be asked of the progress for women in USDAW in the period 1998 to 2004. The comments of the SERTUC report: ‘... that there is lots of impressive work going on, at the same time as lots of retrenchment and power storing’ provided a not unsatisfactory answer.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ SERTUC Report, 2000, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ SERTUC Report, 2000, p. 3.

Chapter 6: Women in USDAW – The Scottish Dimension

This chapter shifts the focus from the national to the Scottish scene, and examines how far what was happening in Scotland mirrored the national picture. It explores the similarities and the differences from the early days of the two unions which merged to form USDAW in 1947 to the demise of the Women in USDAW structures in 2005. Particular attention will be paid to the period 1985–2005, when the Women in USDAW structures were in existence. Here, specific focus will be on the work of the Scottish women's committee. The issues to be explored are whether the activities and campaigns conducted in Scotland were following a pattern established by the national women's committee; did they diverge from this format, reflecting a different Scottish environment, or was what emerged a combination of both the national and Scottish agendas?

This first section on Women in USDAW in Scotland examines the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the early 1980s, prior to the introduction of the Women in USDAW structures. This is undertaken from two different but complementary angles. The first part follows the structure of the early national chapters, and explores how far what was happening nationally in relation to women in the union was mirrored in Scotland. What were the similarities and differences? The second part shifts the focus to the position of USDAW women within a Scottish context, specifically in the 1970s and 1980s. Developments in the Scottish economy, at the STUC, in the wider labour movement as well as the women's movement will be examined for what impact, if any, these had on women in USDAW. This approach takes cognisance of Breitenbach's view of: 'the need to guard against the assumption that what is true for Britain as a whole is true for Scotland. Divergences can and do occur'.¹ This section provides the background and sets the scene for the more detailed exploration of the activities and campaigns of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee from 1985 to 2005.

¹ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 3.

Scottish Women Early Years to 1982

Until 1947, when USDAW was formed, there were two unions organising retail workers operating at UK and Scottish levels. These were the National Union of Shop Assistants and the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Workers, which in 1920 became the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW) following the merger with the Warehouse Workers Union. As acknowledged in the early chapters, the two key sources for the beginnings of the two retail unions that preceded USDAW are Hoffman and Drake.² They painted a vibrant picture of the recruitment and organising activities of union women, with national figures like Mary MacArthur, Ellen Wilkinson and Margaret Bondfield to the fore. The reports of the TUC women's conferences, from the early days through to the 1980s, demonstrated that there were capable, articulate women who rarely if ever were seen at mixed conferences. The retail unions, and subsequently post-merger USDAW, had representatives on the TUC women's committee. Throughout this period, equal pay was a key issue. At USDAW annual conferences, women activists such as Edna Hanes, Irene Shears and Christina Page kept this issue on the agenda. As indicated in the previous chapter, women's structures were introduced into the two retail unions in the early years of the twentieth century and continued, albeit in a much-reduced form, into the 1930s. By the time of the merger in 1947, there were no women's structures, and this was the situation until 1985.

The activities of women activists in Scotland were broadly similar to those at national level. Mary MacArthur commenced her union activity in Scotland, becoming the first woman from Scotland to be elected to the national executive of the Shop Assistants Union. Another Scottish figure from that period was Agnes Hardie from Glasgow, who organised women workers and in the 1880s became the first woman organiser of the Shop Assistants Union. She went on to become the women's organiser for the Labour Party in Scotland and, on the death of her husband in 1937, became MP for Glasgow Springburn.

There are fleeting glimpses of women activists in Scotland, women who remain unnamed but were pioneers. The first agreement in the dressmaking trade in the UK was in Aberdeen in May 1917. Neil Beaton, then organiser for the Shop Assistants Union in

² Hoffman, *They Also Serve*; Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*.

Scotland, wrote: ‘these brave women had parted with the past and had stepped forward into the future that promises to revolutionise the whole dressmaking trade in Scotland’.³ Drake commented on dressmakers as: ‘a class hitherto wretchedly paid, viewed as helpless and hopeless, yet having awakened they have shown an amazing determination’. She recorded that they were led by: ‘an exceedingly capable woman organiser in Aberdeen’.⁴

Research by Arnot, Wright and Hughes highlighted that women in both NUDAW and the Shop Assistants Union were active in the inter-war years in Scotland.⁵ There are tantalising sightings of a few women who made it through to full-time official positions, women such as Isa Davidson, an organiser in NUDAW in Edinburgh and a member of the STUC women’s advisory committee. Arnot described her attempts to organise drapery workers in the 1930s by holding early morning meetings.⁶ Alex Kitson, who became the deputy general secretary of the TGWU, when working as a teenager in St Cuthbert’s Co-op in Edinburgh in the 1930s, recalled meetings with Davidson: ‘she’d be in her 50s ... quite an experienced woman, a toughie, she was there for years’.⁷ Davidson had clear ideas of how to recruit women: ‘It might be better when attempting to organise women, the job be left entirely in women’s hands’.⁸ Another example of a Scottish women activist who was involved in women’s recruitment in the early years of the twentieth century was Annie MacDonald from Glasgow. During 1919–20, she held meetings at midnight in an attempt to recruit confectionery workers who did not finish till 11pm.⁹

Women from the retail unions in Scotland, again similar to the UK position at the TUC, were active at the STUC women’s conferences and on the women’s advisory committee. The existence of the STUC women’s structures provided the women with opportunities for participation and leadership. Agnes Gilroy, NUDAW, chaired the STUC women’s advisory committee on several occasions in the 1930s and 1940s. Tuckett commented of

³ Hoffman, *They Also Serve*, p. 149. He went on to report that at the same time as the Aberdeen dispute agreements were reached with Daly & Co and Pettigrew and Stephens in Glasgow.

⁴ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 96. Arnot noted that in the 1930s production of clothes and the increased use of machinery reduced the need for skilled workers, especially dressmakers. Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 82.

⁵ Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*; Wright, *Women’s Organisations and Feminism in Inter-War Scotland*; Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919–1939* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010).

⁶ Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 169.

⁷ Ian MacDougall, *Voices from Work and Home* (Mercat Press, Edinburgh, 2000) p. 23. St Cuthbert’s Co-op Society was the largest single employer in Edinburgh in the inter-war years.

⁸ STUC women’s conference, 1933, p. 75.

⁹ Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p. 167.

her that she had been an ardent activist since she was 19, and was a valuable figure in the first ten years of the STUC women's advisory committee.¹⁰ Where there was a difference in women's involvement within the TUC and the STUC was that, while there were no women from either of the retail unions who ever sat on the TUC General Council, in Scotland Agnes Gilroy of NUDAW was a member of the STUC General Council in 1932–3 and Isa Barrie, of the Shop Assistants Union joined the General Council in 1941–2. It is not possible without more detailed research into this period to explain why there was this difference. It should also be pointed out that, whereas the TUC General Council had two reserved seats for women trade unionists, no such mechanism existed within the STUC structure.¹¹

In the post-war period, the similarities continued, with USDAW women on both the TUC and STUC women's advisory committees. Jean Glass, a Glasgow official, chaired the STUC women's conference in 1952, 1956, 1961 and 1966. Here, as at UK level, USDAW women could voice their opinions on the role of women in trade unions, a rare event at the union's annual conference. When chairing the STUC women's conference in 1966, Jean Glass remarked:

I am unshaken in my belief that women should have a say in the day-to-day work of their union at all levels. Really serious steps should be taken ... with leadership of their organisations as the ultimate goal in view.¹²

When Jean Glass retired in 1967, there was no USDAW woman official to replace her on the STUC women's advisory committee, and USDAW women remained unrepresented on that committee until 1987. This was not the case with the TUC, where Joyce Riddiough, an USDAW official, was a member of the TUC women's advisory committee for most of the 1970s through to the mid-1980s when she retired.

Scottish women activists participated in equal pay debates at STUC and USDAW conferences. Jean Glass raised the issue on a number of occasions, and in 1962 criticised the men in the unions for paying too much lip service to the issue, advising that: 'instead of sitting on their little pedestals they should be getting on with the job of giving women trade

¹⁰ Angela Tuckett, *The Scottish Trade Union Congress, the First Eighty Years 1897–1977* (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1986) p. 270.

¹¹ It was not until the early 1990s when the STUC changed its structure to ensure greater participation of women on the General Council that an USDAW woman would again be on the STUC General Council.

¹² STUC Women's Conference, 1966, p. 13.

unionists effective backing'.¹³ Where were the Scottish women's voices on equal pay at USDAW annual conferences? Very few women from Scotland, or other parts of the country, made it through to the annual conferences, hampered as they were by barriers imposed by the branch structure. An exception was Annie MacDonald from Glasgow, mentioned earlier as an activist from the turn of the twentieth century. A regular attendee, she made a number of contributions on equal pay. She expressed her frustration at the lack of progress in a speech in 1962 when she declared that she had been: 'telling this story for about forty years'.¹⁴ There was a Miss McGinty from Coatbridge Co-op, who moved propositions on equal pay at annual conferences in 1971 and 1973. She was also an USDAW delegate to the STUC on a number of occasions, in 1970 being the only woman on the USDAW delegation. She was on the union delegation to the TUC in 1958, 1962 and 1968. In the mid-1970s, she disappeared from the conference records.

On structures for women, following the national initiative of Bessie Ward, Annie MacDonald established a women's council made up of women from every branch of the union in Glasgow. Arnot discovered that Shop Assistants women's groups were operating in a number of towns in the Lothian and Borders in 1932.¹⁵ Mention was made previously of the proposition at the 1973 annual conference calling for a national women's officer, proposed by Mrs G. Wainman from the Boots branch in Nottingham. The proposal was greeted with hostility, remitted and not enacted upon until the introduction of the women's structures in 1985. There was a lone voice in support, the aforementioned Annie MacDonald. She said:

We feel that women will always prefer to speak to a woman rather than a man because a man can never see the woman's side of the question ... it is not a matter of discriminating between men and women because we are only getting the women their rights.¹⁶

The report noted that a delegate shouted 'rubbish' to MacDonald's remarks. In the 1975 USDAW conference debate on the abolition of women's conferences, which was carried, there was no Scottish women's voice to be heard.

¹³ STUC Women's Conference Report, 1966, p. 237.

¹⁴ USDAW Annual Conference report, 1962, p. 68.

¹⁵ Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 170.

¹⁶ USDAW Annual Conference report, 1973, p. 30.

As noted in the earlier chapter on the 1970s, the union remained unequivocally male dominated, as much in Scotland as in the UK as a whole. At national level, all the top officials were men. At divisional level, all the senior officials were men, with one exception – Pat Phillips, deputy divisional officer in the South Wales and Western division. Of the 120 full-time officers, there were eight women spread over four of the union's eight divisions with none of them in Scotland. On the national executive committee, with two representatives from each division, there were three women, none of them from Scotland. The involvement of women in the union varied across the divisions. Scotland was in a group of four divisions, half the total, where there were neither women officials nor women executive councillors.

An examination of the composition of the Scottish executive and divisional council at the start of the 1980s illustrated further the gap between the membership and their representatives. Of the two executive council members, both male, one was a Co-op manager, the other a convener in a food factory. On the divisional council of ten members, there was only one woman. Again the workplace background of the male divisional councillors did not reflect the membership, where the majority was female, in retail, with increasing numbers working part-time. Of the male divisional councillors, three were Co-op managers, one from Co-op distribution, four from food manufacturing, and one from a gent's outfitters. All worked full-time. The only woman was a part-time worker in Safeway who had recently replaced a woman from the Co-op.

In the early 1980s, the union began to move slowly towards Women in USDAW structures. As discussed earlier, there was no groundswell for change, no demands at annual conferences for women's committees or a national women's officer. Scottish women activists, as elsewhere in the union, were silent on the issue. When the Women in USDAW Working Party was established by the national executive in 1982, representation was requested from each division. Who would be selected from Scotland? There was no woman official, no woman on the executive, no woman on the STUC women's advisory committee. The Scottish woman chosen to represent Scotland on the Women in USDAW Working Party was May Carlin, a Safeway shop steward and the only woman on the Scottish divisional council.

Scottish Women 1970–1984

The second part of this section explores the position of USDAW women within the Scottish context of the 1970s and early 1980s, in the period before the introduction of the Women in USDAW structures in 1985. What was the impact, if any, on USDAW and its women members of developments in the Scottish economy, the STUC and the wider labour movement, and the emergence of second wave feminism?

The 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the continuing steady decline in manufacturing jobs in Scotland, with job losses and closures including Singer, Massey Ferguson, Corpach, Invergordon, Carron and Bathgate.¹⁷ Breitenbach observed that the preoccupation was with male redundancies and ongoing high male unemployment, even though in the early 1980s women workers constituted 43% of the Scottish workforce. She commented: ‘Women’s needs and demands seem to have been done less justice in Scotland than elsewhere.’¹⁸ As in the rest of the UK, women were concentrated in the service sector, job segregation was endemic and part-time working, essentially women’s work, continued to grow. McIvor has charted this trend, indicating that in 1951 5% of the workforce was part-time and that this had escalated to 41% by 1981.¹⁹ Part-time workers had few rights, no protection if they worked less than sixteen hours a week, or eight hours if they had five years’ continuous service.

The concentration in the service sector, job segregation and part-time working were key features of USDAW’s female membership in Scotland and elsewhere. The majority of women in the union worked in retail, where the long-established pattern in the Co-op and the major supermarket chains was for male managers, with females occupying the lowest grades. Job segregation in factories where USDAW organised was the norm. In Halls, a food manufacturing plant in West Lothian, the highest-paid jobs were the butchers and the drivers, all men, with women on the assembly lines and in the packaging halls on the lowest grades. In Roche, the chemical plant in Dalry, the only jobs available to women were as cleaners, office workers, or canteen employees. As referred to in an earlier chapter, women were lower in the employment hierarchy because they were women and not

¹⁷ *Scottish Trade Union Review*, No 26, November 1984 – January 1985, p. 11.

¹⁸ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Arthur McIvor, ‘Women and Work in 20th Century Scotland’ in A. Dickson and J. H. Treble, *People and Society in Scotland, Vol. III 1914–1990* (John Donald, Edinburgh, 1992) p. 197.

because a rigorous job evaluation had taken place. Part-time working was becoming more prevalent in the sectors where USDAW organised, but the recruitment of these women workers by USDAW did not become a priority until the ongoing membership decline during the Thatcher years. Part-time workers were often seen as not ‘real’ workers and consequently more expendable if redundancies were threatened. This was illustrated in the Spillers pet food plant at Barrhead, Glasgow, where 40% of the 300-strong workforce were female. In 1982, when management deemed that cutbacks were necessary, it was the part-timers who were first to go. This was despite the opposition of the shop stewards, who were criticised by the full-timers, male and female, for their stance. One of the shop stewards, Frank Davis wrote: ‘you got people who took a progressive line on issues like wages but when it came to part-timers they resorted to arguments like pin-money ... but among the part-timers were single women, one-parent families, older women.’²⁰

In academic discourses around part-time working, Hakim argued that: ‘Part-time work is an option only to people who have choices, such as secondary earners.’²¹ She posited that women who worked part-time were satisfied with their employment and were willing to accept undemanding jobs, concentrated in lower grades with lower pay, because their priorities lay in the domestic sphere. Those who took issue with Hakim claimed that part-time work was not invariably voluntary, and that women were unable to make real choices, constrained as they were by childcare and domestic responsibilities.²² As Bruegel pointed out: ‘Circumstances frame preferences.’²³ The reality for many working-class women, in particular with partners on low pay or no pay, or those who were single parents, was that economic necessity was a key factor in their seeking work, and part-time hours were a way to combine parenting and home responsibilities with employment. The experiences of USDAW women endorsed this position and contradicted Hakim’s view that women have demanded part-time work to fit in with their domestic responsibilities and that employers responded to this demand. The quote from the Glasgow part-time worker in Chapter 5 was the reality: ‘Part-time workers are a cheap, flexible workforce who are called in and

²⁰ *Scottish Marxist*, 1982, p. 12.

²¹ C. Hakim, *Key Issues in Women’s Work, Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women’s Employment* (Athlone Press, London, 1996) p. 71.

²² J. Ginn *et al.*, ‘Feminist Fallacies: A Reply to Hakim on Women’s Employment’, *British Journal of Sociology*, No 47, 1996, pp. 167–74.

²³ I. Bruegel, ‘Whose Myths Are They Anyway?’ *British Journal of Sociology*, No 47, 1996, pp. 175-7, p. 177.

thrown out when the employer wants ... they treat us like a tap to be turned on when the pressure grows.'²⁴

USDAW was not unique nor out of line in the lack of attention paid to women's inferior position in the workplace and under-representation in the trade unions. The STUC reports demonstrated that the same characteristics were commonplace across the trade union movement. A trawl of the STUC conference reports in the 1970s and early 1980s revealed that heavy industry, deindustrialisation and international affairs dominated the agendas. Women's issues rarely featured. Breitenbach observed: 'A greater commitment to socialist policies has not led to the STUC being more advanced on women's issues.'²⁵ Attention to women trade unionists by their male counterparts was often associated with industrial action, such as the equal pay strike in 1977 by Laird Portch workers in East Kilbride or the Lee Jeans sit-in in Greenock in 1981. The attitude of some male delegates at the STUC conference could be construed as posturing, such as miners' delegate Mr J. McDowall in the emergency debate on Lee Jeans: 'supporting the Lee Jeans girls all the way by industrial action as well. Are other unions prepared to do the same?'²⁶ Another glimpse of the way in which women in trade unions were perceived came in the comment that at the 1974 STUC conference the buffet facilities were provided by the women's section of Aberdeen Trades Council.²⁷ A different view of women trade unionists is presented by Finlay, who interviewed women involved in the occupation of the Plessey plant in Bathgate in 1982. She noted that it was undertaken by mostly middle-aged women engaged in militant action for the first time. She commented that, along with Lee Jeans, this: 'clearly smashed the notion of women as passive workers'.²⁸

If industrial action was to be the measure of effective trade unionism, then women in USDAW, especially in retail, were likely to be disregarded. This was less to do with a lack of militancy, and more to do with the type of workplaces. Supermarkets were becoming

²⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 111.

²⁵ E. Breitenbach, 'A Comparative Study of the Women's Trade Union Conference and the Scottish Women's Trade Union Conference', *Feminist Review*, No 7, Spring 1981, p. 73.

²⁶ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1981, p. 538.

²⁷ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1974, p. 553. In the Glasgow office of USDAW at this time it was the practice of the clerical staff, all women, to make tea and toast for the male officials, and deliver it to whatever office they had decided to congregate in for their morning break.

²⁸ P. Finlay, 'Resistance, Restructuring and Gender, the Plessey Occupation' in Tony Dickson and David Judge (eds), *The Politics of Industrial Closure* (MacMillan, London, 1987) p. 89. This echoed the research of Gordon on women workers almost one hundred years earlier (*Women and the Labour Movement*).

larger, opening hours extending, part-time working increasingly the norm. Recruiting and organising in such locations, far less initiating industrial action, was difficult, and would have been so whether the workers were male or female. The way in which USDAW women shop stewards achieved results for their members was through local representation to resolve issues.²⁹ This echoes Breitenbach's observation that some women activists have ways other than industrial action of putting pressure on management, of being: 'militant in a different way'.³⁰

Under-representation of women in trade unions, previously noted in USDAW, was widespread across the trade union movement in Scotland, mirroring the situation in the UK. At the 1982 STUC conference, there were 55 women delegates, the highest ever, out of a total of 580.³¹ Throughout the 1970s, the USDAW delegation to the STUC never rose higher than two out of a total of 18–20 delegates. Breitenbach's survey of women trade unionists in Scotland was only able to identify eight full-time women officials across all the unions.³² She also pointed out the different attitudes of the unions to both the TUC and STUC women's conferences.

²⁹ This theme will be developed in the section on USDAW women in action in Scotland.

³⁰ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 54. Illustrations of this sometimes less visible activism emerged from the interviews with USDAW women and will be related later in this chapter.

³¹ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1982, p. 361.

³² Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 50.

Table 6.1: Attitudes towards Women's TUC and Women's STUC

Support:	NUTGW	NUPE	TGWU
	UCATT	NUJ	AUEW
	EQUITY	TASS	NUHKW
	GMWU		
Necessary but regrettable:	APEX	NUAAAW	
Against (some of these Unions participate, while supporting abolition)	BIFU	UPW	NALGO – do not attend
	NATSOPA	ABS	CPSA – do not attend
	POEU	EIS	USDAW

Source: Breitenbach, Women Workers in Scotland, p. 58

USDAW was in the against category, but still participating, because of the decision of the union's 1975 annual conference that women's conferences should be abolished.

Breitenbach claimed that the STUC lagged behind the TUC with regard to positive action for women.³³ This can be illustrated through the conference debates on the introduction of reserved seats for women on the STUC General Council. At the end of the 1970s, there was only one woman on the General Council – Margaret Wilson, Scottish Carpet Workers – who was elected through the trade sections. The TUC General Council had two reserved seats for women, and was not only defending but extending women's structures. In 1981, the TUC increased the reserved seats for women to five. In 1978, a motion at the STUC Congress for the creation of two reserved seats for women was referred to the General Council, which undertook a consultation. Few affiliates responded, and, of those who did, the majority were not in favour. The issue re-appeared in 1979 and was defeated. Where did USDAW stand on this issue? The view was clearly put by Co-op manager and executive council member Pat Hunter:

³³ Ibid., p. 74.

We do not believe that women themselves want to be treated as unequals which the motion asks for. Unfortunately, many women do not feel able to accept the responsibility ... we do not feel that women want to be treated as something different from their male colleagues ... women do not want to be put on a pedestal.³⁴

Opposition to reserved seats for women is not of itself a rejection of the need to improve women's representation and participation in trade unions. Jean Glass, USDAW official, member of the STUC women's committee and champion of women's rights, was not in favour of this measure. Lewenhak wrote that Glass opposed reserved seats: 'since implicit in this was an admission of women's inequality, of their inability to gain election through 'normal' procedures'.³⁵

While USDAW's position remained unchanged, the proposal for two reserved seats for women was accepted at the 1981 STUC conference, and the following year Jane McKay, TGWU, and Gail Wood, GMWU, were elected. It was the switch to support the proposal by the AUEW that made the difference. Tom Dougan, the union official leading the delegation, declared that the AUEW: 'could no longer tolerate the position where we are seen to be hypocritical in the eyes of the trade union movement in Great Britain'.³⁶ Alongside the introduction of women's reserved seats, the STUC women's conference was increased from one to two days, and the membership of the women's advisory committee went from six to ten.

By the early 1980s, there were a few signs of change, of limited progress for women in trade unions in Scotland, but not yet reflecting the increased female membership. The pattern was uneven. As in the UK, it was unions such as NUPE and TASS who were at the forefront, others moving haltingly forwards and still others, such as the EIS, who looked to education and persuasion, rather than structural change, to achieve equality for women within their organisation. USDAW in Scotland and in the UK was yet to address the position of women within the union.

³⁴ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1979, p. 372.

³⁵ Sheila Lewenhak, 'Women in the Leadership of the Scottish Trade Union Congress 1897-1970', *Scottish Labour History*, No 7, July 1973, p. 19.

³⁶ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1981, p. 537. This was an indication that the STUC was not a wholly autonomous body as most affiliates had their head offices in England, and were reluctant, or as in the case of USDAW unable, to vote against policies determined at UK level. The Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS), the teachers' union, was the only solely Scottish union with a significant membership.

The women's movement in Scotland emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. What impact did it have on USDAW women in Scotland before the Women in USDAW structures were in place? Feminism, as identified in an earlier chapter, held little or no appeal for working-class women. Browne in her research into the women's liberation movement in Scotland acknowledges that in the main it was linked with middle-class, educated women.³⁷ Mary, a shop worker from Stirling, encapsulated the position of USDAW women. As referred to earlier (see footnote 347), reflecting on her views on feminism in the early 1980s, she commented: 'feminism never came down my street. It missed my scheme completely ... as a single parent, I was busy bringing up the girls and working in poverty'.³⁸ Scottish women political activists in USDAW, of whom few were visible in this period, were more likely to highlight the importance of the class struggle. Gertie McManus from Edinburgh, who started her working life in 1933, commented at the 1978 STUC conference: 'Men discriminated as well as women ... it is capitalism which breeds discrimination and injustice'.³⁹ Her views were similar to those of Frances Dean, USDAW activist from Manchester, quoted in an earlier chapter. Both were communists, but not of the generation of women who would shift the party's policy towards equality for women.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, women in USDAW in Scotland in the retail and food manufacturing sectors were low paid and increasingly working part-time. Their workplaces demonstrated job segregation. Women in USDAW were not managers, were not on the highest grades with opportunities for bonuses, shift premiums and the possibility of promotion. They were under-represented at all levels within the Scottish division of the union. Within the trade union movement, specifically the STUC, women in USDAW barely figure, are seldom on the union delegation and are hardly ever given the opportunity to speak. There was no USDAW woman on the STUC women's advisory committee. Under-representation of women trade unionists was not confined to USDAW. Other major trade unions such as the EIS were in a similar position, this despite the fact that the membership of both unions was over 60% female. Changes to improve women's representation at the STUC were rejected by USDAW in line with the union's policy nationally. There is no evidence of Scottish USDAW women campaigning for change in

³⁷ Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD, University of Dundee, 2009) p. 2.

³⁸ Interview with Mary Paterson, 8 February 2008.

³⁹ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1978, p. 668. She was the only woman on the USDAW delegation.

the union. Nor was feminism on their agenda. The situation for women in USDAW was essentially static. The question to be addressed in the next section is did the advent of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee make a difference? In the late 1980s through to 2005, were Scottish USDAW women more visible and campaigning more within and beyond the union?

Scottish Women in Action 1985–2005

This section explores the activities and campaigns of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee, from its formation in 1985 to its demise in 2005. The focus will be on the extent to which the Scottish committee paralleled or diverged from the national committee in its activities and priorities, and whether the existence of the divisional women's committee boosted the campaigning activities of Scottish women activists within USDAW and the wider labour movement.

A more detailed, nuanced picture is provided by incorporating the experiences and opinions of grassroots union women and also women from outside the union who were involved with the Scottish women's committee. Six USDAW women were interviewed, three of whom had been the chair of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee, another a member and the other two involved with the women's structures in the north of Scotland. The three women, from outside the union, all engaged with the Scottish committee as tutors on women-only courses, as campaigners on women's issues and as political activists. The selection of individuals to be interviewed was random, based on personal contact, willingness to participate and availability within the allotted timescale. Their oral testimony complements the public record, providing an additional perspective on the activities of the Scottish women's committee.⁴⁰ Information on the participants is at Appendix 6.⁴¹ The format for the interview was a semi-structured face-to-face interview lasting 1-1½ hours.⁴² There were telephone conversations with the interviewees to give advance knowledge of the themes for the discussion, which centred on their involvement in

⁴⁰ Oral history may also challenge the public record. An example of this is in Neil Rafeek, *Communist Women in Scotland: Red Clydeside from the Russian Revolution to the End of the Soviet Union* (I. B. Tauris, London, 2008). The interviews related the divisions which existed within the Party, which was in contradiction to the official version of unity.

⁴¹ All interviewees chose to be named rather than to remain anonymous.

⁴² This format was adopted rather than a questionnaire, which can stifle spontaneity. Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (Longman, Harlow, 1994) p. 148.

the women's structures. For the USDAW women, the interviews also provided an opportunity to discuss their activities as union representatives at their workplaces.⁴³

Oral history has changed and developed. For pioneers of this research method, such as Paul Thompson, it was a way of democratising history, of enabling the voices of marginalised groups to be part of the historical record.⁴⁴ Others considered it to be an unreliable methodology, as epitomised by Hobsbawm, who considered it: 'a remarkably slippery medium for recording facts'.⁴⁵ Many feminists were strong advocates of oral history as a way to retrieve and record women's voices and to capture their often hidden experiences and achievements.⁴⁶ Feminist Sherna Gluck, involved in oral history from the 1970s, and recognising the empowering impact of women telling their stories, acknowledged in the early 1990s that the method was 'more problematic than imagined'.⁴⁷ Sangster also recorded her unease about oral testimonies being considered as accurate, factual accounts of the past.⁴⁸ The transition from a social science to a cultural history approach identified that there was more at issue than faulty memory. Personal accounts were influenced by public discourses, as identified in Passerini's seminal work.⁴⁹ Interviewees did more than recall events; they interpreted them through the prism of subsequent experiences. They sought composure; they wanted to make sense of their lives.⁵⁰ Interviews were recognised as being mutable. Accounts of the past were reshaped in the light of the present. Different versions could be given to a different, or indeed the same, interviewer at different times.

⁴³ Extracts from earlier interviews are also included in the text. They are with Mary Paterson, USDAW activist, on her union involvement in January 2002 and with Kate Phillips and Catriona Burness, WEA tutors, and Mary Paterson in August 2008, on women-only courses in USDAW.

⁴⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past, Oral History*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, third edition, 2000).

⁴⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (Abacus, London, 1998) p. 273.

⁴⁶ Examples of this 'recovery' history include Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place, An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940* (Blackwell, London, 1984) and Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk About their Lives* (Viking, London, 1977).

⁴⁷ Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words, The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Routledge, London, 1991) p. 2.

⁴⁸ Joan Sangster, 'Telling Our Stories, Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History', *Women's History Review*, Vol 3, No 1, 1994, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Luisa Passerini, 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol 8, 1979.

⁵⁰ Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History* Vol 1 No 1, 2004. She cited an example where composure was not possible, of discomposure when the experiences of the women interviewees, who had been in the Home Guard, were excluded from the public discourse – p. 70.

Doris Lessing, in her autobiography, wrote of ‘shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages’.⁵¹

The theoretical discourses of particular significance for this research are subjectivity and intersubjectivity. No interviewer is neutral or objective. Interviews are undertaken from a particular standpoint which impacts on the process.⁵² This research was undertaken from the perspective of personal involvement in, and support for, the Women in USDAW structures. The USDAW interviewees had all engaged with the researcher in the training and campaigning activities associated with the women’s committees, and were aware of her commitment to the union’s women’s work. With two of the non-USDAW participants, there was a shared involvement in making progress on women’s rights and in political activism. With the campaigner on low pay, an ongoing connection was established through the involvement of Scottish USDAW women in the campaigning activities around support for rights for part-timers and a national minimum wage. There is not only the need to identify the motivation for the research, but also to be reflective on the potential impact of the personal and professional relationship with the interviewees, and of the complex dynamics of the interview process.⁵³

This raises the issue of intersubjectivity, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. What the interviewee discloses may be influenced by what the interviewer wants to hear, so that she is selecting from a range of memories those that resonate best with what she knows of the interviewer.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as feminist historians recognise, there is a power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee which needs to be acknowledged. The privileged position of the oral historian extends beyond the interview to the interpretation stage, where the analysis and selection of extracts to be integrated into the text reside with the researcher. Sangster neatly summed up the situation: ‘while detached objectivity may be impossible, a false claim of sisterhood is also unrealistic’.⁵⁵ While recognising the theoretical concerns around the use of oral history, and taking care

⁵¹ Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin* (Harper Collins, London, 1994) p. 12.

⁵² For example, in Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change*, where the author interviewed male composers in the newspaper industry, she clearly identified that she was writing from the perspective of a woman, a socialist and a feminist, and that a different interviewer may elicit different responses.

⁵³ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, London, second edition, 2016) p. 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55. The participants in Browne, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Scotland*, p. 70 assumed that Browne was a feminist although she gave no information on which this could be based.

⁵⁵ Sangster, ‘Telling Our Stories’, p. 11.

not to give undue weight to, or over-analyse, the small number of interviews, they not only add to the official record of the Women in USDAW structures, but also shed light on the reality of USDAW women's working lives. The interviews constitute only a small portion of the research, but used with caution can add to the diversity and complexity surrounding the activities of Women in USDAW.

The interviews with the Scottish USDAW women activists presented the researcher with the challenge of not being too directive or too interventionist, but allowing the interviewees' own views and experiences to emerge. This involved placing the discussion of the women's structures in a broader context, starting with the interviewees' family and working lives, and their union representative activities. This highlighted that their involvement in the women's structures was an addition to their already busy lives. It also brought out the advantages of participation in the union branch in enhancing women's participation, and the role of supportive, as well as hostile, male activists and officials. On women's structures in USDAW, the interviews explored in more depth the main themes developed in the national chapter.

As indicated earlier, USDAW women in Scotland, as elsewhere in the union, were under-represented at all levels. There were no women full-time officers, the two Scottish executive councillors were male and the ten members of the divisional council included only one woman, a part-time worker in Safeway. The union had no female representation on the STUC General Council or STUC women's committee, and the few women on the USDAW delegation to STUC conferences were rarely given the opportunity to speak.⁵⁶

Chapter 4 on the advent of Women in USDAW structures demonstrated that their introduction was not the outcome of challenge from women activists, more a desire by the union hierarchy to be in the mainstream, to follow the recommendations in the 1979 TUC Charter on Equality for Women Within Trade Unions. This lack of demand for change to improve the position of women in USDAW was replicated in Scotland. There was no groundswell, no grassroots campaign, no feminist upsurge. The Women in USDAW structures were designed to complement and not to challenge the formal union structures. They involved the creation of a national women's committee, a national women's

⁵⁶ Under-representation of women trade unionists was not unique to USDAW in Scotland. As illustrated earlier, other major unions were in a similar position.

conference, a women's officer and divisional women's committees, of which Scotland was one. The key objectives of the divisional women's committees were to recruit women members, to get more women involved in the union, and to get a better deal for women at the workplace. The remit of the divisional women's committee was:

- To consider issues that divisional experience indicates as being of particular importance to women.
- To use divisional experience in considering ways to increase the participation of women in the Union.
- To work with the national committee and with the divisional council as appropriate.
- To liaise and work with the Officer for Women's Affairs.
- To meet to consider the above at least six times a year and to make recommendations as appropriate.⁵⁷

Six women with varying degrees of activity, and from different parts of Scotland, were selected by the divisional council from branch nominations to form the first Scottish women's committee.⁵⁸

What campaigns were they and their successors involved in, and in what ways? The Scottish women's committee followed the guidance from the national women's committee and the women's officer on which campaigning issues to concentrate on. Campaigning on issues such as part-time working and low pay were already part of the union's agenda and had been raised by women at annual conferences.⁵⁹ This continued and increased with the advent of the women's committees, and more women retail workers from Scotland spoke on these issues. They highlighted the exploitation, the flexible contracts favouring management, the split shifts, the lack of legal rights. On the shift from full-time to part-time working in the late 1970s, Mary Paterson recalled a conversation with her manager:

I mind him saying 'see, it suits us better, Mary, to have people working part-time rather than working all day because you see you come in here and work for four hours and after four hours you start to get tired, so we bring fresh people in and they work for the next four hours' and I said 'So you are just going to treat us like Wells Fargo horses, you run us into the ground and then get fresh horses?' 'Oh no, not quite like that, not quite like that' And I thought ... if you get enough staff

⁵⁷ Second report of the Women in USDAW Working Party, 1984, p. 6.

⁵⁸ The membership was increased to eight in 1988.

⁵⁹ Recruitment of part-time women workers became a part of a strategy to halt declining membership.

you won't get tired or give people a lunch break, if you get a lunch hour you might perk up a wee bit.⁶⁰

Sheena Friery, a Safeway shop steward from the West of Scotland, berated employers who: 'treat us like a tap to be turned on when the pressure grows',⁶¹ as referred to at footnote 324. Anne, from Inverness, spoke of the Co-op bringing in shifts of 3¾ hours to prevent part-time workers getting the tea break they would have been entitled to under the agreement if they had worked four hours.⁶² Margaret Yuile, a shop steward from the House of Fraser in Paisley, and the first chair of the Scottish women's committee, took the USDAW campaign to the STUC.

Part-time workers do not choose their hours; employers do not give women hours to fit in with their family responsibilities. The needs of the business dictate when these women will work. Part-timers need protection and the unions need desperately to recruit and strengthen their own organisations.⁶³

The Scottish women's committee brought an added dimension to the national part-time workers' campaign. They initiated a survey seeking the views and attitudes of part-time women workers, both members and non-members in the retail industry. As Margaret Yuile from the Scottish committee explained: 'Part-time workers were the best people to say what was important to them as individuals and also what they required from trade union membership.'⁶⁴ This was taken up nationally, and women members throughout the union participated in identifying and interviewing those who worked part-time. *Equal Voice*, the bulletin of the STUC women's committee, reported: 'This is the first time a major union has undertaken such a study, and information obtained will be a unique resource in future recruitment activities.'⁶⁵ Within the union, the rhetoric on the need to protect, recruit and organise part-time workers increased, but how far attitudes had changed is difficult to measure. Kate Phillips, WEA organiser and TUC tutor, recalled that, when dealing with male union officers and shop stewards on union courses, part-time workers were not taken seriously, and there was a view that if they (part-timers) were not fully committed to the

⁶⁰ Interview with Mary Paterson, 26 January 2002.

⁶¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 173.

⁶² Interview with Anne McCreadie, 18 July 2015.

⁶³ STUC Annual Conference Report, 1986, p. 266.

⁶⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 113.

⁶⁵ STUC women's committee, *Equal Voice*, Winter 1988, p. 9. The Women in USDAW 1987 report noted that the results of the survey would be analysed by a supportive male academic from Glasgow, p. 11. The main reason identified for not joining the union was lack of communication, not being asked. The main workplace problems for part-timers that emerged were unilateral alteration of hours and lack of legal rights, issues addressed by Scottish women at USDAW conferences.

workplace, why should officers and representatives be fully committed to them.⁶⁶ Morag Gillespie, Director of the Scottish Low Pay Unit (SLPU) noted that ‘the guys in the unions didn’t want to help part-timers’, and that they had a mind-set that prioritised the male breadwinner.⁶⁷ She illustrated this with the case of USDAW Saturday workers at the Littlewoods Pools site at Hillington. This had emerged from the SLPU campaign to encourage part-timers to pursue retrospective claims for redundancy and unfair dismissal, in the light of the House of Lords decision in 1994 which removed the threshold for employment rights, which were now extended to all workers regardless of hours worked. In the Pools case, the USDAW woman member had worked for 7.5 hours on Saturdays for 13 years. A fire at the site saw all the workers laid off. Full-time and part-timers who worked weekdays returned with continuous service under an agreement negotiated with the union, while Saturday workers were offered a return with broken service. The member took her claim to an employment tribunal when the employer refused to change the terms of return. At the tribunal, the company was represented by a QC, their personnel officer and the local shop steward, who was supported by the union official. The woman was successful, found a job elsewhere, and stated that she would not join a union again, such was her disillusionment with the union.⁶⁸ What reason could the union have for not supporting the Saturday workers? It is not unreasonable to suggest that it was because these Saturday workers were not taken seriously by USDAW. Kate Phillips found that some women trade unionists also accepted the male assessment of their position in the workplace as second-rate, second tier workers.⁶⁹ A recognition of this view was addressed by women activists at an USDAW weekend school in Ayrshire in the late 1980s. One of the outcomes was that a group of participants put together a list of the tasks undertaken at work to counter the oft-used phrase: ‘I’m only a part-timer’.

I only

I only operate a checkout

I only stock shelves

I only re-arrange and price stock

⁶⁶ Interview with Kate Phillips, 15 October 2015.

⁶⁷ Interview with Morag Gillespie, 13 October 2015. The SLPU was set up in 1988 to research and campaign on low pay issues, and to inform low-paid workers about employment rights.

⁶⁸ Interview with Morag Gillespie, 13 October 2015. The Pools case featured in Morag’s MSc, *Part-Time Workers’ Knowledge and Exercise of Employment Rights* (Glasgow Caledonian University, 1996) p. 66.

⁶⁹ Interview with Kate Phillips, 15 October 2015.

I only cope with disgruntled customers
 I only clean up
 I only have to cover when someone is off
 I only work extra hours when the manager tells me
 I only work part-time
 I only work 15 hours, so I don't need tea breaks or holidays.

Low pay was inextricably linked to part-time working. During the period of the women's committee, the low-pay campaign initially centred on the retention of wages councils, and, when they were abolished by the Tory government in 1993, the focus became the introduction of the national minimum wage. The experiences of low-paid women workers became central to the campaign. Margaret Yuile, chair of the women's committee, spoke at conferences and rallies where she related her experience of poverty, of working part-time and with an unemployed husband. An USDAW part-time worker wrote: 'Whenever I go into a supermarket I panic. Not because I'm filling the trolley with luxuries. Halfway round I worry if I've enough to pay for the basics when I reach the checkout.'⁷⁰ The low-pay campaign of the Scottish women's committee followed the pattern set by the national committee, with the focus on the voices and experiences of women members. This was also the position with the women and health campaign, where again Scottish women contributed. Pam Urquhart, from Inverness, raised the issue at the 1987 union annual conference, because time off for cancer screening had been an issue in the local Co-op store. She said:

Women's health is a trade union issue ... This is not only a campaign for which only women must fight. The male members of the union should also be concerned. The majority of male members have female relations, whether it be mother, daughter, wife or girlfriend.⁷¹

In Scotland, the union's cancer screening booklet 'Don't Trust to Luck' was launched in Glasgow by Irene Radigan, an USDAW convener at a food processing factory in Kilmarnock, and Joan Lestor, Labour MP with special responsibility for women's issues. The national women's committee, in encouraging a two-way process of communication, and to ensure that the women and health leaflets would appeal to women members, discussed which issues should be prioritised. From the list that emerged, each divisional

⁷⁰ STUC women's committee, *Equal Voice*, Summer, 1987, p. 9.

⁷¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1987, p. 116.

women's committee chair selected a specific topic on which their committee would produce a leaflet. The Scottish women's committee put together a leaflet on the health risks of women smoking. The leaflets were then customised and widely distributed.⁷²

As indicated in Chapter 5, the feminist movement in the 1970s highlighted the issue of domestic violence. Freedom from violence or threat of violence was one of the demands of the women's liberation movement. The establishment of Women's Aid was an explicitly feminist campaign, but one which resonated with women who had neither contact with the feminist movement, nor identified themselves as feminists. Domestic violence was part of the Women in USDAW campaign agenda, when, as illustrated earlier, women were, for the first time, speaking about their personal experience of domestic abuse from the rostrum at annual conferences. Scottish women were part of this. Helen Syme from Edinburgh called for support for Women's Aid. She said: 'funding is vital ... easy to pay lip service, sympathy does not pay the bills, nor does it stop the blows'.⁷³ On the issue, the Scottish women's committee organised women-only workshops and put on fringe meetings at divisional conference. The speaker was Rosina McCrae, feminist and founding member of Kilmarnock Women's Aid. She was also the keynote speaker at USDAW's national women's conference. A specifically Scottish initiative supported by USDAW women was the Zero Tolerance of Violence Against Women campaign, which was established by Edinburgh District Council women's committee in November 1992. This was a public awareness campaign which challenged the myths and attitudes surrounding violence against women and children.⁷⁴ USDAW women in Scotland sought to spread the word about the campaign throughout the union. Karen Crawford, a Glasgow delegate, addressing the 1995 annual conference, successfully moved that Zero Tolerance literature be sent to every branch of the union and that the union encourage local authorities to get involved.⁷⁵

The earlier chapter on the activities of the women's committees from a national perspective identified a change in approach in the late 1990s. Campaigning continued, but the focus had broadened, with the emphasis on parents and carers rather than exclusively

⁷² The other leaflets dealt with the menopause, pre-menstrual syndrome and period pains, hysterectomy, osteoporosis, and tranquillisers.

⁷³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1995, p. 117. The mover of the proposition was Mary Paterson, chair of the Scottish women's committee.

⁷⁴ See Fiona Mackay, 'The Case of Zero Tolerance, Women's Politics in Action?' in Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay, *Women and Contemporary Scottish Politics* (Polygon, Edinburgh, 2001).

⁷⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1995, p. 115.

on women. New campaigns, for example on family-friendly policies and Respect for Shop workers, were introduced. The later campaign, Respect for Shopworkers, also called Freedom from Fear, aimed to protect shop workers from violence, threats and abuse, and to spread the word that these were not part of the job. The national and divisional women's committees were not initiators or leaders, but participants in these activities. On recruitment, still the dominant issue for the union, attention moved beyond part-time women workers to encompass the young, black and Asian migrant and agency workers.

Where the Scottish women's committee did diverge from the national framework was with the poll tax campaign, the poll tax being introduced in Scotland in April 1989, ahead of the rest of the UK.⁷⁶ The poll tax was discussed and debated across the labour movement in Scotland. There were bitter debates and deep divisions. A non-payment campaign was vociferous in calls for civil disobedience. The Scottish National Party and Militant campaigned for non-payment, while the STUC and the Scottish Labour Party, although strongly opposed to the introduction of the poll tax, were against such a tactic. The view of Donald Dewar MP, then leader of the Labour Party in Scotland, was that where a party aspired to government, it: 'cannot afford selective amnesia when it comes to the law of the land'.⁷⁷ The Scottish Labour Party held a special conference in September 1988 where the position on non-payment was confirmed.

The leading role of the Scottish women activists was acknowledged in the opening debate on Women in USDAW at the 1988 conference. Margaret Calvert, executive councillor from Manchester, praised the: 'excellent work of the Scottish women's committee ... at the forefront of our campaign, speaking on platforms, spearheading our publicity by being prepared to talk about their own experiences and the potential impact of the tax on their own lives and families'.⁷⁸ There was unanimity in USDAW on the iniquities of the tax, where, in the words of Margaret Yuile, the chair of the Scottish women's committee: 'someone with a modest income would pay the same as the richest in the land ... a

⁷⁶ Officially named the Community Charge, it required all adults to pay the same amount regardless of income or property.

⁷⁷ Gerry Hassan and Eric Shaw, *The Strange Death of Labour Scotland* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012) p. 62.

⁷⁸ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 160. The vigour of the Scottish campaign was recognised at the STUC by Archie Graham from Glasgow Trades Council. 'We need more unions, to take the lead from USDAW who have done magnificent work in informing their members of the dangers of the poll tax' STUC Conference Report 1988, p. 291.

redistribution of wealth from poor to rich'.⁷⁹ The Scottish women were the leading speakers at USDAW annual conferences on the issue of the poll tax. In 1988, at the USDAW national conference, out of six Scottish speakers on the poll tax, four were women, not the usual breakdown. When the national women's committee organised a lunchtime fringe meeting on the issue, it was two Scottish members of the women's committee who were the keynote speakers. Margaret Yuile, chair of the Scottish women's committee, was selected by USDAW to move the resolution on the poll tax at the Labour Party conference in 1988. The women argued unequivocally against non-payment, which dovetailed neatly with USDAW's position and that of the Scottish Labour Party. Here, the Scottish women campaigners were not passively following the official line handed down to them, but had reached their own conclusions, which were against a strategy of illegality.

Margaret Yuile, when interviewed, explained why she opposed non-payment:

There would be no money, no funding for home helps, for people maybe special needs. I listened to my wee pensioner neighbour, she was a wee lady, didn't ask for anything. She worried about paying the poll tax, more worried about not paying it ... you had to take that on board, you had to relate to these people. From the beginning it was wrong, the poll tax, and that's basically why I got so involved in it. It was so wrong you had to try to do something about it and that's why I fought so vehemently.⁸⁰

Mary Paterson, who followed Margaret as chair of the Scottish women's committee, talked of how women understood the issues, latched on to what the poll tax meant for family finances, how difficult it would be to get the council tax money off their kids, who were not on high wages. It was the possibility of a warrant sale that was most to be feared.

Anybody who had had experience of a sheriff officer, they come, the men are big burly thugs, they come during the day when the women are more likely to be home than the men, they bullied and threatened, forced their way into people's homes ... I couldn't put myself through that again ... Tommy Sheridan couldn't be everywhere.⁸¹

Margaret Yuile addressed the TUC rally in Manchester in 1989, where speakers included Norman Willis, TUC general secretary. Activists supporting non-payment were much in evidence. She recalled 'my heart was pounding, knew what I was up against, knew they

⁷⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1988, p. 179.

⁸⁰ Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015.

⁸¹ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015. A warrant sale is where creditors instruct sheriff officers to remove a debtor's property and sell it to repay the debt. Tommy Sheridan had promised to stop every warrant sale as part of the Militant non-payment campaign.

would be buying'.⁸² She had been informed by her daughter, who worked at the National Savings Bank in Glasgow, that the union in her workplace was sending down a 'big load' of non-payers to the rally. She was praised by USDAW's general secretary for her strong contribution. He said:

And when the TUC wanted a woman speaker to speak at the demonstration in Manchester, they came to us. Margaret Yuile from Scotland spoke at that demonstration in the most exceptional way, even though there were the anti-payment group heckling at the demonstration and I think it is to her credit and to the credit of this union and its activities that she presented herself in such a tremendous way.⁸³

The Scottish women's committee in the main followed the framework established by the national women's committee and contributed to that agenda through the proposal for a part-time workers survey and the endorsement of Zero Tolerance of Violence Against Women. The national women's committee was a two-way process. It included the chairs of all the divisional women's committees, who not only reported on their own activities but took back ideas from the women's officer and other divisional representatives. The poll tax illustrates a divergence from the national agenda, with Scottish women taking the lead. This was because the poll tax was being introduced first in Scotland, and also because the Scottish women's committee members felt so strongly about the issue that they were willing to go on public platforms as part of the anti-poll tax campaign.

The number of Scottish women speakers at the USDAW annual conference did not continue to increase in a linear fashion. There was an increase from zero women speakers in 1982 to twelve in 1987; in 1992, it had fallen to three, in 2001 and 2002 there were none and in 2005 there were four. The high point was the period 1985–89. Why were there these fluctuations? There is no clear answer. There remained the barriers to women's participation with the branch structure, attendance at which was the route to becoming a delegate to national conference. The early years of the women's committees were viewed as an opportune time to be campaigning against Tory policies, and the importance of women's voices being heard. As the campaigns gradually became less focused on women, maybe there was less encouragement for women to attend annual conference. Again, as outlined in the previous chapter, the women's work had been downgraded in 1998, and there was no longer a Women in USDAW debate or report to conference. Some of the key

⁸² Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015.

⁸³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1990, p. 71.

women activists at the beginning of the women's structures had moved on, and this may have resulted in less leadership. Margaret McCall, a member of the Scottish women's committee in the late 1990s and early 2000s, claimed that it was less vibrant:

I seemed to see things lacking in our women's committee. It seemed to have gone a wee bit downhill, a wee bit staid. I don't know why but before there used to be enthusiasm but now I just felt it was more a talking shop rather than an action group. Don't know if it was getting support or not. I just felt the life seemed to be taken out of them.⁸⁴

More women from Scotland speaking at annual conferences is only one indicator of progress. Was progress being made elsewhere? Again, the pattern was uneven. On women officials, the position most resistant to change, the first woman official in Scotland since 1967 was appointed in 1992. By 2005, there were two women officials, but the following year, the second appointee transferred to the Belfast office. If the number of full-time officials had been proportionate to the women's membership in Scotland, there would have been 12 women officials. As the Women's Claim of Right acknowledged: 'men have found it easier to use their record as activists as the basis for a future political career. With one or two exceptions, women involved have been fighting invisibility.'⁸⁵ This could possibly apply equally to USDAW. A trawl through the USDAW conference reports for the 20 years of the Women in USDAW structures charts the progress of Scottish male activists moving through to become full-time officials. This pattern was not replicated for women activists, some of whom did apply for officials' posts. The two women who were appointed had no track record in campaigning on women's issues or speaking at conferences. The first woman appointed in 1992 was not a shop steward and had never attended Scottish or national conferences. Mary Paterson, who did not apply for a full-time position, commented:

I think she works in one of the big department stores. She was definitely not active within the union because we all knew the activists, they were up for something, you met them whether it was a rally or speaking at divisional conference or asking questions or whatever, in workshops. You met a lot of activists within the union but I never met this woman. Alison or something was her name. I had no idea who she was.⁸⁶

A woman activist who had applied for that position was Pam from Inverness, speaker at USDAW and STUC conferences, and winner of the Jimmy Waugh Memorial Award for

⁸⁴ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

⁸⁵ Women's Claim of Right Group, *A Woman's Claim of Right in Scotland* (Polygon, Edinburgh, 1991) p. 32.

⁸⁶ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

Outstanding Young Trade Unionist in Scotland. She, along with Anne McCreadie, encouraged and supported women-only courses in the north of Scotland.⁸⁷ Briskin contended that the male leadership in unions are more likely to select women who do not challenge, and who have no track record of working on behalf of women.⁸⁸ When interviewed, Pam commented: ‘I almost got a feeling that if you were connected to the women’s committee that they put you in a box so you had to be pushed to one side.’⁸⁹ Margaret Yuile, first chair of the Scottish women’s committee, whose campaigning activities were referred to earlier, was similarly overlooked, this time for a less active man. Margaret McCall, branch secretary of USDAW and a member of the Scottish women’s committee at the time, was not appointed when she applied. On this occasion, the post was given to a young woman from Derry with little union involvement and no experience of Scotland. A common factor in the appointments was Pat Hunter, executive member for Scotland and chair of the appointments panel for union officials. His somewhat cryptic comments on Women in USDAW at annual conferences, where he was the chair of the standing orders committee, hinted at a less than supportive relationship. On his bruised face, resulting from a fall, he commented from the platform: ‘Did Women in USDAW finally get their revenge?’⁹⁰ At a later conference he remarked: ‘I do not have a dialogue with the women’s committee. I wonder why?’⁹¹ It could be argued the he was disproportionately influential in union appointments for Scotland because of his longevity and entrenched positions. Rosina McCrae, when interviewed, commented on his bullying and misogyny. This was totally unconnected to USDAW, but about her experiences within the local Labour party of which they were both members. His derogatory comments to her were mainly related to her campaigning activities on behalf of women.⁹²

The USDAW interviewees indicated that the women’s committee met some resistance and that its credibility continued to be challenged. Margaret Yuile said of some of the senior men in Scotland:

I would say we got lip service. They put up with us because they had to ... I think they were frightened that we would take some of their power away from them.

⁸⁷ Pam Urquhart is now an official with the STUC.

⁸⁸ Briskin and McDermott, *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 130.

⁸⁹ Interview with Pam Urquhart, 16 July 2015.

⁹⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2000, p. 203.

⁹¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report 2004, p. 196.

⁹² Interview with Rosina McCrae, 13 October 2015.

Let's face it, a lot of issues we were dealing with, they weren't interested because it wasn't affecting them.⁹³

Mary Paterson remarked:

It was wee digs, constantly wee digs. It was always quite derogatory. I remember standing at a stall at conference one year and a man from the executive said, 'well you have had your women's committees for 2/3 years what have you done to make it better for the union?' ... and I said, well excuse me, you have had this union for 100 years ... the men have run this union for 100 years, don't expect us to fix it for you in three.⁹⁴

The annual reports recorded on a number of occasions that the hall emptied when there were debates on women's issues. Rosina McCrae reported a similar pattern at the Labour Party conferences. Mary Paterson, at the 1991 USDAW conference, commented: 'let us not kid ourselves that we have changed the attitudes of all men'. She asked the male delegates: 'who packed your suitcase? Who ironed the shirts that went into that suitcase ... and who is going to wash the shirts when you get home?' She contrasted this with the women at conference who had to: 'organise like mad before they got away'.⁹⁵

Hostility was not confined to the men. The interviewees claimed that there were women in Scotland who were not supportive, including women on the Scottish divisional council. Mary spoke of the 'infiltration' of the Scottish women's committee: 'What I see was infiltration of men speaking through women. Something would come up and you would get that whine: 'but that happens to men too', everything you said: 'that happens to men too', except cervical cancer.'⁹⁶ She nicknamed these women as 'noddies', who in her view were there to undermine the work of the Scottish women's committee.

There was not universal hostility from the male officials and activists. There were those who encouraged and supported women. Anne McCreadie, from the Co-op in Inverness, recalled how her full-time official persuaded her to attend the national conference, and made sure there was another woman delegate to go along with her. Anne went on to become branch secretary for the 60 Co-op stores in the north of Scotland.⁹⁷ Margaret

⁹³ Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015.

⁹⁴ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

⁹⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 155.

⁹⁶ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015. This has echoes of the comments of Ellen Wilkinson on the non-threatening women placed by men in the unions: 'nice tame tabby cats put on committees' – TUC Conference Report 1924, p. 365

⁹⁷ Interview with Anne McCreadie, 18 July 2015.

McCall praised the official who set up a local branch, which enabled her to get information on what was happening in the union and to participate in activities beyond her workplace. Prior to this, the depot membership had been allocated to an inactive Boots retail branch, and as a consequence they received no communication on what was happening in the Scottish division. With their own on-site branch, they received information on a wide-range of union activities and could put themselves forward for Scottish and national USDAW conferences. This included the Women in USDAW activities and campaigns. For eight years prior to this, there had been no communication.⁹⁸ Mary mentioned the official who asked if she wanted to ‘go on some woman’s thing’ that was starting up.⁹⁹ Margaret Yuile recalled how her full-time officer supported her, against the male branch chair, who wanted to put an anti-abortion proposition on the annual conference agenda.¹⁰⁰ The branch chair had previously spoken at annual conference in opposition to a woman’s right to choose where he commented: ‘the next step would be why bother about the mentally ill and the handicapped’.¹⁰¹ What was highlighted was the chance element in becoming active, and the power of the official to act either as a gatekeeper to stifle participation or one who opened doors to allow the women to become more active, more involved. The USDAW women interviewed were able to identify with this view, as during the course of their union activity they had been allocated different officials, some hostile, some neutral, some supportive.

The most high-profile instance of Scottish women activists challenging for positions within the union hierarchy was the candidacy of Mary Paterson for a position on the national executive in 1991 and 1994. The two other candidates were Jimmy Burke, convener at the Gray Dunn biscuit factory in Glasgow, and Pat Hunter, full-time convener for the Co-op. Neither of the male candidates reflected the majority of the membership, who were women in retail, increasingly part-time workers and generally low paid. Both were seeking re-election, with Pat Hunter having been on the executive since 1978. When asked why she stood, Mary replied: ‘I stood for the executive council, because I think we needed more women on the EC. We needed a woman’s voice in a woman’s union.’¹⁰² On Pat Hunter, she remarked:

⁹⁸ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

⁹⁹ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015.

¹⁰¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1983, p. 117–8.

¹⁰² Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

He not only dominated the Scottish division but conference by being on the Standing Orders Committee and he would rule the roost at that. I just thought that he had been doing it so long he had become a dictator. Everybody starts with a passion for the union and then as it develops, he just bossed everybody about, really bossed everybody about.¹⁰³

On the reaction to her decision to stand, she commented:

Officials absolutely kept well away from me. The guy who was my official backed right off. Other people steered away from me. Don't be seen talking to Mary. I knew I wasn't going to get it but it is important to stand up. At least I tried. It was about opening up, it hadn't been challenged for years. It broke the pattern of those old fuddy duddies. I would not have stood without the women's committee.¹⁰⁴

Mary's campaign highlighted the women's perspective. In her election leaflet, she wrote: 'Women are important to this union, not just to be mentioned by men at election time ... but all the time.' She had developed a reputation not only for speaking on women's issues at annual conferences, but from time to time challenging the national leadership. She did this when the union moved away from double time for Sunday working to an unspecified premium payment.¹⁰⁵ She criticised the leadership's support for the Labour Party's proposal for one member one vote (OMOV) for Labour Party conference. She declared: 'You cannot individualise the trade union votes, the whole basis of our approach is collective votes and collective action.'¹⁰⁶ A Labour Party member, she was not aligned with any political grouping in the union.

Pat Hunter, the senior male candidate, adapted his election material in the light of the challenge from a woman. In 1994, he wrote: 'Women in Scotland can be assured in every issue of representation, so long as PAT HUNTER represents you, your rights will be protected. WITHOUT WOMEN NOTHING IN LIFE WOULD FUNCTION.'

Mary failed on both occasions to win a seat on the executive, but she had broken the unchallenged run of the sitting members. The following executive election, a third candidate entered the field, a male activist, but he too failed to dislodge the existing members. The next woman to challenge for the executive council in 2000 was successful. The contest was possibly easier, as one of the sitting executive members was retiring. The

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 130.

¹⁰⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1993, p. 85.

first woman to represent Scotland on the national executive was a shop steward from Tesco, where almost two thirds of the membership worked. She had not been involved with the Scottish women's committee, or in campaigning around women's issues.¹⁰⁷ She did not seek re-election in 2006, and Scottish representation on the national executive reverted to two men.

A challenge at local level came when Kath Brotherston, a shop steward at Hall's food manufacturing plant, and chair of the Scottish women's committee, stood for the position of branch secretary. The Hall's branch was a single-site branch, and one where it had become the practice for branch officers to be the senior union representatives, directly involved with the local union official in wage negotiations. The vacancy had arisen because the office-bearer had been appointed a full-time official. Kath decided to 'have a go', that is: 'may be better to have a woman in with the men'. She lost the election, noting: 'that more women came forward afterwards'.¹⁰⁸ Her daughter, Carol Anne, also a shop steward at the plant, saw the election differently. She felt that the contest was 'bitter' and that Kath 'got beat' because it was a male relative of the retiring branch secretary who was standing against Kath: 'that's why I was up in the air ... fellows voted for him because he was Lawrence's cousin'.¹⁰⁹

Breitenbach commented that industrial action does not encompass the gamut of activities deployed by women trade unionists to deal with management and to represent their members effectively.¹¹⁰ The women interviewed demonstrated this. They cited examples of challenging management decisions, their 'wee victories', which included arranging paid time off for cancer screening for two members in the local Co-op store, of fighting to get the store closed on Boxing Day, of obtaining paid tea breaks for part-timers, of arguing with management to ensure that a single parent would receive all the money due her on the day she was leaving. Kath described how she dealt with harassment from a line manager who was ignoring her safety concerns, and threatening to stop her time off for the women's committee meetings. She went to the senior shop stewards to complain, but they claimed they were unable to deal with the case due to lack of evidence. 'So, I put a wee tape

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015. She was a member of USDAW's women's committee and the STUC women's committee.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Kath Brotherston, 7 August 2015. Halls was the largest branch in the Scottish division.

¹⁰⁹ Phone message from Carol Anne, 7 August 2015.

¹¹⁰ Breitenbach, *Women Workers in Scotland*, p. 54.

recorder in my pocket.’ With oral evidence of bullying, a formal grievance was pursued. The result was that the line manager was transferred to another site. The director at the plant later referred to Kath and her daughter as the ‘Rottweiler and her pup’, calling her vindictive and devious.¹¹¹ It was standing up for herself that led Margaret McCall to take on the role of shop steward. At the end of her 6–10pm twilight shift in a distribution centre in Coatbridge, she informed the supervisor that she could not stay late because of childcare issues. It was expected that the women workers stayed behind till all the picking had been completed, sometimes till midnight. Margaret was told: ‘you will just stay here, if you go you will be sacked, if you walk out the door you needn’t come back’. She ignored the threat and left work anyway. The following morning, she phoned the site manager who told her to report to work as normal. The women workers were impressed: ‘you’re dead brave ... imagine standing up to the establishment’.¹¹² They persuaded her to become their union representative; up till then there had been no shop steward.

Scottish Women and the Labour Movement

The following section looks at the involvement of USDAW women in Scotland at the STUC and in the Scottish Labour Party. It will explore whether the existence of the Women in USDAW structures encouraged them to be more visible and more campaigning, not only within the union but in the broader labour movement.

As noted earlier, from the late 1970s there had been demands at STUC conferences from women trade unionists for changes to the structures to improve women’s participation and representation in trade unions. Two reserved seats for women on the General Council were agreed in 1980 and increased to three in 1986. In that year, ‘advisory’ was removed from the STUC women’s committee title, the chair of the women’s committee was to be allocated time to address congress delegates on the work of the committee, and *Equal Voice*, the bulletin of the women’s committee was introduced. A review by the STUC in 1990 instituted further structural changes, with the abolition of the women’s section on the General Council and women to be allocated to industrial sections. This mirrored action taken by the TUC. Unions with a large female membership under an automaticity rule were required to include a woman in their General Council representation. This resulted in

¹¹¹ Interview with Kath Brotherson, 17 August 2015.

¹¹² Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

ten women on the STUC governing body, rising to 12 women in 1994. The outcome was achieved by increasing the size of the General Council, thereby ensuring that no man was displaced. In 1995, new rules were agreed to require all General Council committees to have a woman as chair or vice-chair, and a woman to be president every other year. An increase in the number of women on the STUC General Council did not necessarily lead to greater focus on women's issues. As Breitenbach pointed out, the women on the General Council were not there to represent women's interests, but the industrial interest of their unions.¹¹³

On the discussion and debates around structural changes to improve women's participation, the STUC Congress reports revealed that the USDAW delegation did not participate, with the aforementioned exception of the union's opposition in 1979 to reserved seats for women on the General Council. Notwithstanding this policy position, USDAW put forward Mary Carlin for one of the reserved seats from 1985 to 1989, but without success. She had been elected to the STUC women's committee in 1987, after 20 years of no USDAW representation following the retirement of Jean Glass in 1967. It was only with the introduction of the automaticity rule that she became a member of the General Council. She was not elected to represent USDAW women members, but the union as a whole. The election of an USDAW woman to the STUC General Council following a rule change mirrored what happened at the TUC, where the successful nominee was Bernadette Hillon, the union's women's officer.

Politics in the Labour Party in Scotland were increasingly diverging from the UK, with Scotland consistently returning a majority of Labour MPs during the 18 years of Tory rule. Campaigns for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament became a key priority, and demands for an increase in women's political representation intensified. A key objective of Labour women was to revive the women's structures in Scotland, and to make them more representative and accountable. A focus for the activity at local level was the constituency women's sections. An indication of the upsurge in women's activity was the increase in women's sections from 15 in 1981 to 56 in 1985.¹¹⁴ As a result of their efforts, the Scottish women's conference was reinstated in 1981. Women's seats on the Scottish Executive of

¹¹³ Esther Breitenbach, 'A Comparative Study of the Women's Trade Union Conference and Scottish Women's Trade Conference', *Feminist Review*, No 7, Spring, 1981, p. 76.

¹¹⁴ Women's Claim of Right Group, *A Woman's Claim of Right*, p. 52.

the Party were re-introduced in 1984. Of the five seats reserved for women, two were elected from the women's conference, and three from the conference as a whole. Rosina McCrae from Kilmarnock constituency and Ina Love from NUPE were the first to come through elections at the women's conference and not by conference as a whole. There were setbacks. The area most resistant to change was women's representation in the House of Commons. In 1987, Maria Fyfe was the only Scottish woman Labour MP. Women-only shortlists were introduced at national level in 1994 to increase the number of women MPs. The policy was shelved in 1996, following a legal challenge by Mr Jepson and Mr Dyas-Elliott, who successfully argued before an industrial tribunal that women-only shortlists denied them the opportunity to become Labour Party parliamentary candidates, and that they therefore had been unlawfully discriminated against on the grounds of their sex.¹¹⁵ Those women who had already been selected under the procedure were unaffected. When Scottish women activists put forward a resolution in 1994 to the Scottish Labour Party conference to have women-only shortlists in every seat where a Labour MP was retiring, they were unsuccessful.

The possibility of a Scottish Parliament concentrated the attention on mechanisms to ensure strong representation of women. The STUC women's committee's submission to the Constitutional Convention's Women's Issues Group for 50:50 was taken up within the Scottish Labour Party, and became policy at the Dunoon conference in March 1990. This achievement was assisted by the fact that no men would be displaced: there was no incumbency factor in a new institution.

There is little evidence of interest within USDAW, at Scottish or UK level, for increasing women's political participation. Margaret Yuile and Mary Paterson spoke in favour of quotas for women at all levels within the Labour Party at the 1992 USDAW annual conference, but this was the exception. The union's focus of attention was on returning a Labour government to help halt the decline in union membership, to remove anti-union legislation, and to provide a more supportive environment for collective bargaining. To this end, the union's political agenda was focused on working within the key marginal seats that Labour would have to win to achieve power.

¹¹⁵ The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, brought in by a Labour government, allowed political parties to use all-women shortlists.

The USDAW women interviewed highlighted how their involvement with the Labour Party started with the union. Although Labour voters, it was through their Women in USDAW campaigning activities that they came to recognise that industrial aims needed political action. Margaret Yuile remarked:

I was always interested in politics. I was always voting Labour and things like that and just through family, but as I say once I got involved in the union and the women's committee it became more apparent that we needed a voice in the Labour Party, saying to them, look this is what we need as women, this is what we need as mothers.¹¹⁶

Margaret McCall said: 'It became apparent that you needed to be active politically if you wanted the union's agenda ... that was the only way you could get change'.¹¹⁷

Women activists in the west of Scotland were involved in 1992 in campaigning in the Tory-held marginal of Stirling. Mary Paterson, from the constituency, and chair of the Scottish women's committee, organised women to come through to support the Labour candidate.¹¹⁸ Margaret McCall, from the then Labour heartlands in Lanarkshire, loved the campaign: it was 'loads of fun', we 'worked as a gang'. She contrasted her experiences of working in the poorer and the more prosperous areas. She had been warned that in a 'rough' area:

You would get your hand bit off you if you try to put a leaflet through the door and then we went to Dunblane, I could not believe how nasty people could be, before you would even get to the door they were out shushing you away and if you did manage to get your leaflet through the door they would open the door and throw it away and I felt like saying Keep Britain Tidy ... You know I felt more unsafe there than I did in the Raploch.¹¹⁹

Scottish women in USDAW may have had little involvement in the campaigns to increase women's political representation and have concentrated their efforts on campaigning both on issues such as low pay and the national minimum wage, and in election campaigning, but they were not uncritical loyalists. Margaret Yuile, who had not been involved in election work before, was part of an USDAW team working in the Govan by-election in 1988. She said:

¹¹⁶ Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

¹¹⁸ In 1992 and 1997, the candidates were women, having been selected from women-only shortlists.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

There we were running up and down chapping doors, leafleting, writing letters, you name it ... I was a Govanite and I worked tirelessly for Bob Gillespie and I was annoyed, I just felt the people of Govan deserved better than Bob Gillespie, no harm to him. I was angry with the Labour Party.¹²⁰

At the 1998 USDAW conference, Mary Paterson berated Labour MPs on the withdrawal of benefits from lone parents: ‘in all my running about for and with the Labour Party, I never expected to be attacked by what I consider my own side’.¹²¹ Margaret McCall, while welcoming the introduction of family-friendly policies, commented that unless there was paid leave for domestic and parental leave, it would have little impact on USDAW members.¹²²

From the late 1970s, feminists were entering the trade unions and the labour movement in increasing numbers. Moving into the mainstream, they campaigned for change, for improvements for women in society, in the workplace, in the trade unions and political parties. Kate Phillips wrote:

we took our feminist ideas into community groups, trade unions and the Labour Party. For some of us it meant back to the organisations we had left some years before. But we went with other women and with shared understanding about women’s needs and how to defend them.¹²³

Kate Phillips had been involved with the Labour Party in Wales as a young woman. Her feminism developed through contact with American women from the Peace Corps, when she was living in Nairobi. She was active in the Maryhill women’s section when she came to Glasgow in the mid-70s. It was the Maryhill women’s section that invited Chris Aldred, a feminist from Aberdeen, into the constituency parliamentary selection. The contest was won by Maria Fyfe, who became the MP for the seat.

¹²⁰ Interview with Margaret Yuile, 10 August 2015. The Labour candidate Bob Gillespie was widely regarded as a significant factor in Labour’s defeat. The seat was won by the SNP candidate (formerly a Labour MP) Jim Sillars.

¹²¹ USDAW Annual Conference Report 1998, p. 178. In the interview, she expressed ‘disgust’ at the level set for the national minimum wage – £3.60 an hour for those 22 and over. When she had been involved in the low-pay campaign in the 1992 election, the level proposed had been £3.40 an hour. Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

¹²² USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1999, p. 203. This reflected the ambivalence within the trade union movement to the New Labour government. The STUC declared: ‘Neither as much as the trade union movement wanted ... and we will campaign for significant improvements ... but they are a huge step forward for trade union rights’. STUC Conference Report, 1999, p. 3.

¹²³ Letter in *Radical Scotland*, No 38, April/May 1989, p. 4. Breitenbach made a similar point. She commented that the advent of Thatcherism propelled feminists into the Labour movement. Shirley Henderson and Alison MacKay (eds), *Grit and Diamonds: Women in Scotland Making History 1980–90* (Strathmullion, Edinburgh, 1990) p. 224.

As noted in an earlier chapter, feminism was not attractive to USDAW women. Mary Paterson, on reflecting back on her views on feminism in the 1980s, said of the image portrayed of feminists: ‘It was just the negative you had of it, things said about feminists in the papers, everything was anti-them, they ridiculed them and had them as these fierce women with no sense of humour.’¹²⁴ Margaret McCall also stated that she was not a feminist ‘Women should be represented in all aspects of the workplace and political parties ... feminists take it too far ... seen as anti-men’.¹²⁵ Rosina McCrae, who was to become a leading feminist in the Labour Party, acknowledged that, as a working-class woman from Kilmarnock in the early 1970s:

The women’s movement passed me by. I was aware of it, mainly the controversial side, the bra-burning ... it was irrelevant, it wasn’t in working-class women’s heads. Working-class women knew that there was some inequality in their relationships with men. I think they knew that, but that manifest itself in moaning in others’ houses ... so women would talk about that but they never really made connection with the women’s movement.¹²⁶

Rosina’s feminism developed through her activities in the local Labour Party women’s section, and through her role as a founder member of Kilmarnock Women’s Aid.

Although Women in USDAW may have disavowed the label feminist, there were always women activists, albeit at times virtually invisible, who campaigned for equal rights for women. As identified in earlier chapters, a thread of female activism ran through the union, extending back to before the two retail unions merged to form USDAW in 1947. The thread may have worn very thin at times, but it never snapped. Women in USDAW and feminist activists in the 1980s/1990s were operating in different environments, which provided few opportunities for co-operative engagement.

Women-only courses, part of the remit of the divisional women’s committees, in Scotland initiated a link between USDAW women, such as Mary Paterson and Margaret McCall and feminists such as Kate Phillips and Rosina McCrae. It can be argued that this connection was unlikely to have happened if there had been no women-only courses. Women-only courses were not new. The STUC women’s committee organised the first of their women’s day schools in 1928, and then took them throughout Scotland. Members of the Shop

¹²⁴ Interview with Mary Paterson, 26 January 2002.

¹²⁵ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

¹²⁶ Interview with Rosina McCrae, 13 October 2015.

Assistants' Union and NUDAW attended.¹²⁷ This separate provision for women was very limited, reaching only a tiny number of women. In the 1970s, the impetus to reintroduce women-only courses for trade union women came largely from feminist activists. It was feminists within the TUC Education Service who produced the activities and resources for the women-only courses. The key figure was Ruth Elliott, who had been involved with the women's movement in the 1970s, and had helped to establish women's groups in her union, the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS). There was some resistance to women-only courses. Kate recalled that Elliott at the TUC: 'fought our corner there very strongly and very well'. She and other women tutors had a problematic relationship with Larry Cairns, TUC Education Officer for Scotland. He was not supportive of women-only courses, and regarded the tutors as 'not real union women'.¹²⁸

What was different about women-only courses in the 1980s was not only the increase in provision, but significant changes in design and delivery. Developments in adult education were emphasising student-centred approaches, with learners actively engaged rather than passive recipients. Feminists played a pivotal role in promoting this approach. Thompson acknowledged the impact of the women's movement on adult education.

For at least 20 years from the mid-70s to the mid-90s – in spite of Thatcherism – feminism played an energetic role in reinvigorating adult education ... it influenced both curriculum and practice in ways that articulated and informed many of the important social and political changes taking place in women's lives.¹²⁹

The methods were informed by feminist practices, starting where the women activists were at, valuing their experiences and skills, and shifting the focus from the tutor to the women participants. It was the need for female tutors for the women-only courses that provided opportunities for feminist tutors to become more involved with trade union women.

USDAW in 1980 had no women-only courses. The union's education and training provision was focused on the training of workplace representatives, who attended courses in work time and with paid release. What changed was the establishment of national and

¹²⁷ Arnot, *Women Workers and Trade Union Participation in Scotland*, p. 150. Following the lead of the STUC women's committee, day schools for women trade unionists were taken up by the TUC and individual unions.

¹²⁸ Interview with Kate Phillips, 12 October 2015.

¹²⁹ Jane Thompson, *Words in Edgeways* (NIACE, Leicester, 2007) p. 8. This view echoed that of Barr, *Liberating Knowledge*, p. 16.

divisional women's committees in 1985. The key remit of the women's committees was to reach out to recruit and retain women members by highlighting issues of interest to them. The 1986 Women in USDAW report noted that:

the women's committees will be developing further the programme of workshops designed to encourage more women to participate in the activities of the union. The workshops will seek to involve women who are not already active in the union.¹³⁰

Women-only courses were a part of this development. Pilot courses were held in 1984 in Liverpool, Leeds, London, Glasgow and Dunfermline. Thereafter, the women-only courses became part of the remit of the women's committees. USDAW, as with the TUC, had to look outside the union for female tutors for women-only courses. It was feminist tutors, in the main, who took on this role of initiating and developing women-only courses in USDAW.

In Scotland, the main tutors for the USDAW women-only courses came from the Workers Educational Association (WEA), which had been involved in trade union education since its formation in 1903, and had long-standing links with USDAW at national and Scottish level. The WEA provided the women tutors to the TUC Education Service in Scotland, because all the existing tutors were male. Chris Aldred, WEA tutor-organiser in Aberdeen, was the key figure in terms of promoting a feminist approach and providing innovative materials for women-only courses in the community and in the unions. The main tutor for the women-only courses in Scotland was the WEA tutor-organiser for Glasgow Kate Phillips, feminist and Labour Party activist. She commented:

Feminists called it consciousness-raising, mapping-out experience. For me it was fascinating to be with shop workers, and assisting with the process of doing that ... saying that they were union matters ... Small group discussions taught us that women have clear views, can make plans, can talk for themselves, and what I was talking about – discrimination – was absolutely striking a chord in their lives ... not some fancy feminist ideas, but really important to women workers.¹³¹

The tutors recognised the skills and abilities of USDAW women. Another Scottish tutor remembered the 'feisty, hilarious, articulate women' on a workshop for women members

¹³⁰ Women in USDAW Report, 1986, p. 9.

¹³¹ Correspondence from Kate Phillips, 24 February 2008. She had pondered on how you get from consciousness-raising to working with organised groups with the skills to do things. The answer, she concluded, was through the TUC Education Scheme. She referred to this as her 'eureka moment'. Interview with Kate Phillips, 12 October 2015.

from a fish-processing factory in Fraserburgh. Of a shop worker at a different workshop, she remarked that: ‘her words just blew me away, so direct, so vivid’. She described the women-only courses as: ‘providing a union space, more imaginative, less procedural, to make the women feel different about the union’.¹³²

Greene and Kirton in their research into women-only courses in the TGWU and ASTMS credited them with building the confidence of the women participants, increasing their knowledge and skills and providing opportunities for networking.¹³³ What did USDAW women who attended the courses have to say? Mary Paterson remarked:

It was dead positive for the women the way meetings were held ... everyone getting a chance to speak ... the women with such a lot to say ... the first chance to get a word in edgeways ... The starting point was your own knowledge ... but you left knowing a lot more ... nobody had ever asked before; it took a while to realise you were being educated.¹³⁴

Margaret McCall, a Scottish shop steward who had gone through the union representative training, recalled:

Although I was a shop steward, it wasn’t until I went along to a workshop organised by the women’s committee that I really became involved in the union. It was not just the content that impressed me ... it was the welcoming atmosphere. It was all about getting women involved and making things happen.¹³⁵

When asked why she first went along to a women-only workshop, she replied:

It was women’s issues and I just thought the more I know about women’s issues, many of our members are women, and it was maternity rights. And I just thought I need to know what is going on here because a lot of the time I was just going in and just bluffing.

She spoke of arriving late at the venue:

I was running late and I’m running and I gets to the door and I can hear voices and I thought, oh it’s started and I’m not going in there. I started to walk away and I thought you coward, go big coward, go in, go in ... The people that attended made me feel so welcome, but it was information I was getting, I couldn’t get enough. I was wanting more and more. It just opened up a whole new world of what they were getting away with, the workplace was getting away with.¹³⁶

¹³² Interview with Catriona Burness, 1 February 2008.

¹³³ Anne Marie Greene and Gill Kirton, ‘The Role of Trade Union Education’, *Gender, Work and Organisation*, Vol 13, No 1, 2002, p. 48.

¹³⁴ Interview with Mary Paterson, 8 February 2008.

¹³⁵ Women in USDAW newsletter, 2001, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

Pam recalled:

I remember a lot of laughter but in a really positive way at these workshops, very relaxed that's what I remember. Everybody participated you know what I mean. People felt confident enough that they could take part ... They were a really good way to get women who wouldn't normally come to the union, particularly the women and health, they were really good, a great way to engage with women in a non-threatening way about issues that mattered to them.¹³⁷

Mary contrasted the women-only courses with other union activities:

the formal men-dominated, male-dominated meetings at which we just sat and went through the paperwork, and lost the page number and didn't know who was talking, or whatever, nothing seemed relevant, then you finished and then everybody went for a drink.¹³⁸

The information and knowledge gained were regarded as invaluable. Kath from Halls requested a women-only pensions course. She felt that 'the women needed a lot more explained to them ... not getting answers'. The result was that the women, working with calculators and the pensions agreement, and with the guidance of the TUC tutor, discovered that they would receive less than they expected, but: 'at least they know the score'.¹³⁹

Women-only courses expanded and broadened USDAW's training and education programme. Issues included maternity rights, low and unequal pay, women's health, sexual harassment, domestic abuse and the poll tax. There were skills briefings on speaking in public, making union policy, campaigning. Most of these topics would have received only cursory mention, if any, on standard mixed union representative training courses. A key difference from the existing provision was the reaching out to women, organising sessions in towns and cities, at times that suited the women, and dealing with issues immediately relevant to them. Courses were held in the evenings and at weekends, with no paid release and in the women's own time. They took place in a variety of locations, from Glasgow to Inverness, from Galashiels to Fraserburgh, from Kilmarnock to Dundee.

¹³⁷ Interview with Pam Urquhart, 16 July 2015. She spoke of the women-only courses as: 'a key part of my learning'. She referred to women opening doors for her. Pam went on to do a HND, an MA and a Masters in Lifelong Learning, all while working full-time.

¹³⁸ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

¹³⁹ Interview with Kath Brotherson, 7 August 2015.

As well as briefings for activists, informal get-togethers were organised for women members. This was a pioneering development and created a new layer of membership education in the union. Previously, membership education had been limited to day schools on Sundays, organised by federations – a collection of branches in a geographical area. The day schools were conducted on more traditional lines: participants sitting in rows being addressed by a speaker, often a national officer. Interaction, dialogue, participation were not the norm. This methodology was far removed from that deployed in the women's get-togethers. Most of the women who came along to the members' get-togethers had never attended any previous union meeting. The popularity of the women activists and members' sessions would suggest that the issues dealt with, and the format used, struck a chord with USDAW women.

The equal pay for work of equal value briefings illustrate the efficacy of starting where the women were at and building in manageable chunks from there. An early activity was to draw up on a flipchart a list of the tasks involved in women's jobs and place alongside them those of the male workers. The difference in pay and conditions was then considered. Kate Phillips commented: 'I became accustomed to waiting for the penny to drop, and for the women to declare "that's not fair".'¹⁴⁰

This would not have happened if the starting point had been the intricacies of the equal value regulations rather than the reality in the workplace.

A co-operative, rather than a hierarchical, approach developed between the feminist tutors and members of the Scottish women's committee. It became the practice for women-only courses to have a member of the women's committee alongside the tutor. A mutual respect grew between the tutors and key women activists in Scotland. One illustration of this was the involvement of USDAW women in Kate Phillips' campaign in 1992 to be elected as the MP for Stirling, which, although unsuccessful, laid the base for the 1997 victory for Labour candidate Anne McGuire.

The impact of the women-only courses should not be over-stated. Many women members throughout Scotland would never have attended a women-only learning activity. The spread of women-only courses was patchy, uneven. Much depended on the support of full-

¹⁴⁰ Correspondence from Kate Phillips, 24 February 2008.

time officials to promote the courses, and the acquiescence of branch officials who subsidised the women-only events. In Scotland, the well-attended women and health evening sessions in Ayrshire benefited from the support of the male official, who viewed the briefings as a way to encourage the recruitment of part-time shop workers in his area. In Inverness, where there was no union office, it was Anne McCreadie the branch secretary from the large co-op branch who requested women-only courses as a way of bringing together women activists and members to enthuse them about the union, as well as providing valuable information about issues that directly affected them. In some parts of Scotland few, if any, women-only courses took place. This was probably due to the reluctance of union officials in those areas to pass on information or encourage women to attend. There was no instruction from the union's head office that required them to do so.

Women-only courses could create awareness of inequality and discuss ways to tackle the issues, but could not on their own resolve them. Obstacles remained back in the branches and workplaces. This is illustrated by the comments of a union official, referring back to when he was convener at Halls, the now-closed food-manufacturing unit in Broxburn:

The women reporting back on the need for equal value negotiations, their arguments fell on deaf ears. We felt it was not relevant to our workplace. The employers were reluctant to buy into it as it would cost them money. The butchers and bakers threatened to walk out if it was followed up.¹⁴¹

Nonetheless the achievements of the women-only courses deserve recognition. When the women in USDAW structures were ended in 2005, women-only courses virtually disappeared from the union's education and training programme in Scotland and elsewhere.

In 2005, after 20 years of existence, the women in USDAW committees were disbanded, and replaced by an equalities structure.¹⁴² The background to this change, and the reasons for the demise of the Women in USDAW structures are the subject of Chapter 7. What was the reaction in the Scottish division ... was there acceptance or resistance? Michela Lafferty, co-ordinator of the Scottish women's committee, reported that the committee had been fully consulted and supported the change. It: 'would provide the sectors of our membership who suffer or are likely to suffer discrimination and inequality with an

¹⁴¹ Interview with union official, 6 February 2008.

¹⁴² The new structure consisted of a national advisory equalities group and divisional equalities forums.

entirely new focus. This can only be good news for our membership.¹⁴³ Kirstie Doolan, chair of the Scottish women's committee, and the only Scottish voice in the debate on the proposed equality structures at the 2005 USDAW conference, said: 'No one is saying that the work of the women's committees is finished. We still need to take up a lot, and we still need to reach out to women.'¹⁴⁴ At the Scottish divisional conference, after the decision to introduce an equalities structure, the co-ordinator of the women's committee reported: 'this forum does not in any way dilute the women's equality agenda, but will throw more emphasis on their plight by welcoming colleagues from the black/Asian, disabled or LGBT communities and these will include women.'¹⁴⁵

There were no voices raised in public in opposition to the demise of the Women in USDAW committees. The aforementioned comments could be interpreted as a belief that somehow the women's committee would remain, but bring in new strands – that nothing for women would be lost in the transition.

Margaret McCall disagreed with the change:

I just felt it was wrong. I felt it was diluting the women's committee, equalities is for minority groups. Women are not a minority in the union, it is the biggest group in the union. Why they were wanting to dilute it, I don't know. I felt that is what they were doing, taking the emphasis away from women, which affected the majority of union members.¹⁴⁶

Pam, who moved on from USDAW in the early 1990s, and became an official with the STUC, commented:

There's different needs for these different groups. I think there can be a danger with equalities committees, you know, what can start to happen you have got competing interests within it so who is to say, you know, who decides which group is most important.¹⁴⁷

Similar views were not raised by Scottish women activists in USDAW at the time.

¹⁴³ Written report to the Scottish divisional conference, March 2005.

¹⁴⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 77.

¹⁴⁵ Written report by Michela Lafferty, co-ordinator of the Scottish women's committee, to the Scottish divisional conference, October 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Pam Urquart, 13 July 2015.

Mary Paterson, a chair of the Scottish women's committee, has no recollection of any discussion at national or Scottish level about the importance of maintaining separate structures to further women's interests. She had never thought about a connection between the women's committees and making policy. For her, it was about raising issues that could be taken through the structures that already existed. She did recall a discussion at the national women's committee on reserved seats for women and the President Syd Tierney's response:

what he was worried about was that if there were special seats for women, and women maybe be standing in other seats, there might be more women than men on the executive ... but oh my goodness that would have been a disaster, and he said it, that wouldn't work.¹⁴⁸

An exploration of the activities and campaigns of the Scottish women's committee in USDAW adds to the discussion in the national chapter on the factors that contributed to the demise of the women's structures. As at national level, there was no demand for women's committees in Scotland. The women who were selected to go on the Scottish committee did not go on to transform the union or to challenge the existing male-dominated structures. They campaigned on issues relevant to USDAW women – low pay, part-time workers' rights, maternity rights, women's health. They spearheaded the union's campaign on the poll tax and participated in political activities to secure the return of a Labour government. They made a significant contribution to the union's campaign to recruit and retain women members at a time of declining membership. As at national level, the Scottish women's committee moved from the forefront of the union's campaigns to working alongside others in family-friendly campaigns and Respect for Shopworkers. Michela Lafferty, co-ordinator of the Scottish women's committee in 2005, reported that they were continuing to assist the division's parents and carers campaign.¹⁴⁹ It was noted earlier that Margaret McCall felt that the Scottish women's committee was less vibrant and outgoing than in the past. There was also a lack of continuity in the membership of the women's committee. This can be attributed to two possible factors. Firstly, the composition of the women's committee was determined by the divisional council, therefore it was selection not election. Secondly, the high turnover in the sector meant that there was a high turnover in the union's membership. Of the six Scottish USDAW members interviewed, four had 'moved on' from the union due to redundancy, ill-health,

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Mary Paterson, 7 December 2015.

¹⁴⁹ Written report to the Scottish divisional conference, October 2005.

entering higher education or changing to a job where USDAW was not the appropriate union.

A lack of a feminist analysis was identified in the national chapter as a significant factor in the demise of the Women in USDAW structures. Scottish feminists, such as Breitenbach, argued that it was necessary for women to organise autonomously at the same time as being involved in trade union and political parties.¹⁵⁰ Rosina and Kate, who had campaigned to revive and develop women's structures in the Labour Party, were unequivocal about the necessity to obtain and sustain women's structures. Kate commented:

I felt it was really, really important for women to have a voice, an autonomous voice, that they had the right to say things for themselves and demand things for themselves, whether it was in the trade union movement or in the Labour Party. I felt very strongly that there were a whole lot of things that needed to be said, that needed to be done, and it wasn't about individual women having places, I felt that any women that did take up places had to be representative ... I wanted a collective agreed view, not an individual one woman's view, that would be taken forward.¹⁵¹

Rosina argued that, in fighting to retain women's structures, women activists had to learn from history. She remembered vividly listening to Dora Russell at a women's fringe meeting at a national Labour Party conference in the late 1970s. Russell, speaking on the campaign for birth control in the 1920s, which was supported by the women's organisations, claimed that the women had been beaten by the structures. Women were not on the decision-making bodies, they had no route in to bring issues forward or make policies relevant to women.¹⁵² This experience was one of the triggers that motivated Labour women in the 1980s/1990s to campaign for women to be elected onto the national executive, to have resolutions from the women's conference on the agenda of the national conference, to have quotas for women, to have women-only shortlists.

The feminist analysis of male power was not on the agenda of USDAW women activists in either Scotland or the UK. Women activists in Scotland spoke out about inequality. Some were prepared to challenge for positions on the executive, for full-time officers' posts, to

¹⁵⁰ Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters are Doing it for Themselves, the Women's Movement in Scotland', *Scottish Government Yearbook*, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 215.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Kate Phillips, 15 October 2015.

¹⁵² Interview with Rosina McCrae, 13 October 2015.

become branch officials. When the environment changed with the waning and fragmentation of the women's movement and the move towards equalities rather than women's structures, there was no resistance from Scottish women activists, as there was none nationally.

This chapter on the Scottish dimension, incorporating the experiences of USDAW women activists and women outwith the union who engaged with the Scottish women's committee, has explored in more depth the main themes developed in the national chapter. These were the campaigns and activities of the women's committees, the development and spread of women-only courses, the attitudes to women's structures and to feminism. This has demonstrated that the Scottish women's committee, in the main, mirrored the women's national committee. This was not a rigid adherence to a national plan handed down to the divisions, but a two-way process whereby the chairs of the divisional women's committees participated in the national committee and helped to determine the priorities. Within the national framework, there was scope for divisional initiatives such as the Scottish proposal to undertake a survey of part-time workers, which was taken up nationally. Reflecting the Scottish environment, the Scottish women's committee advocated support for the Zero Tolerance campaign, which originated in Edinburgh, from the local council's women's committee. More significantly, the Scottish women's committee spearheaded the union's poll tax campaign, and did not have to wait till the issue was taken up in England. Under-representation of women at all levels within the union was replicated in Scotland. It is worth noting that Scotland was the last division in the union to appoint a woman official, in 1992, and the last to elect a woman to the national executive in 2000.

USDAW women in Scotland, as nationally, were more visible, more active, more campaigning within and without the union during the period of the women's structures, 1985–2005.

Chapter 7: ... and then there was none – The Demise of the Women in USDAW Structures in 2005

At the beginning of 2005, the Women in USDAW structures had been in existence for almost 20 years with no perceivable threat to their continuance. As indicated in Chapter 5, women were no longer centre stage; the women's officer post had been downgraded with an equalities remit added. Recruitment campaigns were broadened to encompass a more diverse workforce, young workers, and black and Asian and migrant workers in particular. Campaigning focused on issues for parents and carers, rather than women. Nonetheless, the Women in USDAW structures maintained their activities, making a significant contribution to USDAW's wider agenda. By the end of 2005, there was no longer a national women's committee, divisional women's committees or an annual women's conference. They ceased to exist as separate entities. They were replaced with an equalities structure, with a national advisory equalities group and divisional equalities forums. Now, rather than recruit, encourage participation and reflect issues of concern to women, the equalities structure had to focus on the interests of four groups: women; black and Asian; disabled; and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). How is this to be explained? Were the Women in USDAW structures no longer necessary as women had been fully integrated into the union, represented at all levels in proportion to their membership? Table 7.1 depicts the position of Women in USDAW in 2005.

Table 7.1: Women in Leadership Positions in USDAW 2005

Leadership Positions USDAW 2005			
	Men	Women	Total
Central Officials	4	0	4
National Officers	2	5	7
Divisional Officers	7	0	7
Deputy Divisional Officers	7	1	8
Area Organisers	66	26	92
Executive Council	6	9	15
Divisional Councils	28	43	71

Source: USDAW Annual Conference Report 2005

At national officer level, women were in the majority, holding five of the seven posts, while on the executive council, women constituted nine of the 15 members. With female membership around 60%, these were examples where proportionality had been achieved, and without any imposition of quotas or reserved seats. Kirton pointed out, however, that the presence of women does not necessarily imply power. She argued that, if women were not elected by women or linked in some formal way to women's groups, there was no obvious way to ensure that women in key positions would speak for women or would raise their concerns and priorities.¹ With the USDAW executive, the gains were not irreversible. In the union elections of 2006, the President was male for the first time since 1991, and there was no longer a female majority on the executive. There were now nine men and six women. Elsewhere in the structure, a different, more unequal picture emerges. The four top officials, all seven divisional officers and all but one of the deputy divisional officers were male. Of the full-time officials, only 26 of the 92 were female. Equality had not been achieved.

Was the disbanding of the women's structures and replacing them with equalities structures a result of USDAW taking their lead from the TUC, following the majority of other unions? As identified earlier, the establishment of the Women in USDAW structures in 1985 was less due to internal agitation from women activists, and more to the union's desire to be in the mainstream, to take the path advocated by the TUC in the 1979 Equality for Women Charter. This was an approach that could be characterised as 'going with the flow'.

The trade union movement from the 1990s began to pay more attention to the equalities agenda, with the issues facing black and Asian members being given a higher priority in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence murder in 1993 and the Macpherson report on institutional racism in 1999. Will Sullivan, Unison delegate to the 2004 TUC conference, and chair of the TUC Black Members committee, referred to these developments as: '... a wake-up call for the trade union movement'.² USDAW was in step with these developments. Neville Lawrence addressed the union's annual conference in 1999. In the TUC 2003 Equal Opportunities Audit, USDAW chose to highlight work on race, reporting

¹ Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 23.

² TUC Conference Report, 2004, p. 64.

on recruitment aimed at black and Asian workers, and a campaign to raise awareness of the impact of racism.³

The equalities agenda of the trade union movement developed beyond race. Colgan and Ledwith commented that unions began to respond to the concerns of a more diverse workforce by extending their equality agendas.⁴ In 2001, a decision was taken at the TUC that all affiliates be committed to promoting equality, and report back on progress to the TUC every two years. The first TUC Equality Audit in 2003 reported on the activities and priorities for the following groups: women, black, disabled, LGBT and young members. SERTUC reports for 2000 and 2004 provided information on the unions' equality work, and these reflected the growing activities not only for black members, but also for gay and lesbian members. These reports demonstrated the unions expanding equality strategies. The first SERTUC report in 1987, 'Moving Towards Equality', dealt exclusively with women's participation in trade unions, as did further reports in the 1990s. In the 2000 report, 'New Moves Towards Equality, New Challenges', questions were included on black and ethnic membership. In the 2004 report, 'Waving not Drowning', new questions were inserted about LGBT and disabled membership structures. For unions, these moves around equalities were not only about a growing awareness of discrimination and under-representation in the workplaces, and within the unions, and a need to deal with the growing discrimination legislation, but equally importantly, about attracting members from more diverse groups to try to stop the decline in union membership. USDAW mirrored what was happening elsewhere in the union movement. President Marge Carey, in her opening address to the 2004 conference, commented on the need to do more to make the union: '... more equality friendly'.⁵ The general secretary declared: 'Our agenda for equality has to change because new issues are coming to the fore all the time, new forms of discrimination, lesbian and gay rights ... these issues must be on our agenda'.⁶

³ TUC Equal Opportunities Audit, 2003, p. 23.

⁴ Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith (eds), *Gender Diversity and Trade Unions, International Perspectives* (Routledge, London, 2002) p. 1.

⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2004, p. 5.

⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 75.

As with other unions, recruitment was an additional incentive. The *Organising for Equality Statement* made clear: ‘... we need women, black people, LGBT workers and disabled members if we are going to develop our strength and effectiveness’.⁷

Where the argument that USDAW was following the TUC and other unions falters is not in the acknowledgement of the necessity of a broader equalities agenda, but in the structures developed to achieve this. Disbanding women’s committees to replace them with general equalities structures was not the route taken by either the TUC or the majority of unions. The TUC women’s committee and conference, which had been in existence since 1931, were retained. Separate structures for women were endorsed. The TUC report, *Organising for the Future, Women in Trade Unions*, observed: ‘... creating the space for women to articulate and identify their experiences is central to the setting of a new bargaining and organising agenda that is responsive to women workers’.⁸

In the TUC, new equalities structures were created: separate committees for disabled and LGBT members were added to those already in existence for women and race. Each of the four equality strands had separate motion-based conferences, from which motions could be transferred to the main TUC conference agenda. The STUC also maintained separate women’s structures, with a women’s committee and an annual women’s conference. In the 2005 USDAW Organising for Equality executive council statement, reference is made to other unions bringing in integrated equalities committees, but the reference is vague – ‘several unions’, and none named. It was not the general direction taken by most unions. The TGWU had both national and regional women’s committees running alongside race committees. Unison, with a female membership of over 70%, developed an equalities structure which provided for four self-organising groups: for women, black, disabled, and lesbian and gay members at branch, regional and national level.⁹ The teaching union NASUWT, with 68% female membership, had no women’s committee in 2000, but introduced one in 2005. The overall trend at that point was for women’s groups to operate in parallel with other equality mechanisms. McBride pointed to the SERTUC 2000 survey

⁷ USDAW, *Organising for Equality Report*, 2005, p. 14.

⁸ TUC, *Organising for the Future, Women in Trade Unions*, 2008, p. 3. The booklet was produced as a result of a resolution at the 2007 TUC women’s conference. In the TUC *Working Women Manual*, 2005, the necessity of women-only structures is outlined and endorsed, p. 34.

⁹ The complex structure, with an emphasis on achieving proportionality, emerged from the detailed negotiations involving NUPE, COHSE and NALGO in the lead-up to the formation of UNISON. The process and some of the consequences are explored by McBride in *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*.

as an illustration that women-only structures were an accepted institutional practice or norm within trade unions.¹⁰ Kirton and Healy stated that women's separate organising had become a legitimate and accepted practice within unions.¹¹

Cockburn argued that separate organising was a necessity and a key mechanism for promoting and achieving equality.¹² From the feminist activists and writers of the 1970s and 1980s to those continuing the research in the twenty-first century, there is near unanimity about the value of women-only structures. However, they were neither myopic nor naively optimistic in their views. They had reservations and concerns, in particular that women's committees could be side-lined and become a substitute for action by the union as a whole. Nonetheless, the consensus in the literature was that separate organising for women was advantageous, a key element in progress towards equality. Kirton echoed the dominant view: '... it would be a retrograde and risky step to dismantle the structures which have given women a voice and variable degrees of power and influence in the unions in the last twenty years or more'.¹³

Support for women-only structures led to criticism of the general equalities committees. MSF officials, interviewed by Parker, were of the view that bundling equalities together would have the effect of reducing the attention given to gender concerns.¹⁴ Elliott argued that having committees with a general equality remit undermined the principle of autonomous organisation for women and implied that the problems of different disadvantaged groups were similar.¹⁵

USDAW's stated position on the combined equalities structures diverged from this mainstream thinking. The declared aim of integration was to extend and enhance the union's equality work, and give it a more prominent role. In the words of the general secretary, the different strands would be: 'learning from each other leading to greater

¹⁰ McBride, *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*, p. 170.

¹¹ Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy, *Gender and Leadership in Unions* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2013) p. 206.

¹² Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 9. Other feminists concurred, including McBride, *Gender Democracy in Trade Unions*, p. 3; Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, pp. 167–8.

¹³ Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 163.

¹⁴ Parker, *Women's Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 215.

¹⁵ Ruth Elliott, 'How Far Have We Come? Women's Organisations in the Unions in the United Kingdom', *Feminist Review*, Vol 16, 1984, p. 67.

awareness of the effects of discrimination, sharing of difficulties and an understanding of each other ... not being in one compartment on an equality agenda'.¹⁶

Within the union's case for integration, there were some contradictions and ambiguities. The Organisation for Equality executive council statement referred to the existing structures for women and race: 'as a model of positive action, a road map for tackling under-involvement'.¹⁷ These committees provided separate spaces for women and black and Asian members. What was being proposed was a hybrid equalities structure with four groupings, and a single space to speak out. In the section in the statement entitled 'One Size Doesn't Fit All', there appeared to be a recognition that the four groups did not face the same issues, that they needed: 'different approaches to organise different groups. We need to be careful that we address the different needs of each group and don't allow any one group to be swamped by the needs of others.'¹⁸ There was no indication as to how this was to be achieved in a combined structure.

Cited in support of the union's position was the forthcoming creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). This was an integrated commission composed of the former Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission, along with the inclusion of the newer areas of legislation on age, religious belief and LGBT, and in addition the area of human rights.¹⁹ In the USDAW debate on the new structures, Maureen Williams, vice chair of the race relations committee and a member of a divisional women's committee, commented: 'with the new single commission coming in a year's time we need to prepare for it. Having a single umbrella with all the strands under it is the way forward.'²⁰ USDAW's view of the EHRC was out of sync with the TUC. Mary Davis, a delegate from NATFHE, moved the successful resolution at the 2004 TUC conference which had been submitted by the TUC women's conference: 'So far as women are concerned we do not want to be a strand in some big

¹⁶ USDAW, Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 75.

¹⁷ USDAW, Organising for the Equality, 2005, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ The EHRC took over in 2007. The first chair was Trevor Phillips, who had been chair of the Commission for Racial Equality.

²⁰ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 13. Williams, active in the women's structures, played a part in organising women-only workshops for black and Asian women workers.

diversity melting pot where an unaccountable board can establish hierarchies of oppression in a flavour of the month approach to equality.²¹

Why did the practice of separate women's structures in trade unions, and the case for them outlined by activists and researchers, not resonate with USDAW? Was it in part due to a lack of feminist analysis, a dearth of feminists within the union ranks who would have argued for the continuance of women's structures? As outlined earlier, feminism in the trade union movement from the 1970s onwards was largely associated with women in white-collar unions, who as Beale pointed out began to have considerable influence at the TUC women's conference.²² It was feminists who were the driving force behind the TUC 1979 Equality for Women in Trade Unions Charter. This charter, with its recommendations for positive action by individual unions, became the benchmark against which progress would be measured. The more traditional, working-class unions were less likely to be imbued with a feminist spirit. Kirton, in her study of trade union women-only courses, noted that, whereas tutors from the white-collar union MSF self-identified as feminists, those from the TGWU did not. This, in her view, reflected the argument in the literature that feminism had most appeal for middle-class women.²³ TGWU official Margaret Prosser, who was the national women's officer and then the deputy general secretary, supported this view. She commented: 'I had to make sure that no one thought of me as some raving feminist ... their confrontational approach would not have worked with the T&G.'²⁴ Ledwith and Colgan recorded that in the 1990s being labelled a feminist was increasingly seen by some women as problematic.²⁵ Cockburn noted that: 'Women activists say they must be careful to avoid being identified with feminism if they are to maintain their credibility in their trade unions ... feminism represented a front for lesbianism and extreme leftism.'²⁶

Consequently, even when women trade unionists shared some of the goals of feminists, they dismissed the label, often with the phrase: 'I'm not a feminist but ...'.

²¹ TUC Annual Conference Report, 2004, p. 136. Similar criticisms were made by Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 444, and Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics*, p. 163.

²² Beale, *Getting It Together*, p. 98.

²³ Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 105.

²⁴ Margaret Prosser, *Your Seat is at the End* (Feather Duster Publications, London, 2012) p. 87.

²⁵ Colgan and Ledwith, *Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions*, p. 26.

²⁶ Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change*, p. 250.

USDAW's experience differed significantly from the white-collar unions in that it did not experience an influx of feminists in the 1970s/1980s. Middle-class educated feminists seeking involvement in the trade union movement would have entered white-collar unions who represented professional staff, not unions catering for women who worked in shops and factories. USDAW's recruitment procedures for full-time officers also posed a barrier to feminist entry into the union. Appointments were internal, the women coming through from workplaces where USDAW organised. Union conference reports, which are verbatim, provided no evidence of USDAW women putting the case for separate structures in the immediate period before their introduction. The women in USDAW structures established in 1985 were accepted rather than fought for. The influence of feminists on USDAW at this stage was indirect, through the TUC women's conference, to the 1979 Equality Charter, to USDAW taking up the TUC recommendations. Harrington's research into woman activists in the late 1990s, noted that, while women were in favour of equal rights, the ideology of feminism remained unacceptable to them. She quoted an USDAW interviewee on feminism: 'turns off many women ... because of the perception of burning their bras rather than improving women's lot'.²⁷

Where an opening for feminists did emerge was when the union, in establishing the woman's structures, in 1985 made the position of women's officer a head of department and not a national negotiating officer. This opened it up to external applications and the appointment of Bernadette Hillon, described by Harrington as committed to a feminist agenda.²⁸ Another feminist in a high-profile position in the union was Audrey Wise MP, union President between 1991 and 1997. Both deployed what influence they had to encourage women's participation and to highlight issues of concern to women members. A case can be made for arguing that it was the presence of these two women that helped to safeguard the women's structures. In 1993, 12 years before the end of the women's structures, the annual conference debated a proposition calling for an equality committee to deal with all discrimination, whether gender, race, creed or disability. This was portrayed as a natural progression from the women's committees. The mover commented: '... there is no difference, can be no difference between any type of discrimination'.²⁹ It was a precursor of the 2005 Organising for Equality statement, but the response and the outcome

²⁷ Harrington, *Sisters Organising*, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1993, p. 53.

were different. The proposition was opposed by Moira MacDonald, a founder member of the Manchester divisional women's committee. She claimed the proposal was: '... trying in a backdoor way to get rid of the women's committees'.³⁰ The general secretary expressed his total commitment to the work of the women's committees, and drew attention to: '... important distinctions to be drawn between the nature of different forms of discrimination. These differences need to be reflected in the structural mechanisms which the union develops to tackle the various forms of discrimination.'³¹

The motion was defeated. It is probable that this speech was written by the women's officer, and it is possible to argue that, along with the President, she helped to prevent the demise of the women's structures at that point. Bernadette Hillon left the union in the autumn of 1997. The President was defeated in 1997. No identifiable socialist feminists replaced them in the union's hierarchy. Diana Jeuda, the union's research officer, who played a key role in the establishment of the women's structures, retired in 1998. Another strong voice for the retention of the women's structures was no longer involved in USDAW. Marge Carey, who defeated Audrey Wise in the election for President, was described by Bill Connor, general secretary till 2005 as: '... a champion for women's rights, without being a tick-box feminist'.³²

A lack of feminists in the union in 2005 to put forward arguments in favour of the women's structures appears to have been a contributory factor in their demise. An analysis of the contributions from the women's committee members in the debate on the proposed equalities structures in 2005 gives support to the view that not only did they not espouse feminist arguments for separate structures, they did not regard women's committees as an essential component of progress for women within trade unions. The four women who spoke from the women's committee perspective were all chairs of the divisional committees. Sally Neale, chair of the Southern committee, proclaimed: 'We will continue to do the same job. With the huge majority of women members, women's issues will be addressed, but within the new equalities structure.'³³

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³² *Independent*, Obituary, 10 February 2012.

³³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 75.

Mandy Harrison, from the north-west, commented: 'I am looking forward to continuing what we are doing to take up women's issues ... work will continue with the new structures ... it must'.³⁴

There was no sense that the women were rejecting women's committees, but rather that they were opening them up, that they were reaching out and bringing in other groups. Perhaps the women activists were reassured by the pronouncements of the leadership. The President commented in 2004: 'I can assure you that equalities structures are definitely not designed to do away with Women in USDAW work.'³⁵ The general secretary at the 2005 conference gave: 'a guarantee ... an absolute personal commitment ... will continue to give a high priority to women's issues'.³⁶ Yet within the equalities structure there was no guarantee that these women activists would remain as members or chairs on the divisional equalities forums. The Organising for Equality report gave no indication as to how women were to pursue issues of specific relevance to them. The report made reference to the existing structures for women and black and Asian members as: 'a model for positive action, a road map for tackling under-involvement', yet these were separate committees for the two groups.³⁷ The possibility of committees for each of the four groups was addressed and rejected. The statement commented that this would result in 32 committees, and continued:

Setting up committees left, right and centre may not be the right way forward ... where are we going to find activists banging on the door to sit on them? We don't measure our commitment by the number of committees we have.³⁸

The general secretary commented on the financial implications:

I could not stand here at this rostrum and in all honesty, ask you to give the executive council the authority to let us spend the money on setting up 30-odd committees. I could not ask you to do that.³⁹

The debate on the equality structures brought contributions from representatives of the four groups to be incorporated into a general equalities structure and highlighted the focus shifting away from women. There were 20 speakers in the debate, nine women and 11

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2004, p. 6.

³⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 75.

³⁷ USDAW Organising for Equality Report, 2005, p. 16.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2005, p. 76.

men. Apart from the four women's committee members, there were four delegates speaking up for black and Asian members, four for LGBT members and three for disabled members.⁴⁰ All spoke in support of the new equalities structures; there was no voice raised in opposition.

The general equalities structures were not introduced with the objective of advancing the cause of women members. The development was aimed more at giving a voice to disadvantaged groups, in the expectation that this would lead to greater recruitment within the diverse workforce in these sectors where USDAW was organised. They were not about making policy, but more about campaigning. The divisional equalities forums: 'won't be talking shops – they will be out and about in workplaces and at union events reaching out to members who might otherwise not get involved in the union'.⁴¹ The hybrid equalities structures not only deprived USDAW women of separate committees, but also diminished the possibility of having an impact on policy formation and negotiations. Women in USDAW comprised almost 60% of the union's membership, but without the advantages of the power that numerical strength might bring.

A further question to explore is whether or not the women's structures were securely embedded from the start, and, if not, did this leave them vulnerable to extinction? Cockburn identified a short and a long equality agenda. The former she defined as tokenism, cosmetic treatment, the minimum position male leaders felt constrained to introduce. The long agenda of equal opportunities was a project of transformative change which met the aspirations of feminists. This involved a multi-faceted approach, with a range of strategies, including women's committees and reserved seats.⁴² Where did USDAW fit into Cockburn's analysis? Although Bill Whatley, general secretary in 1985, described the women's structures as permanent, an integral part of the union, attempts to have them inserted into the rule book in the first few years of their existence were not supported, and the proposal faded from the scene. The 1984 Working Party on Women in USDAW made clear that there was no transformational agenda. The women's committees were to supplement, not replace. They were in no way to undermine the union's formal

⁴⁰ The remaining five contributions were less focused; one on discrimination in general, two on discrimination against fat people, one urging support for Labour in the forthcoming election and one an intervention in the wrong debate.

⁴¹ USDAW Press Release, 25 May 2005.

⁴² Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 13.

structures. Measures such as reserved seats or quotas were implacably opposed by both men and women. USDAW women's structures look closer to Cockburn's short rather than long equality agenda. On how deeply rooted they were, there is a contradictory comment from President Carey. She commented on the: '... very well-embedded women's structures' and how the union '... will use them to assist in developing, broader equality structures'.⁴³ The success of the women's structures was put forward as a reason to remove them. Briskin, building on the analytical work of earlier researchers, argued that the success of women's groups was dependent upon maintaining a balance between autonomy and integration – a radical progressive edge from the separate women's structures allied to a decision-making role for women within mainstream structures.⁴⁴

How far did USDAW's women's groups achieve this difficult balance? The autonomy of the women's committees, a women-only space, was curtailed by the control exercised by the divisional councils and divisional officers who retained the power to select, from branch nominations, members of the women's committees. Women were not elected, but appointed, and could be changed by the divisional officer, as could the divisional coordinators, who were full-time women officials. The women placed on the committees, a mixture of experienced and new members, given the ethos of the union, were unlikely to bring a radical progressive edge. With no involvement in, and possibly little knowledge of, the women's movement, most women's committee members would have had no clear agenda on how to advance the women's cause. They were developmental rather than decision-making bodies. As to the women's conference, this was a misnomer. It was a meeting of the members of the divisional and national women's committees, to review the work of the previous year and plan future activities. This gathering had no ability to put motions on the agenda of the union's annual conference. The national women's committee was neither a women-only space nor a decision-making body. The senior male officials were part of the committee, and could determine what was pursued or rejected. This does not conform to Briskin's autonomy–integration paradigm. The structures did not allow for development or change emanating from the women, nor did they create an effective bridge to the decision-making bodies, which were running in parallel, not linked to the women's committees.

⁴³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 2004, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Briskin in *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 12.

Where are the examples of women's structures in unions that were embedded, permanent and secure and what characteristics did they have that USDAW did not? The TUC women's structures appear to be in accord with Cockburn's long equality agenda and Briskin's autonomy-integration model for success. Within the TUC from the 1920s, there were slow, incremental changes for women, progress sometimes stagnating but never disappearing. There was a quickening of the process during second-wave feminism. The decision-making women's conference was deployed by women activists as a springboard for action in the 1980s and 1990s. This resulted in greater powers for both the women's committee and conference, more women on the General Council, and a higher profile for women's issues. This did not happen in a vacuum; women were joining unions in greater numbers, but it required the drive of women activists to take advantage of the situation. NUPE provides a second illustration. The union started on the journey towards equality for women in 1975 when research was commissioned into women's under-involvement in the union. This was not in response to women activists, but was an initiative of the senior male union officials. Reserved seats for women were introduced, and later women's committees, a women's conference and a women's officer. Negotiations in 1991 to form UNISON developed the women's agenda further with a range of positive action measures from women's committees and conferences to self-organising groups. In neither the TUC nor UNISON has equality for women been achieved, but there have been significant advances.

Factors which contributed to keeping the women's agenda to the forefront in these organisations, and women's structures as a key mechanism for making progress, were a mixture of longevity, continuity, women activists with a feminist agenda, a multi-faceted approach to positive action measures, an increase in female membership and also some supportive men in senior positions. USDAW's women's structures lacked continuity and longevity. USDAW, created in 1947, had no women's structures until 1985.⁴⁵ These committees were not well integrated into the union's decision-making structures and positive action measures were limited.

⁴⁵ NUDAW and the Shop Assistant's Union merged to form USDAW. In the early years of the twentieth century, both unions had women's structures. Drake recorded that it was the women activists in the Shop Assistant's Union who invented the idea of a women's advisory council within unions. NUDAW appointed Ellen Wilkinson as the first women's officer, and she set up a women's department. Neither union retained the structures. By the 1930s, there was little sign that they had ever existed.

Cockburn demonstrated how men's resistance to sex equality in organisations is deep-seated.⁴⁶ She recognised that, without male allies, equality structures for women would be non-starters. Were men in USDAW supportive of the Women in USDAW structures, or did they tolerate them only so long as they did not threaten their dominant position? Audrey Wise, USDAW's first women President, was elected in 1991 without the support of the male hierarchy. Her success was generally attributed to her ability to engage with USDAW women, in particular those involved in the women's committees. A decade later came the first challenges from women officials for the positions of general secretary and deputy general secretary. Both had been involved in the women's committees. Although they were unsuccessful, they did at least undermine the stereotype of a male leadership in USDAW and shook up what had been regarded as the natural order. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that, for some USDAW men, this constituted an unacceptable development.

As outlined previously, a lack of male enthusiasm for debates around women's issues and, in some instances, attempts to disband the women's structures emerged from time to time at the USDAW annual conferences. Parker, from her interviews with women activists, reported that some were of the view that resistance to women's structures continued to exist.⁴⁷ Scottish activists in the previous chapter identified hostility to the women's committees. There was a divergence at local level from the public rhetoric of support for women from male leaders at national level.

There is no single explanation for the demise of the Women in USDAW structures. Increased demands for more recognition of diversity had to be met to sustain the union. USDAW made a choice to respond to this in a way that veered away from the direction taken by the TUC and other major unions where the consensus had been to create new separate structures for other disadvantaged groups. USDAW, instead, established a combined equalities structure. Factors that contributed to that decision included the lack of feminists to sustain and develop the women's structures and the preponderance of women activists who were more comfortable with equal treatment for all as opposed to what some regarded as preferential treatment for women. Allied to these was the fact that the women's structures were not fought for, not achieved through debate and challenge. They were

⁴⁶ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 112.

⁴⁷ Parker, *Women's Groups and Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 34.

brought in to bring USDAW into the mainstream by following the recommendations in the TUC 1979 Equality Charter. The structures were not designed to bring about Cockburn's long transformative equality agenda. They did not conform to Briskin's autonomy–integration balance. When the proposal to disband the women's committees and replace them with equalities structures came, there was no one arguing for their retention. The Women in USDAW structures can be likened to Cockburn's comment on equality: ' ... a frail plant grafted onto sturdy old stock'.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 112.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis charts the rise and fall of the women's structures in USDAW, from their introduction in 1985 to their demise in 2005. The aims were to explore the factors leading to the establishment of the Women in USDAW structures, to analyse their achievements and challenges, and to seek to explain why they were disbanded.

A key conclusion from the research is that the introduction of the Women in USDAW structures was more about increasing women's membership than about increasing their participation and representation. As has been demonstrated, USDAW, along with the trade union movement in general at the beginning of the 1980s, was experiencing a significant decline in membership.¹ This was the result of a combination of factors, including changes in the labour market and a harsh economic environment, exacerbated by a hostile Tory government. USDAW, in addition, was finding changes in the retail sector, notably extended trading hours, creating difficulties for recruitment. The potential to increase membership was with the previously overlooked part-time women workers in retail. Bernadette Hillon, USDAW's first women's officer, commented that the Women in USDAW structures emerged because: 'its leaders sensed that the future lay in recruiting low-paid, often part-time women workers'.² This endorses Cockburn's view that unions were slowly coming to the realisation that their survival depended on a more pro-active approach to women workers, which included the recruitment of part-timers.³ The terms of reference of the newly created women's structures made recruitment a central objective. Attracting women into membership was consistently referred to in the Women in USDAW reports and debates. The women's conference regularly included workshops on how to recruit women workers. As the 1997 Women in USDAW report acknowledged, the women's structures were vital in recruiting female members in ways that traditional structures were not able to reach.⁴

Post 1997, although recruitment remained a priority for USDAW, the focus moved away from women, as their activities were subsumed into a broader-based, family-friendly

¹ USDAW Annual Reports from 1979 to 1985 chart a decrease from 470,019 to 385,455 members.

² Coote and Pattullo, *Power and Prejudice*, p. 155.

³ Cockburn, *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, p. 7.

⁴ Women in USDAW Report, 1997, p. 8.

agenda. The union developed initiatives to attract a more diverse workforce, including young workers, black and Asian and migrant workers. As their role in recruitment became of less significance, so too did the focus on the Women in USDAW structures. The women's officer post was downgraded from national officer status, with race equality being added to the remit. There was no longer a Women in USDAW report to annual conference and no timetabled Women in USDAW debate. This contributes to the argument that the Women in USDAW structures were not primarily perceived by the male leadership as vehicles for women's empowerment, and that their role diminished as their significance in recruitment decreased.

Furthermore, although the union commissioned a survey of branch secretaries in 1983 to ascertain the barriers to women's participation, it chose not to take action on the findings, which demonstrated that the existing branch structure constituted a serious obstacle to women's involvement.⁵ By failing to address this, the USDAW leadership demonstrated a lack of willingness to overhaul an element of union machinery which curtailed women's activity, and left control, in the main, with local male activists. The interviews with Scottish USDAW women illustrated that women's participation increased significantly when they were involved in the branch structure. For example, Margaret McCall, shop steward at the Boots Distribution Centre in Coatbridge, was initially assigned to an inactive Boots retail branch, based in Glasgow. This confined her union activity for eight years to being a workplace representative. When a supportive male official created an on-site branch with Margaret as branch secretary, a whole new world of union activity opened up to her and her members, with direct communication on local, Scottish and national issues and events. This led to her involvement with the Scottish women's committee, and eventually to becoming USDAW's women's representative on the STUC General Council. Without access to the branch structure, this female activism would have been lost to the union.

The evidence presented has shown that the Women in USDAW structures were not designed to alter the existing constitution, where the female membership was marginalised and under-represented. The women's committees were to 'supplement and not replace the

⁵ This was an issue not unique to USDAW, but a well-documented barrier to the participation of women in trade unions.

union's normal activities'.⁶ The Women in USDAW structures were not integrated into the union's rule book. They were running in parallel, with no effective bridge to mainstream policy-making bodies. The research concurs with Harrington's conclusion that the women's structures were not effectively incorporated into the wider union structure.⁷ The women's structures mirrored Cockburn's short rather than long equality agenda. The former she defined as tokenism, the minimum leaders felt constrained to introduce. The long equality agenda was much more ambitious. It was a project of transformative change, which questioned the basis of existing union organisation and met the aspirations of feminists.⁸ This approach, she stated: 'costs more money, flattens the hierarchy and runs up against male resistance'.⁹

The research demonstrates that the Women in USDAW structures emerged without any campaign from women activists within the union. They did not advocate nor seek women-only spaces or self-organising structures. They were not influenced by the resurgent women's movement, where feminists argued that separate women's structures were an integral component of progress for women in trade unions. The interviews with USDAW women demonstrated their lack of involvement or interest in the women's movement. The thesis confirms Harrington's research that USDAW women rejected the ideology of feminism, which they perceived as challenging their roles as wives and mothers. It also endorses her view that USDAW women were: 'comfortable with ideas of equality and equal rights'.¹⁰ In the interview with Margaret McCall, she declared that she was not a feminist, that they were anti-man, that they 'take it too far'.¹¹ Yet, in her workplace, on the Scottish Women in USDAW and the STUC women's committees, she was a strong voice and an active campaigner for women workers. This points to the difference between organised feminism and the ideas within feminism. The former may not be of interest to working-class women, but the latter, on such issues as equal pay and domestic violence, often were. Feminism, broadly defined, can encompass those women who did not self-identify as feminists. USDAW women activists could be accommodated within the equal rights strand of feminism.

⁶ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1984, p. 8.

⁷ Harrington, *Women's Local Level Trade Union Participation*, p. 208.

⁸ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Harrington, *Women's Local Level Trade Union Participation*, p. 169.

¹¹ Interview with Margaret McCall, 22 September 2015.

However, the research identifies an indirect link with feminist activity in trade unions and suggests that the women's movement did have an impact on the working-class women members of USDAW. The 1979 TUC Charter for Equality for Women within Trade Unions originated from the TUC women's conference, championed by feminist activists. Endorsed by the TUC Congress, it recommended the establishment of women's committees and the appointment of women's officers. Unions were required to report back to the TUC on progress. USDAW moved towards women's structures in line with the Charter. Later developments at the TUC to enhance the representation of women benefitted USDAW women. The automaticity rule enabled an USDAW woman for the first time to be a member of the TUC General Council, and the proportionality requirement for delegations to the TUC ensured more USDAW women would attend the TUC annual conference.

The thesis has shown that the two decades of the Women in USDAW structures brought some progress, albeit uneven, for women. Women in the union were more visible and more involved in recruitment and campaigning. The national and divisional women's committees provided women with opportunities to raise issues of relevance to them and in so doing they broadened the union's agenda. Existing issues such as equal pay, low pay and part-time workers rights were taken up with renewed vigour, with the voices of women, speaking directly from their own experience, being heard more at USDAW conferences. New issues were introduced into the union's mainstream, including women and health, maternity rights, domestic violence and childcare. Where women's issues were on the agenda, more women came forward to speak. Fringe meetings on the issues of specific relevance to women were initiated at the national and divisional conferences and the union's education and training programme was extended and developed to include women-only membership get-togethers. The overall testimonies from the Scottish women activists from USDAW complement this official record and illustrate how the women's structures provided new avenues for participation that were not available in the mainstream structures. This evidence not only confirms the research of Harrington and Parker into the operation of the Women in USDAW structures, but expands and adds depth to their work, as it includes the period beyond their research up to the eventual abandonment of the structures in 2005.

On collective bargaining, the evidence is that progress for USDAW women was patchy. There was the union's major equal value victory, with Geraldine O'Sullivan, a Sainsbury checkout operator, successfully comparing her job to that of a warehouse operative. Elsewhere, the campaigning on issues of specific relevance to women by the women's committees did not necessarily translate into negotiating objectives, as women, in the majority of cases, were not directly involved in determining their terms and conditions at local or national level. Feminist historians, such as Cockburn, contended that it was easier to shift the structures than the practices of unions, and that collective bargaining in particular was resistant to change.¹²

The thesis illustrates the ongoing hostility and resistance to separate structures for women, and demonstrates that, from their beginning through to their demise, they were not universally welcomed or encouraged. Unscripted comments by the general secretary at the 1985 USDAW conference, which established the Women in USDAW structures, were at odds with the official pro-women statements he had made earlier. This would indicate that this was a less than wholehearted conversion to the idea of women's structures. He said:

The only thing that worries me is that because of the high-level of activity amongst women members of USDAW, we will soon have a demand to set up a working party for men who are beginning to feel rather put upon.¹³

Examples of antagonism surfaced periodically at annual conferences. One illustration was the frequency of comments from women speakers about the number of male delegates who left the hall when women's issues were being discussed. More overt challenges came in USDAW debates to abolish women's committees and conferences. Class solidarity for some male delegates was paramount, with a male delegate speaking of the 'dangers of sectionalising the union'.¹⁴ Another theme from those opposed to separate structures was that women 'should stand on their abilities' and that there should be 'no guaranteed place for anyone, anywhere'.¹⁵ They adhered to the USDAW motto 'Unity is Strength' and refused to acknowledge that the existing structures disadvantaged women and curtailed their participation.

¹² Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change*, p. 249.

¹³ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 122.

¹⁴ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1985, p. 12.

¹⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1994, p. 153.

These USDAW views echo those proclaimed at TUC conferences, from the early twentieth century when the introduction of women's structures was being discussed, and beyond. They demonstrate the longevity of the arguments within the trade union movement opposed to positive action for women. The Scottish women activists interviewed, speaking from their own experiences, confirmed that there was an undercurrent of hostility. This is epitomised by the comment of Pam Urquhart, who went on to become an STUC official, on those involved in the Women in USDAW structures: 'I almost got the feeling that they put you in a box, so you had to be pushed aside'.¹⁶ No Scottish women activist involved with the women's committee was appointed to a full-time officer position in the 20 years of the Women in USDAW structures. The first woman to be elected to USDAW's national executive, in 2000, had no association with the Women in USDAW committees, unlike Mary Paterson, a key campaigner on women's issues, who twice challenged unsuccessfully for the position. This supports the findings of Parker's research that women who questioned or challenged received less encouragement than those who supported the status quo.¹⁷ She quoted an USDAW woman official who contended that acceptance by the male hierarchy was: 'subject to the perceived complementarity of their aims to those of the union'.¹⁸ The findings are also in line with wider research into the attitudes of male union leaders to the role of women. Kirton and Healy contended that women activists were supported only as long as they did not threaten male dominance.¹⁹

The research identifies a number of factors contributing to the demise of the Women in USDAW structures in 2005. A key conclusion is that in their composition and operation they remained firmly in the control of the male leadership, and that this hindered the development of an effective women's structure and made it easier to dismantle. The autonomy of the national women's committee was curtailed by the involvement of senior male officials, including the general and deputy general secretaries, who could influence the agenda and determine what was pursued, rejected or ignored. It was neither a women-only space nor a decision-making body. At divisional level, control of the appointment, not election, of members of the women's committees, was exercised predominantly by male divisional officers and councillors, who retained the power to select from branch nominations. The women's conference was developmental, not a decision-making body. It

¹⁶ Interview with Pam Urquhart, 16 July 2016.

¹⁷ Parker, *Women's Equality in British Trade Unions*, p. 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ Healy and Kirton, 'Women, Power and Trade Union Government in the UK'.

was a meeting of the national and divisional women's committees to review the work of the previous year and to plan future activities. Unlike the TUC women's conference, it did not have the ability to put forward motions to annual conference, nor to have women members elected from the women's conference to the national executive with the specific remit of representing women's views.

The evidence in the thesis demonstrates that USDAW's women's structures did not conform to Briskin's autonomy–integration paradigm for the continued success of separate structures for women in trade unions. Building on the work of earlier feminist researchers, she argued that what was required was a dual strategy: a strategic balance between autonomy and integration and a radical progressive edge from the women's structures linked to a decision-making role for women within mainstream structures.²⁰

On the integration strand, as well as that on autonomy, the Women in USDAW structures failed to comply with Briskin's formula. She advocated integration to prevent marginalisation of women and of issues of specific relevance to them. This involved the strategic placement of women in union structures, including a direct input into collective bargaining. This reserving of places for women, as has been shown, was anathema to USDAW women as well as men, from the women pioneers of the Shop Assistants Union to the women activists on the women's committees in the 1980s and 1990s. Any such policy would have disrupted the existing structures, whereas USDAW's women's structures were designed not to interfere with the mainstream organisation.

A contributory factor in the abandonment of the Women in USDAW structures which emerges from the research is the lack of feminists within the union to argue for continuance of separate structures. Harrington pointed out that USDAW women in South Wales, although they engaged with the women's committee and through it increased their activism, remained sceptical of separate structures. On a wider basis, this research shows that USDAW women activists did not put forward the argument that women's structures were necessary to improve women's participation and representation. An analysis of the contributions from women's committee chairs in the debate on the proposed equalities structures at the 2005 USDAW conference illustrated that not only did they not advance arguments for separate structures, they did not appear to regard women's structures as an

²⁰ Briskin in *Women Challenging Unions*, p. 12.

essential component for progress for women in trade unions. They welcomed the hybrid equalities structures. In contrast, feminist activists consistently contended that separate organising, although not sufficient by itself, was a necessary mechanism for promoting equality for women. Kate Phillips and Rosina McCrae, the two Scottish feminists interviewed, were unequivocal in their advocacy of women's structures as a prerequisite for progress for women. Feminist authors, as identified in the thesis, were alert to the potential problems of autonomous organising. Nevertheless, the dominant view in the historiography as expressed by Kirton was that to abandon women's structures would be a retrograde step.²¹

The new equalities structure recognised the need to extend the union's equality work to reflect the greater diversity of the membership and to take cognisance of the growing discrimination legislation. The objective was to encourage the recruitment and involvement in USDAW of women, black and Asian, disabled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers, the four groups in the new integrated structures. The new terminology of a National Advisory Equalities Group and Divisional Equalities forums, not committees, indicated a diminished status for the equalities work in the union, with no link to the decision-making process. Separate organising, which had previously existed for women and for black and Asian members, was abandoned. The *Organising for Equality* report stated: 'We need to be careful that we address the needs of each group and not allow any one group to be swamped by the needs of others.'²² Yet no opportunities were created for the disadvantaged groups to discuss separately the problems and issues specific to them, and to identify policies and campaigns to address their agendas. Cockburn's long equality agenda advocated the need for disadvantaged groups to form alliances.²³ The composition and operation of USDAW's hybrid equalities structure did not provide the environment to achieve this.

Further research into the progress towards equality for women in USDAW could involve an investigation of the union's equalities structures from 2005, with a view to ascertaining how many women were on the national and divisional equality bodies, how far their programmes were oriented towards women, what issues of specific relevance to women were pursued, and what progress towards equality for women was achieved.

²¹ Kirton, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*, p. 163.

²² USDAW, *Organising for Equality* report, 2005, p. 18.

²³ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, pp. 235-6.

USDAW women did not campaign for separate structures, but the research shows this cannot be construed as a female membership that was apathetic or disinterested in the union. Chapters 2 and 3 have shown that, despite the barriers to involvement, women were active in the two retail unions that preceded USDAW and that this continued into the new union. The records show that the women were aware of and willing to speak out against inequalities in the workplace and the union. An USDAW delegate to the TUC women's conference, in the debate on the Organisation of Women in Trade Unions, stated: 'the problem is one of the dominant male'.²⁴ Mrs Wainman from the Boots factory, Nottingham, at the 1973 USDAW conference, in arguing unsuccessfully for a women's officer, commented:

Some will criticise the females because of their apparent apathy and lack of participation in union affairs ... the real fault lies with the society which has created and still encourages such attitudes and secondly with the leaders who have failed to show the way out of this enslaving environment.²⁵

USDAW conference reports featured women campaigning vociferously for equal pay. At the TUC and STUC women's conferences, USDAW women participated in a wide range of debates, and were elected to the TUC and STUC women's committees. The interviews with the Scottish USDAW women highlighted their achievements and challenges as shop stewards in effectively representing women members in the workplace. These were almost always absent from the union's records. Gordon has argued that a key role for feminist historians is to retrieve women trade unionists from obscurity.²⁶ This thesis plays a part in rectifying this under-exposure by recording the continuity of the activism of USDAW women and including them in the historical record.

This thesis contributes to the historiography of women in trade unions, specifically to the debate on separate structures for women. In-depth investigation into one union, from the introduction to the demise of the women's structures, highlights the complexities and uncertainties involved in the introduction and operation of the Women in USDAW structures. It demonstrates that separate structures, even when women did not campaign for them, can provide opportunities for women activists to highlight issues of specific relevance to them, and to broaden the union's mainstream agenda. Women became more

²⁴ TUC Women's Conference, 1960, p. 20.

²⁵ USDAW Annual Conference Report, 1973, p. 29.

²⁶ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*, p. 5.

visible and more involved in recruitment and campaigning. They became more knowledgeable and confident and more likely to seek positions at different levels in the union. The research highlights the vulnerability of women's structures in a changing political and economic environment, and the ongoing male resistance. It confirms existing research that, for women's structures in trade unions to continue to exist and survive, what is required is a genuine commitment to women's equality from the top, a determination by the male hierarchy to transform, not tinker with, the mainstream structures to open them up to greater female participation and decision-making, a willingness to sustain separate organising by providing adequate resources and a measure of autonomy, and, in addition, a cohort of women activists linked into the women's structures, who are convinced of the case for, and who continue to argue strongly in favour of, separate organising by women. The dearth of those factors in USDAW contributed to the eventual dismantling of the Women in USDAW structures. Cockburn's comment on equality as 'a frail plant grafted onto sturdy old stock' epitomised the situation of the Women in USDAW structures.²⁷

²⁷ Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, p. 124.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Position of Women in Unions, September 1976

Union	Total membership		% of women members	NEC		Full-time officials		TUC Delegates	
	M	F		M	F	M	F	M	F
APEX	62,438	75,278	55	11	4	5	1	10	3
ASTMS	351,00	62,000	18	23	1	65	5	19	1
ATWU	23,122	19,027	45	16	6	19	5	7	2
AUEW (E.S.)	1,038,720	166,000	14	9	-	186	1	35	-
BAKERS	30,122	20,325	40	14	4	25	1	10	-
CATU	20,768	23,636	53	16	2	6	-	7	2
COHSE	42,420	101,059	70	27	1	35	5	8	-
CPSA	69,451	145,693	68	18	8	24	4	22	8
CSU	29,108	17,676	38	21	2	10	1	8	2
EETPU	361,193	52,996	13	14	-	150	-	13	1
FTAT	73,857	10,243	12	24	-	40	-	11	1
GMWU	592,073	290,283	33	30	-	272	10	64	4
IRSF	23,093	31,827	58	25	3	6	1	9	-
NALGO	357,942	267,221	43	61	5	174	17	69	5
NAS/UWT	70,000	15,000	18	35	3	8	-	6	2
NUBE	58,118	48,957	46	21	3	28	3	13	-
NUDBTW	35,186	20,138	36	14	1	25	1	6	5
NUFLAT	32,187	30,268	48	15	1	46	2	13	-
NUHKW	19,887	52,836	73	23	2	29	2	11	1
NUPE	201,847	382,638	65	20	6	120	2	29	4
NUT	66,896	197,453	75	41	7	24	2	30	1
NUTGW	13,359	96,070	88	10	5	34	6	11	5
SCS	85,000	17,000	17	22	4	17	3	17	-
SOGAT	123,876	69,923	36	30	2	67	3	31	5
TASS	128,895	15,571	11	26	1	36	2	14	4
TGWU	1,511,000	289,000	16	39	-	480	3	76	2
TSSA	55,600	15,705	22	28	2	50	10	13	2
TWU	7,318	13,381	65	18	1	6	3	4	1
UPW	147,679	42,321	22	14	5	11	1	12	2
USDAW	153,653	223,649	59	16	1	129	4	21	5

Source: Equal Pay and Opportunities Campaign, 1976

Appendix 2

USDAW: Rights for Working Women Charter: 1975

The Action Programme

1. Equal pay for work of equal value.
2. Legal rights to equal opportunities and access to jobs, promotion and training.
3. Equal treatment in pensions and all forms of social security.
4. Free choice for women on whether they stay at home to raise their families or return to work.
5. Full protection of job rights during maternity leave.
6. Earnings related state benefits during maternity leave.
7. Sickness schemes extended to cover maternity and illness due to pregnancy.
8. Proper facilities for the care of children and elderly relatives.
9. Increase of family allowances to £2 and extension to the first child.
10. Action to ensure girls and women are aware of job opportunities available.
11. An increase in girls and women undergoing training courses.
12. Great extension in scope and number of places on training courses available for women re-entering work.

Appendix 3

A TUC Charter

Equality for Women within Trade Unions

1. The National Executive Committee of the union should publicly declare to all its members the commitment of the union to involving women members in the activities of the union at all levels.
2. The structure of the union should be examined to see whether it prevents women from reaching the decision-making bodies.
3. Where there are large women's memberships but no women on the decision making bodies special provision should be made to ensure that women's views are represented, either through the creation of additional seats or by co-option.
4. The National Executive Committee of each union should consider the desirability of setting up advisory committees within its constitutional machinery to ensure that the special interests of its women members are protected.
5. Similar committees at regional, divisional, and district level could also assist by encouraging the active involvement of women in the general activities of the union.
6. Efforts should be made to include in collective agreements provision for time off without loss of pay to attend branch meetings during working hours where that is practicable.
7. Where it is not practicable to hold meetings during working hours every effort should be made to provide child-care facilities for use by either parent.
8. Child-care facilities, for use by either parent, should be provided at all district, divisional and regional meetings and particularly at the union's annual conference and for training courses organised by the union.
9. Although it may be open to any members of either sex to go to union training courses, special encouragement should be given to women to attend.
10. The content of journals and other union publications should be presented in non-sexist terms.

Appendix 4

Summary of Findings of the Cardiff Survey on Branches

1. In only 27% of branch committees were women in the majority even though women constituted a majority of the members of about three quarters of the branches.
2. Only 34% of the branches reported a majority of women shop stewards.
3. Women were in a minority in all official posts within the branch e.g., chair-person, secretary, etc.
4. Only a third of the branches surveyed sent women delegates to the 1983 ADM.
5. A higher proportion (45%) of women attended the ADM as visitors.
6. Half the branches surveyed had formal arrangements to conduct union business in worktime, a third had informal arrangements and 20% had no arrangement at all.
7. Only a quarter of branches were single site, single employer branches.
8. Half the branches had closed shops.
9. The majority (56%) of branch meetings were held off employers' premises during the members' own time (two thirds of these are held later on in the evenings).
10. Attendance levels were affected by the venue and timing of meetings and the type of branch (single or multi-site).
11. Only 1.6% of branches provided child care facilities at branch meetings.
12. Where branch committees exist, roughly equal numbers met on employers' premises in work time as met off employers' premises in their own time.
13. Only 1.3% of branches provided child care facilities at branch committee meetings.
14. Around 40% of the branches were affiliated to their local trades council and a similar percentage to the local Labour Party. 19 branches were affiliated to both.
15. Members of 54% of branches took advantage of USDAW education courses, the vast majority of them being held away from the workplaces, or home study courses.

Source: Women in USDAW, 2nd Report, 1984, p. 10

Appendix 5

Terms of Reference

National Committee

- To keep under review issues of particular importance to women.
- To consider ways of attracting women into membership of USDAW.
- To consider ways to increase the participation of women in the affairs of the union.
- To receive regular reports from the officer with responsibility for women's affairs.
- To work with divisional committees as appropriate.
- To meet to consider the above at least six times a year and to make recommendations as appropriate.
- To report annually to the Executive Council in time for such a report to be presented to ADM each year.

Divisional Committee

- To consider issues that divisional experience indicates as being of particular importance to women.
- To use divisional experience in considering ways to increase the participation of women in the union.
- To work with the national committee and with the divisional council as appropriate.
- To liaise and work with the officer for women's affairs.
- To meet to consider the above at least six times a year and to make recommendations as appropriate.

Officer for Women's Affairs

- To work with the national and divisional Women in USDAW committees as appropriate, including the servicing of the national Women in USDAW committee.
- To work with national and divisional officials to ensure that issues of particular importance to women members are identified, that appropriate information is gathered,

and policies developed and to ensure that appropriate priority is given to these issues in developing the union's collective bargaining objectives.

- To work as part of the union's recruiting effort to develop and extend current activity designed to attract women into membership of USDAW.
- To consider ways in which to increase the participation of women in union affairs and to encourage them to take up lay and full-time leadership positions and to work as appropriate with officials to put such programme into practice.
- To work with the union's specialist departments as appropriate.
- To develop links with other organisations also working in this area.
- To represent USDAW externally as appropriate.

Source: Second Report of the Women in USDAW Working Party, 1984, pp. 6–7

Appendix 6

INTERVIEWEES

USDAW

Margaret Yuile	Shop steward, House of Fraser, Paisley. First chair of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee in 1985. Active in campaigns on women and health, part-time workers, national minimum wage and the poll tax. Involved in Labour Party election campaigns.
Mary Paterson	Shop steward in self-service restaurant, Stirling, Second chair of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee. Key campaigner on part-time workers, low pay, women and health, poll tax, domestic violence. Active in women-only workshops. First woman to stand for Scottish seat on the union's national executive. Political campaigner in Stirling.
Kath Brotherston	Shop steward at Halls food factory, Broxburn, West Lothian, the largest USDAW branch in Scotland. Chair of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee in the late 1990s.
Anne McCreadie	Co-op branch secretary based in Inverness. The branch included 60 Co-op stores in the Highlands and Islands. Initiated women-only courses in the area to improve communication with members and to increase their knowledge of women's issues.
Pam Urquhart	Young activist and shop steward in the Co-op in Inverness in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Involved in Women in USDAW campaigns in the north. Winner of the STUC

	Jimmy Waugh Memorial Trophy for Outstanding Young Trade Unionist in Scotland in 1989.
Margaret McCall	Shop steward and branch secretary at Boots Distribution Centre, Coatbridge. Member of the Scottish Women in USDAW committee in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Involved in Women in USDAW campaigns. Political campaigning in Stirling. USDAW representative on the STUC women's committee and General Council.

Non-USDAW

Kate Phillips	Feminist, Labour Party activist and WEA tutor-organiser in Glasgow. Developed women-only courses for USDAW and acted as the main tutor for the Scottish workshops. Labour candidate in Stirling in 1992 General Election, where she was supported by USDAW women.
Rosina McCrae	Feminist and Labour Party activist. Founder of Kilmarnock Women's Aid. Tutor at women-only courses in Scotland on domestic abuse/Zero Tolerance. Speaker on the issue at national and Scottish USDAW conferences.
Morag Gillespie	Director of the Scottish Low Pay Unit. Worked with USDAW women in Scotland on part-time workers, low pay and the national minimum wage campaigns.