

**Women's participation in teacher unions: implications of a 'triple burden' for union gender equality strategies**

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## **Women's participation in teacher unions: implications of a 'triple burden' for union gender equality strategies**

### **Abstract**

Amidst declining union influence, teacher unions have retained power. However, work intensification, arising from increasing reform in school education, has potentially undermined union participation, particularly women's. Using a mixed-method approach, we examine how the tangled combination of women's paid work, union participation and family/domestic responsibilities (the 'triple burden') affect women's roles as unionists. Examining the case of Australian teachers, we find that while demands of 'work' and 'life' can stifle union participation, it is specifically the cultural and historical legacies in unions that hinder women's participation. Our findings offer new insights around issues affecting the participation of women in female-dominated unions and the intersection between union organisation and operation, and the member-workers whom they represent.

### **Introduction**

For the first time since the collection of union data, in some national contexts, women are now more highly unionised than men (Cooper, 2016; Milkman, 2007). However, scholarship has shown that women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have exhibited lower levels of union participation across different industries and occupations (Kirton 2018; Thornthwaite et al., 2018). While it could be expected that female-dominated unions would be more inclusive, Kirton (2018) argues that, paradoxically, the opposite is true, with numerous barriers presented to women's participation in these unions. This article examines gendered aspects of professional work, unpaid family/domestic responsibilities and union participation in the case of the school education

sector, and draws specific attention to how union practices can enable or constrain the participation of women faced with these multiple demands. Drawing upon empirical research on women's experience in a teacher trade union in Australia, we apply Kirton's (2018) concept of the 'triple burden' of paid, union and domestic/family work, as informed through the work of Colgan and Ledwith (2000) and Munro (2001), to examine how these intersecting challenges affect the participation of women in a female-dominated union. These issues are examined in the context of work intensification related to heightened education reform, as well as ongoing demands on women in the unpaid family/domestic sphere.

We use the label 'female-dominated' to mean a higher proportion of those who identify as female (60% or more) in an occupation, industry, or organisation (WGEA, 2019), and 'feminisation' as the process by which an occupation, industry or organisation becomes more female-dominated (Murphy and Oesch, 2015). We take 'union participation' to mean the participation of women in various union activities, such as conference and meeting attendance, or holding a committee role or officer position (Kirton, 2018). While our article, to some extent, considers women's participation in 'women's groups' (Parker, 2003), we are predominantly concerned with women's representation and participation in the broader structures and processes of unions. In addition, our article is scoped to women's participation in *unpaid* union roles, decision-making forums and processes, rather than *paid* roles, such as an elected union officer.

An expansive body of literature (summarised in Kirton, 2017) has considered strategies for improving the participation and inclusion of women in male-dominated union environments. This study mirrors analysis of these issues within a female-dominated occupation and its associated trade union, calling attention to issues surrounding women's participation at a time when the 'union heartland' has shifted to female-dominated industries and occupations (Cooper, 2012). Thus, this article revisits an issue that has persisted in feminist industrial relations literature for

decades, by providing contemporary examination of the barriers facing women in female-dominated professions, occupations and organisations. In doing so, we investigate the following research question:

How do the practices of one female-dominated trade union enable and constrain the participation of women?

In answering this question, we also propose several sub-questions.

1. How does this trade union seek to represent the interests of their women members and include women in decision-making?
2. How do the various elements of the ‘triple burden’ (professional work, unpaid family/domestic responsibilities, union participation) affect women’s participation in a female-dominated trade union?
3. To what extent have measures aimed at increasing representation and involvement been effective?

To examine these issues, the article reports on a case study of female<sup>1</sup> school teachers who are also members of the representative industrial organisation for public education in the state of New South Wales (NSW), Australia – the NSW Teachers’ Federation (NSWTF). The NSWTF is the largest public sector union in NSW, in the Australian state with the largest teacher workforce, representing workers in the largest schooling sector (public education) in Australia. In 2017, there were over 790,000 students (approximately 66% of all students in NSW) enrolled in 2,210 NSW

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<sup>1</sup> We are mindful that the gender binary can obfuscate some other experiences that are equally important to those who identify as non-binary, however the latter is outside the scope of our article.

public schools (ABS, 2017), taught by close to 65,000 teachers (NSW DOE, 2017: 68). In a context of union decline in Australia and globally, the NSWTF is a unique collective organisation to examine given it has sustained remarkably high membership levels at 82%, or 55,000 members in 2016 (NSWTF, 2017: 70; NSW DOE, 2017: 68). This is considerably higher than the 15% union membership Australia-wide and across the education and training sector (including tertiary education) nation-wide (33%) (August 2018, ABS, 2018a). Women comprise 73.5% of the NSWTF's members (NSWTF, 2019), positioning that union as a key organisation in the new female-dominated 'union heartland'. This gendered composition reflects occupational segregation of teaching more broadly where women made up 70.5% of all teaching staff in NSW public schools in 2015 (NSWTF, 2017: 94).

Using the NSWTF as a case study, we provide a gendered analysis of participation in a female-dominated trade union. We use this case study to understand how intersecting dynamics of the 'triple burden', including professional work, family/domestic life and union involvement, disproportionately affect the involvement and participation of women in a female-dominated trade union. In doing so, we examine union strategies to improve women's participation and evaluate the efficacy of these strategies. The article begins with a review of the literature on the feminisation of trade unions and the teaching profession, the gendered patterns of member participation in trade unions, and recent manifestations of education reform that have intensified and reshaped teachers' work. We then present the research method and findings. We end with a discussion of the findings, reflecting on the implications of the 'triple burden' for union participation, before drawing conclusions for the prospects of union renewal.

## **Key Literature**

*Feminisation of trade unions and the teaching profession*

Feminisation of the trade union movement has been a recent phenomenon, involving a distinct shift in the ‘union heartland’ from traditional blue-collar industries and occupations to more female-dominated white-collar industries and occupations, such as teaching and nursing (Cooper, 2012; Milkman, 2007). Even as overall unionisation declines, the female share of union membership has expanded rapidly such that in many Western countries (including Australia), the unionisation of women has outpaced that of men (Cooper, 2016; Ledwith, 2012; Milkman, 2007). Gender segregation in the labour market has also shaped the gender composition of many unions, especially those that are occupation-based (Milkman, 2007). Some of the most highly female-dominated occupations, professions and industries in Australia also have the highest rate of union membership, such as healthcare and social assistance (ABS, 2018a; WGEA, 2019). These trends invite attention to the changing face of unionism in Australia, as well as examination of union practice and strategy as trade unions become increasingly female-dominated organisations.

The teaching profession reflects occupational segregation along gender lines, being female-dominated (WGEA, 2019). Although initially a male-dominated occupation in Australia, where women comprised only 10% of the NSW teaching workforce in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were drawn into teaching to make up for a growing scarcity of men (Theobald and Dwyer, 1999 cited in Campbell and Proctor, 2014). Prompted by a shortage of (male) teachers following World War II, legislative restrictions on the deployment of married women as teachers were lifted, seeing the labour of married women come into demand in the state. The feminisation of teaching has also emerged through the legitimisation of ‘feminine’ and ‘maternal’ occupations being viewed as suitable for women, thus diminishing the apparent suitability and attractiveness of teaching as an occupation for men (Williams, 1995).

*Barriers to women’s union participation and the ‘triple burden’*

While the ‘union heartland’ has shifted to more female-dominated industries and occupations, the broader picture of unions across the developed world is one of women’s under-representation and under-participation relative to their share of membership. This is at a time where virtually all industrialised countries are facing union membership decline with consequences for their representativeness and are considering ways to retain their ‘old’ constituencies while engaging ‘new’ constituencies (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). This scenario of under-participation and under-representation will be examined as it may pertain to the experience of women in the NSWTF. This article therefore taps into a wealth of literature which highlights the changing landscape of the union movement, but which has observed enduring barriers to women’s participation in union activity and representation in decision-making structures, in addition to barriers to women’s advancement into officer roles and strategic leadership positions (Ledwith, 2012; Thornthwaite et al., 2018).

Women’s involvement in trade union organisation, particularly in a traditionally male-dominated union environment, is complex (Cooper, 2012). Leading feminist scholars in this area have rejected essentialist discourses that label women as ‘passive workers’ who are uninterested in trade unionism or possess more anti-union attitudes (Milkman, 2007; Pocock, 1995). Rather, theorisation from feminist sociological and industrial relations literature has pointed to several inter-connected explanations for this sustained under-representation and under-participation (Thornthwaite et al., 2018). This has included the gendered division of domestic work and parenting responsibilities, the gender-segregated nature of employment (especially women’s concentration in part-time, casual and temporary work), the organisation of trade union work, personal factors such as lack of information or confidence issues, the masculine construction of trade union practices and agendas, as well as overwork and exhaustion at home and in paid work (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Cooper, 2012; Thornthwaite et al., 2018; Pocock, 1995). Munro

(2017) adds nuance to this analysis, highlighting that union involvement is possible for women despite their caring responsibilities – while it may be difficult to attend union meetings outside work hours or hold elected roles, women often participate in strikes and pickets and frequently attend union meetings held during work hours. These pressures also resonate with Kirton's (2006a) conceptualisation of women balancing multiple 'careers'. Kirton argues that women frequently commit to more than one significant life activity – in the labour market, the family and, sometimes, the union – which can sometimes be complementary and other times in conflict. This involvement in the union is not limited to paid union work, but can also impact involvement in unpaid delegate roles. We draw upon this concept of the 'triple load' proposed by Kirton and amplify this through the concept of the 'triple burden' (Kirton 2018) to highlight that women, in the female-dominated occupation of school teaching, are burdened through disproportionate workload demands, unpaid caring/domestic responsibilities and concentration in a 'feminised' occupation, thus affecting their union involvement.

Kirton (2017) also emphasises that women's continuing low rate of participation and under-representation in union leadership positions and decision-making structures can be attributed to the environment women face in the union movement combined with the wider societal gender regime. Cunnison (1987) characterises the trade union movement, since its inception, as being a male-dominated institution which has privileged the goals, strategies and priorities of men's working lives, largely ignoring the specific needs and objectives of women. In this way, unions inevitably reflect the wider social arrangements in which they are embedded (Milkman, 2007). Pocock (1995) and other writers (e.g. Cooper, 2012; Cunnison, 1987; Kirton and Healy, 1999; Thornthwaite et al., 2018) highlight how the traditional ways in which unions have worked, such as holding meetings at times or locations inappropriate for women with caregiving responsibilities, displaying sexist behaviour in meetings, or paid officials working long hours, have served to reinforce a masculinist union culture. Therefore, despite being increasingly



female-dominated organisations, organisational scholars (e.g. Bryans and Marvin, 2003; Wajcman, 1998) have cast such institutions as sites for replicating and leveraging male privilege. Scholarship has also drawn attention to the more serious manifestations of union exclusion through observation of male cultures in unions that normalise harassment and bullying (Cooper, 2012; Thornthwaite et al., 2018). These conditions serve not only to stifle women's participation, but also affect the prioritisation and advancement of 'women's issues' by the union (Cooper, 2012; Parker, 2009). Scholarship has also emphasised that women's participation is additionally constrained by the gendered division of domestic labour (in particular women's role as primary caregivers in the family), which can create time poverty, particularly for women engaged in child rearing (Pocock 1995).

Reflecting on these varied challenges to women's participation and representation, we argue that there exists a sustained 'triple burden' of paid work, unpaid family/domestic responsibilities and union involvement (for those women who do choose to participate), which intersect and coalesce to shape the experience of women in their union. Where there remains a gap in understanding, however, is in how these structural, cultural and personal challenges may manifest in a *female-dominated* union which intuitively could be assumed to be more inclusive. This gap is addressed in our article.

#### *Union responses to women's under-representation and under-participation*

Trade unions, particularly male-dominated unions, have generally been slow to recognise women's lagging under-representation and under-participation (Thornthwaite et al., 2018). Demands by feminists for gender equality in unions gathered momentum in the 1980s and early 1990s, which focused largely on removing barriers to women's participation and ensuring their interests and concerns were better represented on the bargaining table (Colgan and Ledwith,

2002; Kirton, 2017). Unions (including the NSWTF) responded to this wave of pressure by introducing various positive action measures (Cooper, 2012; Kirton, 2017; Phelan, 1981). For instance, to redress imbalance in gender representation, many trade unions initiated ‘reserved seats’ practices on their executive and other national bodies, and supported gender balance in elected positions through modifying voting processes (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Phelan, 1981). Unions have also made greater efforts to establish active women’s groups and forums (such as committees, networks and conferences) that provide separate ‘safe spaces’ for women to learn about unionism and deliberate their concerns (Kirton, 2017; Parker, 2009).

However, notwithstanding such potentially transformative structural changes, scholars have cast strong doubt on the enduring effectiveness of these measures for redressing sustained under-representation and under-participation across the broader union movement (Ledwith, 2012). Colgan and Ledwith (2002) emphasise that while numerical modifications to union representative structures are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own to improve women’s inclusion and address deeper structural and cultural barriers to participation. For instance, McBride’s (2001) study of strategies adopted by UNISON – the UK’s largest (public sector) union – documented that while members of oppressed social groups were able to take reserved seats in decision-making forums and the union encouraged more family-friendly practices (such as providing child care), these initiatives were insufficient in tackling the root structural cause of women’s lack of participation.

There has been limited research, however, on whether and how these barriers endure in female-dominated trade unions and the strategies deployed by such unions as means of rectification. One study of large UK unions conducted by Kirton (2015) indicates that such challenges may also arise in female-dominated teacher unions and therefore require further attention and action.

Kirton (2015) observed the paradox of the gender proportionality gap being among the widest in

female-dominated teacher unions and rationalises that this may be attributed to the gendered caregiving responsibilities and employment patterns (e.g. concentration in part-time work) of female teachers, resulting in reduced time for union participation. In light of this sustained experience of women in unions, feminist writers have advocated ‘gender transformation’ of union structures, hierarchies, cultures, and bargaining and policy agendas. As workforces and union memberships across the world have become more diverse, more demands have been placed on unions to renew their activities, processes and structures (Kirton, 2017). We investigate these demands as they also relate to the operation and practice of female-dominated trade unions.

### *Education reform and increasing work demands upon teachers*

This article endeavours to understand the ‘triple burden’ factors affecting women’s participation and representation in a female-dominated teacher union. Critical to understanding the nature of the triple burden in teaching today is the context of current changes to teachers’ work and conditions in school education. We argue this context has particularly intensified pressures for women in one element of the ‘triple burden’ (paid work) and therefore contributed to significantly shaping union involvement. Alongside other Western industrialised nations, the Global Education Reform Movement or ‘GERM’ (Sahlberg, 2016) is reshaping education in ways that include devolution, heightened competition and market ‘choice’ (Hogan and Thompson, 2019), recasting education into a product or commodity, with attendant introduction of ‘teaching standards’ and the publication of the results of national standardised testing (Mockler, 2013). In the state of NSW, policies including *Local Schools, Local Decisions* have encouraged devolution of previously centralised functions, such as staffing and financial management, to the school level (Gavin and McGrath-Champ, 2017). These changes have also occurred at a time of regulatory reform reshaping the activities of teacher unions (and other unions) in the state (Gavin, 2019). In NSW, there is a legislated ‘cap’ on teacher salaries,

constrained ability to argue ‘work value’ cases in the state industrial tribunal and restrictions on taking protected industrial action (Gavin, 2019). Within this context, emerging research has documented the implications of these policy shifts for teachers’ work. In research by McGrath-Champ et al. (2018) and Fitzgerald et al. (2018), it was highlighted that Australian public school teachers work some of the longest weekly hours among OECD<sup>2</sup> countries, particularly in NSW, which is argued to be attributed to the plethora of reform initiatives introduced over the last decade (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018).

In a climate of heightened education reform, our article will draw attention to the implications of intensified paid work pressures, enduring gendered domestic/family challenges, and structural and cultural barriers in unions to understand how the ‘triple burden’ may affect women’s participation in a female-dominated union environment, which, to date, has been an under-researched area of inquiry. In doing so, we examine the effect of the ‘triple-burden’ in one female-dominated trade union and evaluate the strategies of this union to improving women’s representation and participation, drawing implications for union strategy across the union movement.

## **Methodology**

To examine these issues, this article incorporates data from two datasets which present a case of women’s participation in a teacher union as affected by the ‘triple burden’. Ethical and organisational approval for the research were granted by the University of Sydney and NSWTF, respectively. The first dataset, which this article primarily reports on, is from a case study analysis of the NSWTF conducted from 2015-2018, which examined the union’s response to education reform affecting teachers’ working conditions over a 35-year period. Whilst it was not

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<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

the initial intent of this study to adopt a ‘gendered’ examination of union strategy, various gendered dimensions were revealed as relevant in the union’s work, including the barriers to women’s involvement. Data were gathered through analysis of internal union documents and interviews with 71 NSWTF officers and members, NSW school principal’s organisations, education ministers and senior NSW Department of Education officers. While participants were asked broadly to discuss and evaluate the NSWTF’s strategies to protecting and advancing teachers’ working conditions, specific questions were also asked about the barriers women faced in being involved in the union and shaping union activity, and strategies to address this.

Data were collected according to themes initially identified in the trade union strategy and renewal literature, refined through the document analysis process and interviews. For this article, data generated about women’s union participation (and barriers to participation) are reported. As this article reports, findings about the internal practices of the union, commentary from rank-and-file members and officers in the union are specifically included. Thus, findings are produced from 61 interviews, with 29 women (23 officers; 6 members) and 32 men (29 officers; 3 members), as well as relevant document sources. Participants are identified by their role and gender (where gender is relevant to the interpretation of the findings), as well as the date of interview. Data was analysed with a constant comparative method using nVivo software to analyse and code the document sources and interview transcripts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The other dataset reported on in this article is complementary to the union case study and contextualises teachers’ work experience within the landscape of intensified education reform, which is relevant to understanding the ‘triple burden’ pressures facing women. This dataset involved a large NSWTF-commissioned, state-wide questionnaire survey of teachers in NSW public schools in 2018, conducted as independent research. The survey was designed by the research team, with the union taking a consultation role and assisting with the piloting of the

survey through a diverse sample of 30 members in a workshop format so as to maximise validity. This article draws upon survey items that specifically documented recent changes in teacher workload, including volume, intensity, sources and effects, plus gendered dimensions of these changes. This approximately 30-minute survey included a variety of closed, Likert-scale questions as well as open-response questions and was distributed online through the NSWTF to ensure member confidentiality. With 18,234 responses (33.6% of NSWTF membership), the gender breakdown was 77% female and 23% male.<sup>3</sup> Statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data was conducted with IBM's SPSS (PAW) software. Qualitative data were systematically collated, coded and examined using Excel and nVivo software. Participants are denoted by a unique, de-identified participation record number, followed by gender.

The integration of data from these two datasets enables a comprehensive picture to be drawn of women's experiences as both teachers and unionists in their profession in a time of intensified school education reform, and a shifting of the 'union heartland' to female-dominated unions. These datasets inform how dimensions of the 'triple burden' shape women's representation and participation in a teacher union, the structural and cultural barriers women still face around union involvement, and strategies adopted by a female-dominated union to address these barriers.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section addresses the research questions by reporting on the impact of the 'triple burden' on women's representation and participation in a female-dominated trade union. It then examines historical as well as more contemporary union strategies to improve women's representation and participation and assesses the effectiveness of these strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> These figures correspond closely with the percentage of female teachers state-wide at 73% female and 26% male (CESE, 2018: 41).

*Women's representation in the NSWTF*

In considering research sub-question one, we examine data collected through documentary sources on the representation of women in NSWTF decision-making structures and grassroots positions, depicted in Table 1. Three bodies comprise the union's governance structure (Annual Conference, Council, Executive – see Table 1Bi-iii). This is complemented by other grassroots forums and delegated union roles. Table 1 outlines the size and purpose of each decision-making body, as well as representation of women in these decision-making structures and in other grassroots roles.

**TABLE 1 HERE**

Regarding Annual Conference, women currently represent 68.7% of delegates (Table 1Bi) (NSWTF, 2017: 3), which is lower than their representation in teaching positions (70.5% of the NSW teaching profession: Table 1Ai) and as union members (73.5% of NSWTF members: Table 1Aii). While this is an improvement from the mid-1980s where women were significantly statistically under-represented, it is still not proportionally representative based on current membership (NSWTF, 2017: 3). Similarly, Council – considered to be the union's most important forum for debate and development of union strategy (NSWTF, 2000) – during the 1980s was described as “90% men and very blokey” (Former NSWTF General Secretary 1 (male)), with only 31 female to 163 male Councillors (Phelan, 1981: 42). While perceptions hold that Council today still has a masculine culture and practice (NSWTF, 2012; Former NSWTF Organiser (female)), recent statistics show improvements with 59.5% of Councillors now women (NSWTF, 2017: 93). Regarding Executive, women represented 55% of members in 2017, however, this statistic was below the 78% required to make Executive gender-representative at

the time (NSWTF, 2017: 92). While it is evident from data reported in union documents that the representation of women in key union decision-making forums has improved in recent decades, there remains an overall statistical under-representation of women even in a female-dominated union.

### *Contributors to women's under-representation and under-participation – the 'triple burden'*

Our first and second sub-questions examine the key contributors to women's under-representation and under-participation in the teachers' union, in relation to the 'triple burden' – work, union and family – and implications for women's participation.

### *Workload and work patterns in teaching*

Our datasets reveal important findings explaining the under-representation of women across all of the union's decision-making forums. The intersecting demands of teaching/professional work and family/domestic responsibilities coalesced to particularly affect women and amplify barriers to their union participation. This is at a time of intensified reform in the school education sector where heightened expectations around compliance and accountability have contributed to the expansion of teachers' workload and intensification of teachers' work. Our data reveal that female teachers have slightly higher weekly working hours (56.9 hours) compared to men (55.1 hours). This difference, although small, is statistically significant on the Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U-test ( $t=8.94$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $n=11,580$ ), and holds across the different dimensions of working hours for teachers – at school and home during term, and during the holidays. This gendered dimension of workload was supported in the qualitative survey data where a female respondent commented that “the biggest problem with teachers particularly primary, being female dominated, [is] we keep saying yes to things without...saying no” (#6703692925, female),



referencing socialised 'feminine' roles and how these can contribute to particular expectations of women.

Women are also much more likely than men to work part-time, either on a permanent (12% vs 3%) or temporary (5% vs 2%) basis, which can present additional work/domestic pressures.

Working part-time is more common for women and can be related to caring responsibilities.

Women are more likely than men to work part-time during their careers (44% vs 16% during the ages of 20-74 years) and this increases for women with a child under the age of six (61% vs 7.9%) (ABS, 2018b). Women in a couple also undertake more housework and caring

responsibilities than men, either with or without dependent children (Wilkins and Lass, 2018).

However, the labour force participation rate increases as children grow and women become more likely to combine their caring responsibilities with paid work. Hence, we do not imply that household and caring responsibilities last for the entirety of a woman's working life or that women have no agency in negotiating domestic responsibilities, but official statistics show that women, compared to men, at different points over the life course take on greater responsibility for unpaid work (domestic and caring).

We are unable to interpret from our data if working part-time enables greater union participation, nor can we determine whether the identities of women socialised into a feminised profession prevent them from renegotiating the gendered division of domestic labour within their households. However official data shows that at different life stages and with different dependent status, women are more highly engaged in unpaid work. It is also the case that women in part-time positions can still feel workload pressures, which could be compounded by their employment status. For instance, one survey respondent reported that despite working shorter hours, part-time teachers were expected to work on particular days, regardless of their contracted work days, requiring additional travel and a need "to organise paid childcare in these instances"

(#6727028068, female). Another similarly commented that “even part time workload has doubled in the last 5 years” (#6703457887, female).

### *Caring responsibilities*

Our survey data also highlighted how workload conflicted with family responsibilities, particularly burdening female teachers. More women than men (86% vs 82%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their work demands conflicted with their family responsibilities. Qualitative survey data evidenced that being a ‘mother’ was a significant additional consideration in relation to the experience of workload pressures of women. One respondent commented, “my family can go days without seeing their mother” (#6708691617, female), emphasising how workload can affect family life. Another, that she did not “think a young mother would be able to work fulltime effectively without affecting her wellbeing in the current climate” (#6711354929, female), and another that “I’m not really sure if I can sustain a workload of 60-70 hours per week whilst also caring for my children and family. Something has to give!” (#6752566573, female). One reported already feeling that she was a “sub-standard mother at home”, being “over worked and exhausted” (#6724525309, female), while another “single mother” respondent felt “it is lucky that I don't have a partner because I wouldn't have time to give everything needed to my child, partner and job!” (#6729512400, female). These sentiments bore close similarity with many more open-ended survey comments.

Indeed it has been reported elsewhere (Australia and internationally) that women take on disproportionate responsibilities for family and domestic duties. Compared to men, women spend less time in paid employment and more time on housework and caring responsibilities (Wilkins and Lass, 2018). The nation-wide results of the 2018 Household, Income, Labour and Dynamics (HILDA) Survey showed that while men spent 13.3 hours/week on housework (5.4 hours being

for caring), women spent 20.4 hours/week on housework, of which 11.3 hours were for caring (Wilkins and Lass, 2018). This data emphasises the cumulative negative effects for female teachers whose work pressures are compounded by taking on disproportionate (unpaid) family/domestic duties. In making these points we acknowledge, however, that circumstances alter over a woman's life cycle and are 'adaptive' rather than 'static', as argued by Hakim (2000). While numerous studies (cited in Munro, 2017) have found that women active in trade unions are often older with less dependent children, Hakim (2000) emphasises a dialectical, dynamic relationship between women's work and family preferences, such that work-life preferences should be viewed as 'adaptive'.

#### *Implications for women's union participation*

Arising from pressures of workload and caring responsibilities, data also drawn from the union case study highlighted how fuller participation in union forums was difficult. Meetings of all the union's major decision-making bodies are held at times which necessarily avoid core school-hours but present attendance difficulties for many women. Council, Annual Conference and Executive meetings are held on Saturdays, during school holidays and on weekday nights, respectively, in metropolitan Sydney, all of which can present a barrier for women with children. Emblematic of this, a Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary (female) commented: "I think it's always been terribly hard for women to participate. I mean the Executive used to go to 10 o'clock at night and sometimes later...that's not compatible with family life".

Additionally, at the grassroots level, holding union Association meetings after school hours meant that some women with caring responsibilities had difficulty regularly attending these. As commented by a Former NSWTF Research Officer (female): "Going to meetings after school hours posed a barrier to participation in area Associations. You had to be available, and that is a

stepping stone to everywhere else...Because the area Associations were the funnel, certainly women with caring responsibilities would've been pretty locked out." Being 'locked out' of local area meetings therefore had the compounding effect of stifling participation in larger (more influential) union forums and blocking an important pathway to holding future officer positions (Former NSWTF Research Officer (female); Former Women's Coordinator 1 (female)). Some union officers also reflected on the irony that the forum which members could attend to address issues of concern, such as teacher workload, was a key forum they had difficulty in attending because workload was an enduring barrier to attendance. These difficulties, however, did not suggest that women weren't interested in participating, as expressed in a statement from a Former NSWTF Organiser (female).

I think there's a whole lot of competing factors...it's not that women aren't as committed, it isn't that women don't want to participate. Women still carry the bulk of caring responsibilities, teaching full-time...I look in awe of our women activists who can juggle it all, who can be up to their necks in campaigns, while balancing teaching and family...[S]ome of our women are single mums with two or three kids...but...[w]henver you need them they're there, how do they do it?...I'm in awe of them, I really am.

While female participants expressed desire to be active in their unions, these constraints, coupled with a perceived lack of support from the union, hindered fuller participation. This sentiment reflects a larger body of research highlighting that women still desire to be able to participate in their union despite the 'triple burden' hindering this (see Kirton, 2017; Munro, 2017).

### *Union structure*

Combined with workload pressures and caring responsibilities, the frequency with which these decision-making forums are held was also reported as affecting participation. While a one-off

Annual Conference could be easier to attend (68.7% women, shown in Table 1Bi), representation of women in more frequently held forums (Council and Executive) attracted less participation (Council: 51.9%; Executive: 40%, Table 1Bii-iii). As indicated above, women with caring responsibilities could have difficulty attending Council meetings held in metropolitan Sydney if travelling long distances, while Executive meetings held outside school hours on weekdays also created challenges for women juggling high teaching workloads with caring responsibilities. Therefore, the location and timing of union meetings can create overt barriers to women's union participation.

Interestingly, Table 1 highlights, by comparison, the slightly more active participation of women in grassroots-based positions of union delegate (64.9%, Table 1Cii) or being a member of their school's Workplace Committee (71%, Table 1Ciii). The higher representation of women at the grassroots level may suggest that women can more readily integrate their 'union work' with their 'paid work' when they are bound in the same physical workplace. This may also indicate more ability to take on union issues on an 'as needs' basis as they arise in the school context subject to capacity, rather than interrupting family life and caring responsibilities by attending regular out-of-hours, off-site union forums. This data resonates with Munro's (2017) and Kirton's (2006a) argument that women (including those with caring responsibilities) are more likely to participate in local union activity when it is part of work time.

### *Union culture*

Beyond workload and caring demands, women particularly commented on aspects of the culture, practice and dynamics of the union's decision-making forums which were perceived as inhibiting fuller participation. These comments especially pertained to experiences at Council – the union's main debating forum. While representation of women in this forum was still fairly high (59.5%) relative to the union's membership, female respondents (plus some male respondents)

commented that aspects of union culture and practice stifled women's participation. In addition to Council being described as a "hard...difficult forum" (Former NSWTF President (female)), where debate could be "hostile" (Current NSWTF union official), female respondents emphasised how the dynamic of debate was confronting and intimidating (Current NSWTF Deputy Secretary (female); Former Women's Coordinator 2 (female)). The "patriarchal and male" (Former NSWTF union official) style of debate was also seen as conflicting with more collaborative approaches articulated by some respondents to be preferred by women when working through complex issues and problems (Former NSWTF Women's Coordinator 3; Former NSWTF union official).

During debate men typically spoke for longer, naturally expected extensions to their speaking time, and were more comfortable with repeating arguments of other (male) speakers (Former NSWTF President (female)). By comparison, women generally spoke less in frequency and duration, would not repeat an argument, and less frequently sought an extension of speaking time (Former NSWTF President (female); Current NSWTF Deputy Secretary (female)). The practice of needing to "physically stand up out of your seat with your hand raised...then be very, very loud and...talk in the kind of strident, dominant, union kind of voice" to have a view heard in the debate could be "quite daunting" for some women (Former NSWTF Women's Coordinator 3) and thus affect their participation in this forum (Former NSWTF Women's Coordinator 1 (female)). This reinforces Kirton and Healy's (1999) and Colgan and Ledwith's (2002) observations that although unions have become more progressive in redressing the gender imbalance in union structures at a representational level (as will be discussed below), union cultures have generally remained enduringly patriarchal and masculine, and thus a deterrent to wider participation by women.

To some extent, the practice and culture of these decision-making forums were seen to potentially influence the issues given priority by the union. As commented by a former Women's Coordinator: "It's hard because within the Federation...you can see yourself [that] those issues are of vital importance for women, but you have to convince other Federation members to give priority to those matters" (Former NSWTF Women's Coordinator 3). This reinforces scholarship highlighting that 'women's issues' have generally not been adequately addressed in unions due to a persistent male-defined bargaining agenda (Kirton, 2006b). While feminist scholarship has highlighted that women share many bargaining concerns similar to men, women have been reported to prioritise issues differently and can feel that they have gender-specific employment needs and concerns (Kirton, 2006b; Kirton and Healy, 1999), which is perhaps even more of a priority for unions representing female-dominated occupations. Therefore, while on a percentage basis, women are more represented in the Council forum than men, aspects of union culture and practice in this key decision-making forum were seen as compromising the ability for women to advance issues they deemed important.

#### *Union strategies to address under-representation and under-participation*

This section considers the third sub-question, evaluating the effectiveness of the NSWTF strategies for addressing women's under-representation and under-participation. The section emphasises that while in an historical sense, our data, drawn from the union case study, found that the NSWTF has been progressive in developing programs and initiatives aimed at improving women's participation in the union (within a context of male dominance) these initiatives have overlooked deeper structural barriers to women's participation in the union and cultural legacies in previously male-dominated unions.

The 1970s ‘Women’s Movement’ in the NSWTF drove pressure to have all aspects of the union’s structure made representative. This was reflective of the broader ‘second wave feminism’ movement occurring during this time, as noted in the literature, where women campaigned for equality and inclusion in workplaces and across broader society (Kirton, 2017). This feminist campaign, however, sparked debate and antagonism in the NSWTF, particularly from males (Former NSWTF Women’s Coordinator 3; Former NSWTF Research Officer (female)). This response is documented in literature from Kirton (2018) and Cooper (2012) who observe that while unions have steadily adopted specific policies and practices for increasing women’s representation, a common response has been (mostly) male antagonism towards this campaigning.

Despite these attitudes it is evident from our datasets that the NSWTF has distinguished itself as a trade union that has been highly progressive in promoting women’s participation in the union, particularly through holding conferences and training (Parker, 2003) (see Table 2). It is worth noting, however, that with respect to involving women in the union’s decision-making forums, there are no official rules set by the NSWTF for gender representation on these decision-making bodies or in grassroots forums. In the NSWTF, proportional gender representation by enforcement of ‘rules’ has been dismissed in favour of a “naturally [and] organically” fostered “culture” of encouraging improved gender representation (Former NSWTF senior union official). Table 1, however, reflects weaknesses of this approach in achieving this goal, as representation in decision-making and grassroots forums is still not proportional on gender lines.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, it also illustrates how representation and participation in these decision-making and grassroots structures declines as they increase in frequency and the level of commitment required of members’ time.

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the NSWTF’s approach to gender representation in decision-making structures, the Independent Education Union, which represents teachers in independent (private) schools, in 2018 adopted a rule that women should now make up at least half of all members elected to its federal council branches. This decision was aimed at improving representativeness and participation in state branch structures and union affairs (Workplace Express, 2018). However, based on evidence from the NSWTF’s experience, it is questionable whether adopting rules around gender representation (alone) will improve women’s participation in union forums and activities.



**TABLE 2 HERE***Evaluation of the effectiveness of union strategies to improve women's participation and representation*

This section operationalises our final sub-question to evaluate the effectiveness of the NSWTF's strategies for improving women's representation and participation in the union, particularly in response to the sustained work and family/domestic pressures facing women teachers. We argue that the various initiatives described above have been important in encouraging participation, but that even further action is needed to improve participation and representation particularly as many of these initiatives have, so far, been ineffective in addressing the entrenched intersecting pressures arising from the 'triple burden', which, arguably, have also intensified during a period of increased work demands on teachers.

Considering first formal representation in the union: while developing formal rules around gender representation in the union's decision-making structure had been consistently rejected in favour of building representation 'naturally and organically', the effectiveness of this approach is questionable (as evident from the figures in Table 1), such that representation along gender lines has not been achieved. As commented by a former NSWTF rank-and-file member when asked about the efficacy of the union's strategies to improve representation, "I think they're sort of aware that this kind of stuff needs to happen, I'm just not sure that that translates in reality."

Beyond formal representation, while participants reflected that various union strategies arising out of the NSWTF's Women's Action Program (see Table 2) had delivered improvements in women's representation and participation, there still remained enduring and systemic structural

and cultural barriers to participation that the union appeared to overlook (Former NSWTF senior union official; Former NSWTF Organiser (female)). However, in assessing (formal) strategies implemented by the union to improve participation, male and female respondents had differing views on their efficacy. While the Women's Action Program has encouraged women's involvement through initiatives such as training or holding conferences, which, on its own, is important (Parker, 2003), these 'shallow' approaches to encouraging participation, we argue, fail to tackle deeper cultural and structural issues preventing participation. Most commonly it was perceived by female respondents that women were hindered from participating in union activity due to their workload and caring responsibilities, reinforcing elements of the 'triple burden' that entrenched pressures for working women with family/domestic responsibilities. The most common, and often the only, form of support mentioned that was provided by the union to address this structural barrier was provision of child caring services to support attendance at union meetings. Notably this is a measure which has elsewhere been described as inadequate (McBride, 2001) and which, while reflecting current statistics around caring responsibilities (Wilkins and Lass, 2018), also reflects ongoing assumptions about gender roles.

While child care was available 'in principle' it was commented as not being readily taken up by women (Former NSWTF Research Officer (female); Former Organiser (female)). From early years, children are commonly involved in out-of-school sporting and other activities that are incompatible with standard child care, and/or need time at home. In contrast, most male respondents viewed child care as an effective support strategy, echoed in the statement from a Former NSWTF General Secretary 2 (male):

[Women] could get money from the Federation to set up babysitting at their Association meetings if they wanted to. So we did everything we possibly could...[I]t's a difficult one, but we didn't put any obstacles, well, we tried not to. I'm sure there were

obstacles...But we didn't deliberately put obstacles in their way, we tried to promote and help as much as we could...[T]here are those issues and whether we like it or not, some of them are just almost impossible to resolve.

This seemingly 'gender-blind' statement neglects the broader systemic issues facing women's entry into, and experience with, their union. On the issue of child care, Kirton (2006b) argues that in view of the organisation of women's work and their role in the home and family, provision of child care, while important, is very limited with regard to its ability to improve participation due to deeper structural and cultural barriers facing women. Of greater policy and theoretical concern is the need to advance equality agendas and manage the effects for women who do participate in masculine union cultures (Kirton, 2006b).

Beyond providing child care, other practical strategies provided by the union that aimed at improving women's participation were noted. One strategy included encouraging women to attend as 'observers' of Council when there was no female Councillor from a particular Association represented in that forum (Current NSWTF Deputy Secretary (female)). Most recently, the NSWTF has also revised its Anna Stewart Program (refer Table 2) to find more effective ways to increase women's participation across the union's work, acknowledging the enduring barriers to women's participation that remain decades later (NSWTF, 2019).

More discerning (but few) male respondents acknowledged and were sympathetic to the fact that "[t]here are barriers for women" in participating in union activity (Former NSWTF Deputy President (male)). A former male Deputy President commented that "Whenever the Council meets on Saturdays, childcare is available for women. Now I say that as if that's enough, of course it is not enough" (Former NSWTF Deputy President (male)). Interestingly, we see here an assumption that child care services are something only *women* might require. Another male

officer observed broader structural barriers and the need to more closely integrate and support women's professional work and union work at an early stage of their careers, highlighted in the statement that: "[W]e can have the debate about whether we need child care facilities at Association meetings...but if we just focus on that it won't be enough. We've got to look at the development, relationships and leadership, most importantly, where this union began, and that was the classroom. That for me is the biggest frustration I've got" (Current NSWTF Organiser).

There was an overall perception from respondents that improving women's participation was an area the union had underachieved in. Given that this is a case of a female-dominated union that had actively tried to address this area, this finding is of concern. In interviewing a former NSWTF Organiser (female), when asked whether the union could more actively support women's involvement, the Organiser indicated that "sometimes I think we forget", alluding to how the union could overlook the more systemic challenges facing women arising from the intersecting dimensions of the 'triple burden' (Former NSWTF Organiser (female)). While women's representation in union decision-making and grassroots structures has improved in recent decades from a statistical perspective, the culture, practices and processes within the union were viewed as not fully accommodating the needs of working women with additional responsibilities, particularly in the teaching profession, and at a time of intensified work pressures. Moreover, and somewhat of concern, there appeared to be hesitation from the union in renewing particular aspects of union practice, such as the style of Council debate, with expression from a senior union official that "I don't think we can successfully change the adversarial nature of some of our forums because we've had it so long and it has other positives" (Former NSWTF senior union official).

There was a sense that trade unions (including teacher unions) needed to be more creative in their strategies for engaging this key constituency of workers and more deeply attuned to the complex

working lives and responsibilities of women teachers. While our case examines issues specific to the teaching profession, we argue that it is illustrative of further renewal required of female-dominated trade unions in the shifting ‘union heartland’. As commented by a former NSWTF Organiser (female): “The reality is the typical unionist is a female in a white collar profession, and we now outnumber the men... Women are going to disengage from the union if they don’t think the union’s doing anything for them... We now have to make the union relevant to women” (Former NSWTF Organiser (female)). Thornthwaite et al.’s (2018) study of another Australian education union attempting to improve women’s participation came to a similar conclusion found in our article that union strategies can be ‘blind’ to the deeper structural barriers affecting women’s participation.

## **Conclusion**

This article has drawn critical attention to how the practices of one female-dominated teacher union can enable and constrain the participation of women at a time when the ‘union heartland’ has shifted to female-dominated industries and occupations and the education sector has experienced unprecedented intensification of work and new accountability requirements brought about through complex, overlapping reforms. We have argued that the ‘triple burden’ experienced by women directly affects active participation and representation in union activity, even where that union is female-dominated. Our second sub-question aimed to explore these implications. We find that while women’s representation in decision-making structures of the teachers’ union has improved in recent decades, work intensification pressures in the teaching profession, combined with other enduring structural and labour market barriers, position women at a disadvantage in terms of their capacity to more readily participate in union activity. This resonates with Kirton’s (2006a) claims of women’s ‘multiple careers’ often being in conflict with each other. We add to Kirton’s (2006a) argument, however, in emphasising that in addition to

women's participation being affected by elements of the 'triple burden', including paid work and family responsibilities, their fuller participation is particularly constrained by systemic cultural and historical legacies in unions which appear misaligned with the new profile of workers that unions in the new 'heartland' represent.

Our first and third sub-questions explored how the union seeks to include and represent the interests of their women members and the effectiveness of these measures. Here, we find that while the NSWTF has historically been progressive in developing structures and programs to facilitate women's participation, there remain cultural and historical legacies within the union that combine to stifle participation and become 'gender blind' to the enduring 'triple burden' women face particularly at a time of heightened work intensification. Providing programs and opportunities for building confidence, knowledge and skills in union work, in conjunction with support strategies for working mothers, are seemingly insufficient to address structural and cultural barriers affecting participation more deeply. Therefore, the practices of unions can simultaneously enable and also constrain women's participation. While unions should be mindful of two elements of the 'triple burden' – paid work and family responsibilities – that can hinder women's participation, greater effort should be focused on changing union culture and practice – the third element of the 'triple burden' – to progressively enhance women's participation. We do not wish to make the claim in this article however, that female teachers are disadvantaged with respect to outcomes the NSWTF has secured for women in the teaching profession. Indeed, the NSWTF has been highly progressive in securing advances for women, for instance, around gender equal pay, parental leave and career progression. However, we note a limitation of our study is little data captured on how women's representation and participation directly shapes union strategy and outcomes for female teachers.

This article therefore taps into a seemingly ‘old debate’ about women’s under-participation and under-representation in unions from a new perspective, examining how these perpetuate despite the shifting union ‘heartland’ and in a female-dominated occupation. While the intersecting pressures of the ‘triple burden’ coalesce to stifle women’s fuller participation, trade unions can remain ‘gender blind’ and stifle needed renewal of traditional union structures and practices. As echoed by Ledwith (2012) and Williams (1995), the narrative presented in this article continues to reflect a story of exclusionary masculinised unionism and hegemonic masculinity at the expense of inclusivity and democratisation, seeing masculinity reproduced even within female-dominated occupations and professions. While we acknowledge that unions have made significant leaps in prioritising efforts to improve women’s participation and leadership, this study reinforces Kirton and Healy’s (2013 cited in Kirton, 2017) observations of the continuation of multi-faceted barriers to women’s participation in union activity.

This article draws attention to the need for more internal consciousness-building in unions around the enduring barriers facing women today in workplaces and homes and the critical need for union structures and decision-making processes to reflect the gendered nature of particular workforces. It also reinforces Pocock’s (1995; 2011) arguments for a more socially-embedded analysis on the causes of under-representation which enlarges the focus from the workplace and labour market to a broader set of intersecting work, household and community contexts. The work, domestic and social aspects of women’s lives must therefore be a more central focus of union action if existing male norms that privilege and authorise men are to be dismantled and women are to have increased opportunity for representation and participation (Pocock, 1995). Future research that garners perspectives from members and union leaders (particularly women) about these issues in other female-dominated and non-female-dominated unions is necessary. Such research might consider the effectiveness of certain union initiatives (including more innovative practices such as using social media to encourage participation) and the potential for

revitalisation of union strategies, practices and cultures so as to address enduring barriers to women's participation in union work.

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**Table 1 – Women’s representation in NSWTF decision-making structures and grassroots positions**

<b>A. Proportion of women in the NSWTF relative to presence in NSW public education</b>					
i. NSW public education – 70.5%					
ii. NSWTF – 73.5%					
<b>B. Decision-making forum</b>					
<b>Name of Forum (and Position)</b>	<b>Frequency or Nature</b>	<b>Purpose and Function</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Women’s representation within the union (% of total)</b>	<b>Year of data reporting</b>
<b>i. Annual Conference (Delegate)</b>	Annual	Elected delegates debate union policy and campaign priorities	600 rank-and-file members (elected from Associations)	68.7%	2017
<b>ii. Council (Councillor)</b>	Held 8 times per year	Resolutions from Annual Conference debated by elected members	300 rank-and-file members (elected from Associations)	51.9%	2018
<b>iii. Executive (Member)</b>	Held every 2 weeks	Elected members discuss campaign tactics and issues arising between Council meetings. Also represents the administrative and managerial arm of the union	3 senior officers and 15 classroom teachers (elected from Council)	55%	2017
<b>C. Grassroots-based position</b>					
<b>i. Association</b>	Held 8 times per year or as required	Rank-and-file members discuss workplace issues and implementation of campaign tactics locally	160 local forums state-wide. Minimum of 15 members	N/A	N/A
<b>ii. Union delegate</b>	School-based	Local union representative	1 per public school	64.9%	2017
<b>iii. Workplace Committee (Member)</b>	School-based	Local teachers build union capacity at the school level and engage the school community in union campaigns	Comprised of a small number of teachers	71.0%	2017

*Data included in this table is sourced from internal documents of the NSWTF*

**Table 2 – NSWTF initiatives to promote women’s union participation**

Initiative	Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women’s Action Program</li> <li>• Women’s Coordinator (elected role)</li> <li>• Women’s Annual Conference</li> <li>• Women’s Contact position</li>   <li>• Women-only Union training courses</li> <li>• Anna Stewart program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demystify union processes, remove structural barriers</li> <li>• Role responsible for advancing women member’s issues</li> <li>• Union participation forum for women and women’s issues</li> <li>• In each public school, separate from local union delegate to raise women’s workplace issues</li> <li>• Allows women to build core union skills</li> <li>• Women ‘shadow’ officers developing capacity to hold future officer role</li> </ul>

Source: NSWTF Case Study Research: Various interviews with Former Women’s Coordinator, current NSWTF union official and Trade Union Training Officer