

*Carolina Uppenberg*

## Female Workers but not Women

### Paradoxes in Women's Conditions and Strategies in Swedish Trade Unions, 1900–1925

#### ABSTRACT

This article compares the opportunities that existed for trade union organisation by women and the scope for pursuing women's issues in the Swedish Tailoring Workers' Union (*Skrädderiarbetareförbundet*), the Swedish Textile Workers' Union (*Textilarbetareförbundet*) and the Swedish Women's Trade Union (*Kvinnornas fackförbund*). Trade union minutes are analysed using theories on women's organisation, in which exposure of male standards in trade union organisation and the concept of women as powerless are central. The results reveal some differences in the opportunities for women to become members of the Tailoring Workers' Union, which initially tried to exclude women, and the Textile Workers' Union, which saw it as a priority to recruit more women. Nevertheless, both unions shared a similar view of women as weak and especially difficult to organise as trade union members. A lack of debate about women's conditions is also clear in both unions. Comparison with the Women's Trade Union shows that dedicated organisations for women played a major role in women's opportunities for union involvement, but that gender-based union organisation was regarded as a threat to the supposedly genderless trade unions.

Should women organise themselves in a way which establishes their equality with men and highlights the similarities between men and women, or is it more effective to organise separately as women and highlight the differences that exist between the living conditions of women and those of men? American historian Joan W. Scott calls this central question the paradox of feminism and believes that, since inequality builds on and replicates the cultural construct of gender difference, the question is as unavoidable as it is insoluble.<sup>1</sup> She argues that women's political strategies throughout history should not primarily be analysed as being chosen on the basis of a theoretical conviction of their merits, but rather based on the ambivalent, inconsistent and contradictory resistance they encountered.<sup>2</sup> In the Swedish trade union movement, distinct organisations for women have been extremely rare, and the attempts that have been made have been controversial.<sup>3</sup> Historian Ylva Waldemarson says in her research on the Women's Council of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*LO:s Kvinnorådet*) that the appointment of female members suggested there were different interests within within the Trade Union Confederation (LO). The Trade Union Confederation was a stakeholder organisation for the working class, and "challenging the gender neutrality of the organisation was by extension the same as questioning the indivisibility of class. It was like weakening the concept of class and therefore weakening the class struggle."<sup>4</sup> Swedish political scientist

- 1 Joan Wallach Scott: *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, London 1996. Mary McIntosh and Carole Pateman argue that this is a fundamental problem for women's movements and calls it „Wollstonecraft's dilemma“ after the 18<sup>th</sup> century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, see Mary McIntosh/Carole Pateman: *The Patriarchal Welfare State*, in: Christopher Pierson/Francis G. Castles (eds.): *The Welfare State Reader*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 119–150, p. 142.
- 2 Scott: *Only Paradoxes*, pp. 3–5, 13–17. A Danish example of an analysis based on this premise is Drude Dahlerup: *Arbejderkvinderne: organisering efter kønnet eller klassen?*, in: Anette Eklund Hansen (ed.): *Arbejderkvinder i bevægelse. Rapport fra konference om Arbejderkvindernes vilkår, historisk og aktuelt 1990*, Copenhagen 1992, pp. 9–20, p. 9, p. 17.
- 3 Women's trade unions have had greater success in Denmark and Iceland. Women's trade unions that were founded during the early days of the workers' movement still exist in both countries, Guðbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir: *Kvinnofack eller integrering som strategi mot underordning. Diskussion kring kvinnliga fackföreningar på Island*, Lund 1995, pp. 55–63. As shown below, however, similar patterns of difficulties as faced by Swedish women trade union activists can also be discerned in Denmark and Iceland. There are grounds for a more systematic comparison of the different paths taken by women's trade unions in the Nordic countries.
- 4 Ylva Waldemarson: *Kvinnor och klass – en paradoxal skapelseberättelse. LO:s kvinnoråd och makten att benämna 1898–1967*, Stockholm 2000, p. 32. The Swedish Women's Council (*Kvinnorådet*) was formed in 1946 (Waldemarson, p. 34) and the issue was also debated for decades in Norway until the Norwegian Trade Union Confederation's Women's Council (*LO:s Kvinnenemnd*) was formed in 1940, Gro Hagemann: *Fagbevegelsen og kvinnene*, in: *Arbeiderhistorie. Årbok for Arbeiderbevegelsens Arkiv og Bibliotek*, Oslo 1990, pp. 113–131, p 118.

Maud Eduards has described how women's organisations that reveal men to be gender-biased, with interests in their identity as men rather than autonomous individuals, tend to encounter the greatest resistance. It is not the organisation of women as such that poses the challenge, in Eduards' view, but women's organisations whose strategy reveals that a supposedly genderless organisation or institution is built on male interests. Dedicated organisations for women are perceived as being against men, whether they mention men or not.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines women's trade union organisation in Sweden over the period 1900–1925, with the focus on women's conditions as members and how female members influenced the work of the trade unions, during a period of upheaval in the power relationships in the labour market.

## Method and Sources

Three trade unions, the Tailoring Workers' Union (*Skrädderiarbetareförbundet*), the Textile Workers' Union (*Textilarbetareförbundet*) and the Women's Trade Union (*Kvinnornas fackförbund*) are compared using an ideological discourse analysis.<sup>6</sup> The expressed main purpose of the trade unions was to change the power balance between employers and workers regardless of gender, but it is the premise of this article that they also created and sustained power balances between men and women.<sup>7</sup> Consequently the article examines both what was said and the actual results.

The unions were active in the same sector of the labour market, namely women-dominated, low-paid, low-status trades. The unions differed in line with the accepted definitions of craft unions and industrial unions. Craft unions consisted of skilled workers banding together to protect their specific status and role in the labour market, which in this case applies to the Tailoring Workers' Union. The Textile Workers' Union was an industrial union that brought together all types of workers in a particular industry. The Women's Trade Union cannot however be put into either of these categories, since its role as a specific union for women rather than a particular profession gave it a unique place

5 Maud Eduards: *Förbjuden handling. Om kvinnors organisering och feministisk teori*, Malmö 2005, pp. 148–149, 154–157.

6 See Peter Esaiasson/Mikael Gilljam/Henrik Oscarsson/Lena Wängnerud: *Metodpraktikan. Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*, Stockholm 2007, pp. 112–122.

7 Christina Carlsson: *Kvinnosyn och kvinnopolitik. En studie av svensk socialdemokrati 1880–1910*, Lund 1986, pp. 272–277; Inger Humlesjö: *Manlighetskonstruktion i arbetarhistoria och fackföreningar*, in: Ann-Marie Berggren (ed.): *Manligt och omanligt i ett historiskt perspektiv*, Stockholm 1999, pp. 237–239; Ulla Wikander: *Kvinnoarbete i Europa 1789–1950. Genus, makt och arbetsdelning*, Stockholm 2006, pp. 64–67.

in the Swedish trade union movement.<sup>8</sup> These unions also differ in terms of their mutual relationships. The Tailoring Workers' Union was active in the same sector as the Women's Trade Union, which operated between 1902 and 1908, when it was incorporated in the Tailoring Workers' Union.<sup>9</sup> This allows comparisons at several levels. The activities of a craft union, an industrial union and a women's union can be compared, and similarly the Tailoring Workers' Union before and after incorporation of the Women's Trade Union, can be compared with the Textile Workers' Union, which did not undergo association with any women's trade union. Developments in the various trade unions are also compared over a period of time when dramatic events unfolded. Although this comparative analysis is not comprehensive in the traditional sense, it is hoped that comparison of accounts of the scope and opportunities for women in trade unions will be as productive as the more common comparison between countries.<sup>10</sup>

To examine the opportunities that existed for women to become and act as members of trade unions and the attention that women's issues were given in the unions, material was gathered from the unions' collected archives at the Workers' Movement Archive (*Arbetarrörelsens arkiv*) in Stockholm. The minutes of congresses dating from the constitutional congress until the congress immediately after 1925 were read and analysed in

- 8 Lars Magnusson: *Sveriges ekonomiska historia*, Stockholm 1996, pp. 123–125, 389–391; Klas Åmark describes how matters of organisation were normally „a question of how men should organise men“, Klas Åmark: *Solidaritetens gränser. LO och industriförbundsfrågan 1900–1990*, Stockholm 1998, pp. 12, 152, 334–340, quotation p. 152.
- 9 For information about the trade unions, see Hulda Flood: *Den socialdemokratiska kvinnorörelsen i Sverige*, Stockholm 1960; Ulla Gabrielsson: *Kvinnornas fackförbund 1902–1908*, Stockholm 1981 (unpublished Bachelor thesis, Dept of History, Stockholm University); Gustaf Janzén (ed.): *Svenska Textilarbetareförbundet 1898–1923*. Minnesskrift, Stockholm 1923; Gunnel Johansson: *Kvinnans ställning i svensk fackföreningsrörelse: studium av kvinnofrågan hos Kvinnornas fackförbund 1902–1908, och Skrädderiarbetareförbundet 1909–1920*, Umeå 1986 (unpublished Bachelor thesis, Dept of History, Umeå University); Ture Nerman: *Svenska beklädnadsarbetareförbundet 1889–1939: historik*, Stockholm 1939; Karl Johan Olsson: *Textilarna. Svenska Textilarbetareförbundet 1898–1938*, Norrköping 1938; Gunnar Qvist: *Statistik och politik: Landsorganisationen och kvinnorna på arbetsmarknaden*, Stockholm 1974; Christer Winberg: *Kvinnliga arbetare och facklig organisation: Textilarbetareförbundet som exempel*, in: *Studier i modern historia tillägnade Jarl Torbacke den 18 augusti 1990*, Kristianstad 1990, pp. 329–344.
- 10 For the traditional comparative method, see Thomas Denk: *Komparativ metod – förståelse genom jämförelse*, Lund 2002. For methodological inspiration, see Joachim C. Häberlen: *Reflections on Comparative Everyday History: Practices in the Working-Class Movement in Leipzig and Lyon during the early 1930s*, in: *The International History Review* 33:4 (2011), pp. 687–704. However, the article also contains occasional comparisons with conditions in other Nordic countries.

their entirety for the unions.<sup>11</sup> This has also been completed with the minutes of management board meetings, executive committee meetings and annual meetings. In the case of the Women's Trade Union, the minutes of congresses are a less fruitful source. The union held only two congresses and the second of these dealt largely with the question of incorporation with the Tailoring Workers' Union. The minutes of the union executive therefore provide the main source of analysis for the Women's Trade Union. To provide background to the formation of the Women's Trade Union the minutes of its forerunner, the Committee for Women's Agitation (*Kommittén för den kvinnliga agitationen*) were also studied. The decision to study minutes from the managing bodies of the national unions could be questioned on the grounds that they were too remote from their everyday members. The problem with studying women's issues, however, is that the matters discussed generally had nothing to do with women, and a study at lower levels of union organisation would likely yield very few discussions of women's issues. It is only when the collected discussions of the union are examined that a number of women's issues are brought up. One benefit of using minutes as a source is that they follow a similar form for each of the unions and over time; they have a standardised procedure that facilitates comparison between the unions. One dilemma is that this is largely a process of analysing a vacuum. It is the lack of women in the members' lists, at meetings and in discussions that is in focus, but there are no records from those who were not members or did not speak at the meetings. This means that both the presence and absence of information must be analysed without being taken for granted.

## Gendering the History of the Labour Movement – Theoretical Approach

By taking a gender history approach, this article will show how notions of gender affected power relationships between men and women within trade unions and how external events influenced the activities of the unions with respect to these power relationships. The time period that the article covers was marked by events that shook the balance of power in the labour market and in society as a whole, namely the general strike of 1909, which was a stinging defeat for the trade union movement, the hunger riots that broke out in 1917 in many parts of Sweden, sparked by food shortages and inspired by the Russian Revolution, as well as a short-lasting but severe economic crisis in the early

11 For more detailed information about the unions and their congresses, see Carolina Lindqvist [Uppenber]: *Kvinnlig majoritet, manlig makt: kvinnors villkor och strategier i fyra svenska fackförbund under perioder av strejk, uppror och ekonomisk kris 1900–1925*, Stockholm 2011 (unpublished Master thesis, Dept of Economic History, Stockholm University).

years of the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> The article also shows how these events affected women trade union members more than men. The time period was chosen on the grounds that momentous historical events can provide opportunities for changes in women's conditions. Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman argues that "[in] the brief, flaring moments of revolutionary energy, women and men have been able to define themselves as 'one' force against authority", but when these moments are over and the changes have been institutionalised, men have reassumed power.<sup>13</sup>

- 12 Knut Bäckström: *Arbetarrörelsen i Sverige. Andra boken. Den politiska arbetarrörelsens sprängning och ett nytt revolutionärt arbetarpartis uppkomst*, Stockholm 1963, pp. 133–138, 141–144; Kaj Kristensson/Hans Nyström/Örjan Nyström: *Från mörkret stiga vi mot ljuset. Arbetarrörelsens historia i Sverige*, Göteborg 1979, pp. 127–129; Yvonne Hirdman: *Vi bygger landet. Den svenska arbetarrörelsens historia från Per Götek till Olof Palme*, Stockholm 1988, p. 77; Gunnar Gunnarsson: *Arbetarrörelsens krönika i ord och bild 1881–1938*, Stockholm 1973, p. 169; Ture Nerman/Karl Otto Zamore/Lennart Björklund (eds.): *Svensk arbetarrörelse i ord och bild 1881–1955*, Stockholm 1956, pp. 18–19; Ragnar Casparsson: *LO under fem årtienden. Första delen 1898–1923*, Stockholm 1947, pp. 359–360, 533–536; Bernt Schiller: *Storstrejken 1909. Förhistoria och orsaker*, Göteborg 1967, pp. 119, 134–137, 202–206, 230–235; Lennart Schön: *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia: tillväxt och omvandling under två sekel*, Stockholm 2000, p. 267, 278–280, 287; Håkan Blomqvist: *Den röda tråden. Arbetarrörelsens historia: en alternativ översikt*, Stockholm 1989, pp. 90–91, 101–107, 122; Klas Åmark: *Facklig makt och fackligt medlemskap. De svenska fackförbundens medlemsutveckling 1890–1940*, Lund 1986, pp. 98–99, 114–118; Mats Adolfsson: *Bondeuppror och gatustrider: 1719–1932*, Stockholm 2007, pp. 273–283; Mats Nyström: *Hungerupproret 1917*, Ludvika 1994, pp. 11–12, 22, 32–40, 72–79; Kjell Östberg: *Efter rösträtten: kvinnors utrymme efter det demokratiska genombrottet*, Eslöv 1997, pp. 19–20, 34–36; Eva Schmitz: *Arbetarkvinnors mobiliseringar i arbetarrörelsens barndom: en studie av arbetarkvinnors strejkaktiviteter och dess inflytande på den svenska arbetarrörelsen*, Lund 1999, pp. 110–116; Lars Magnusson: *Sveriges ekonomiska historia*, Stockholm 1996, pp. 365–369; Francis Sejersted: *Socialdemokratins tidsålder. Sverige och Norge under 1900-talet*, Nora 2005, pp. 149–151. There were also hunger riots and a sense of revolution in other Nordic countries to varying extents: in Finland a true revolution took place in 1918 when „the Reds“ seized state power in southern Finland for a few months. Juhani Piilonen argues that women played a prominent role: *Women's Contribution to „Red Finland“ 1918*, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 13:1 (1988), pp. 39–48, p. 40. The hunger riots were more widespread in Norway than in Sweden, but the political consequences were greater in Sweden. It was only after the events of 1917 that women were given the vote and a parliamentary system was introduced in Sweden, which was already the case in Norway. In Denmark the food situation was considerably better and hunger riots were minor, Nils Elvander: *Skandinavisk arbetarrörelse*, Stockholm 1980, pp. 38–40.
- 13 Yvonne Hirdman: *Genussystemet: reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala underordning*, in: Christina Ericsson (ed.): *Genus i historisk forskning*, Lund 1993, pp. 146–161, p. 160. See also Scott: *Only Paradoxes*, pp. 14, 18, 174. For a similar analysis of women's central role in the early stages of revolution, and how they are repressed once the revolution has become

American gender historian Alice Kessler-Harris writes in her book *Gendering Labor History* that it is not enough to include women in existing analyses, since concepts such as class, trade unionism and labour are shaped by male standards. Using them without a gender analysis conceals the conflicts between genders and the different conditions that have existed for men and women. Kessler-Harris argues that it is equally important to analyse how men who joined trade unions did so not just as workers but also in their role as men, which is a fundamental viewpoint in this article.<sup>14</sup> Involvement in politics and trade-union issues has traditionally been seen as a male arena. One aspect of this is that women have been construed as second-class workers who have not been expected to have the capacity, will or courage to make demands of their employers, because of their weaker position in the labour market and because of notions that women's nature was incompatible with militancy and loyal comradeship.<sup>15</sup> Women being perceived as harder to organise, tend to form the starting point rather than the focus of research, a fact that is criticised by Scott in her evaluation of the influential book *The Making of the English Working Class*, by E. P. Thompson. The perception of class is central to this book, but according to Scott the expression of radicalism and the union struggle is itself male gendered. She writes that “[b]ecause of their domestic and reproductive functions, women are, by definition, only partial or imperfect political actors”.<sup>16</sup> Economic historian Anita Göransson points out that what is coded as male or female should be understood from the perspective of where power rests, that the construction of masculinity has changed with history to reflect shifts in power, and that femininity is constructed as the “opposite of masculinity”, in other words absence of power.<sup>17</sup>

established, also examining the Russian Revolution, see Jane McDermid/Anna Hillyar: *Midwives of the Revolution. Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, London 1999, pp. 195–200.

- 14 Alice Kessler-Harris: *Gendering Labor History*, Chicago 2007, pp. 147–149, 156–157. See also Waldemarson, pp. 21–22.
- 15 See for example Hagemann, pp. 112–116; Spike V. Peterson: *A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy. Integrating Reproductive, Productive and Virtual Economies*, London 2003, pp. 10–12; Guida West/Rhoda Lois Blumberg: *Reconstructing Social Protest from a Feminist Perspective*, in: Guida West/Rhoda Lois Blumberg (eds.): *Women and Social Protest*, Oxford 1990, pp. 3–35, pp. 22–24; Eva Schmitz: *Kvinnors fackliga kamp. Från textilarbetarstrejken 1890 till textilarbetarstrejken 1931*, in: Josephine Askegård/Kjersti Bosdotter/Klaus Misgeld (eds.): *Kvinnor tar plats. Arbetsmarknad och industriarbete på 1900-talet*, Stockholm 2002, pp. 33–51, pp. 33–34.
- 16 Joan Wallach Scott: *Women and the Making of the English Working Class*, in: Joan Wallach Scott (ed.): *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988, pp. 68–90, p. 74.
- 17 Anita Göransson: *Mening, makt och materialitet. Ett försök att förena realistiska och post-strukturalistiska positioner*, in: *Häftet för kritiska studier 4* (1998), pp. 3–26, pp. 8–9, quotation p. 8.

Kessler-Harris argues that men actively shut out or opposed women as members of unions and that researchers should therefore not ask why women did not become unionised, but how women were excluded from unionisation. The main purpose of trade union activities was to organise workers to get higher wages and better working conditions, but several researchers point to a tendency for their efforts to focus on improving men's wages and conditions, which led to a choice of strategy that worked against potential women members. According to Kessler-Harris, women were regarded as competitors for jobs, and in response the male-dominated trade unions followed two main strategies: excluding women from trade unions with the goal of discouraging employers from employing women, a strategy more widely used by the craft unions, and by organising women so that their wages were at the same level as men's and therefore posed no risk of undercutting, which was more common among industrial unions. The problem, however, was that women's main means of competing was their lower wages, so it was not clearly in women's interests to join the male-dominated trade unions. Women's weaker ties to the labour market meant that a smaller proportion of trade-union activities appealed to them, and because they were less well represented in the trade unions it was more difficult to change the situation and women's issues tended to become a special interest that did not appeal to most of the members, in other words men.<sup>18</sup>

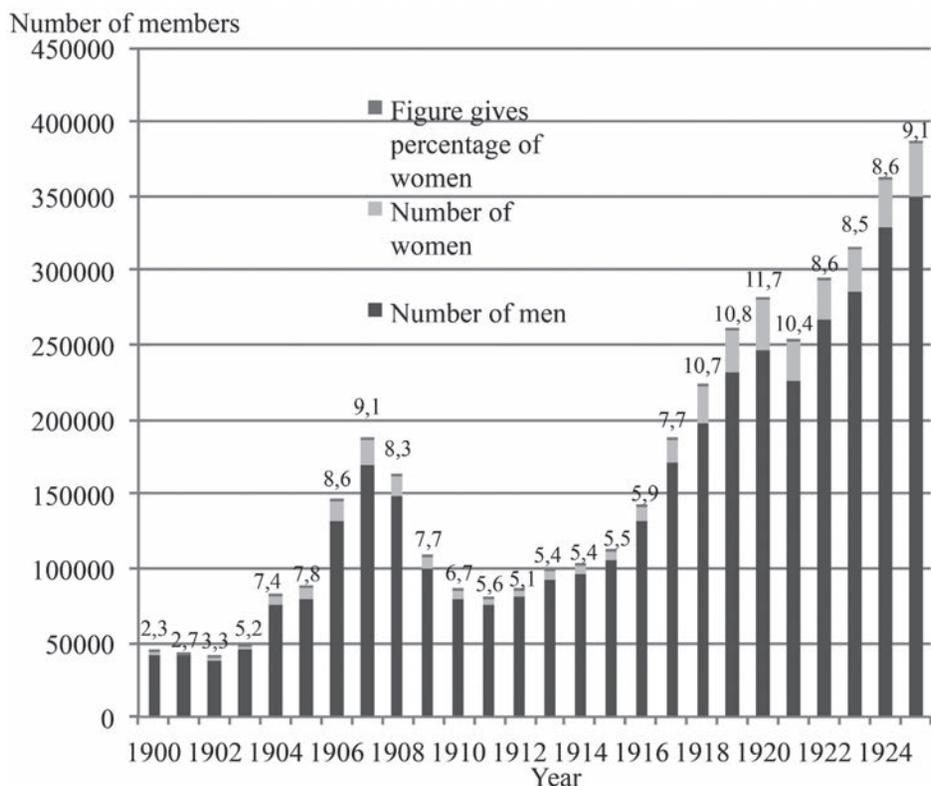
## The Trade Union Confederation and the Trade Union Struggle 1900–1925

To put the development of the Tailoring Workers' Union (*Skrädderiarbetareförbundet*), Textile Workers' Union (*Textilarbetareförbundet*) and the Women's Trade Union (*Kvinnornas fackförbund*) in context it is useful to examine the membership growth of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen*, LO) as a whole. Membership numbers and the percentages of women are shown in Figure 1 below.

Two aspects of this trend are of interest for the arguments in this article. First, it shows the significance of the events that form the background to the study, namely the

18 Kessler-Harris, pp. 24–29, p. 36. See also Sue Dorothy Cobble: *Rethinking Troubled Relations between Women and Unions: Craft Unionism and Female Activism*, in: *Feminist studies* 16:3 (1990), pp. 519–548; Ruth Milkman (ed.): *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U. S. Women's Labor History*, Boston 1985. For empirical Nordic examples see Rafnsdóttir, pp. 63–65; Hagemann, pp. 116–118; Vera Espeland Ertresvaag: *Arbeiderkvinnenes faglige og politiske organisering 1889–1901*, in: Ida Blom/Gro Hagemann (eds.): *Kvinner selv... Sju bidrag til norsk kvinnehistorie*, Oslo 1977, pp. 47–70, pp. 56–59; Birgitte Geisler/Jane Helverskov Larsen/Knud Sehested: *Fagbevægelse og kvindeliv. Analyse af et forbunds varetagelse af kvinders interesser i produktion og reproduktion fra århundredskiftet til 30'ernes krise – belyst gennem Dansk Tekstilarbejderforbund*, Aalborg 1981, pp. 72–73.

Figure 1: Number of Members of the Trade Union Confederation in Sweden and Percentage of Women Members 1900–1925.



Source: Anders L. Johansson/Lars Magnusson: LO andra halvseket. Fackföreningsrörelsen och samhället, Stockholm 1998, pp. 343–344.

general strike in 1909, the hunger riots in 1917 and the economic crisis in the early 1920s. The general strike and the economic crisis led to sharp falls in membership, the general strike having considerably greater effect than the economic crisis. It was not until 1917 that LO returned to the same membership level as in 1907, then the years following 1917 saw a marked increase.<sup>19</sup> The second aspect is that when membership rises or falls steeply the percentage of women members rises or falls even more steeply. This means that the general strike and the economic crisis impacted on all workers' opportunities to be union members, but had an even greater impact on women workers, and similarly the upturn

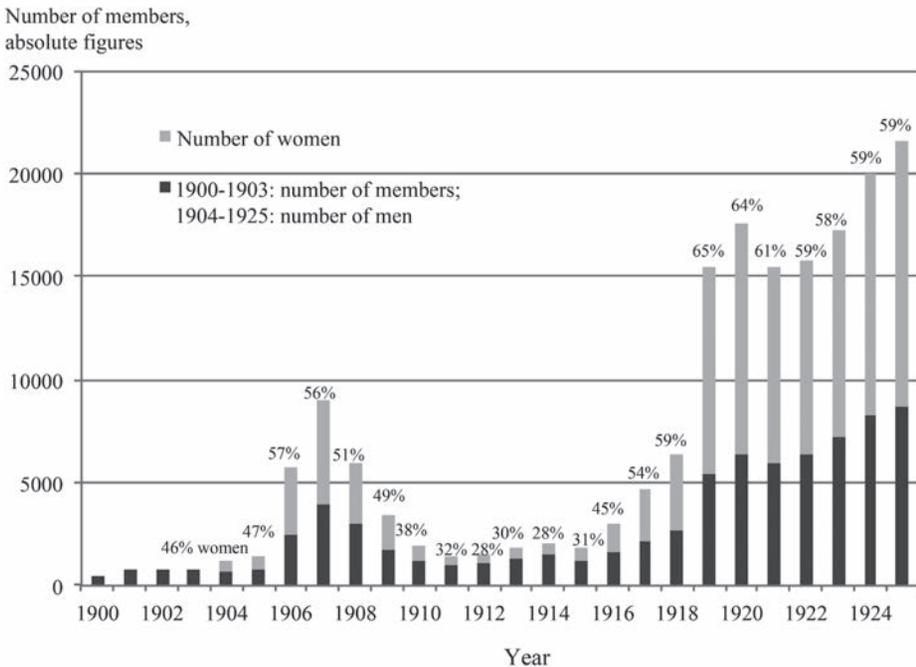
19 The same trend was also seen in Norway and Denmark, Elvander, p. 40.

after 1917 improved opportunities and the desire for trade union involvement as a whole, but especially so for women.<sup>20</sup>

## Membership Trends in the Textile Workers' Union 1900–1925

Membership growth in the Textile Workers' Union is shown in Figure 2 below. The graph is very similar to that for the total membership and percentage of women members in LO, but the percentages of women are considerably higher due to the gender composition of workers in the textile industry. One difference is that the percentage increases and decreases are significantly higher in the Textile Workers' Union than in

*Figure 2:* Number of Members of the Textile Workers' Union 1900–1925, Shown by Gender 1904–1925, and Percentage of Women Members 1904–1925.



*Source:* Hjärdís D'Agostino: *Arbetsförbundens medlemsutveckling i Sverige 1900–1985*, Stockholm 1987, pp. 165–166.

20 A similar trend was seen in the Danish Textile Workers' Union: in 1914 the level of unionisation among women in the textile industry was around 33 per cent; by 1919 this had risen to around 71 per cent. The corresponding figures for men were around 59 per cent in 1914 and around 93 per cent in 1919, Geisler/Helverskov Larsen/Sehested, p. 76.

LO as a whole, which means that women (and hence women-dominated trade unions) were more affected by changes in power balances in the labour market. The available data shows that the proportion of women in the textile industry throughout this time period was between 60 and 70 per cent, a level that is only achieved in the union in 1918–1919. In 1920 the level of unionisation among men and women was roughly 53 per cent. In 1907 the level of unionisation was 22 per cent for women and 35 per cent for men; in 1917 it was 15 per cent for women and 21 per cent for men.<sup>21</sup>

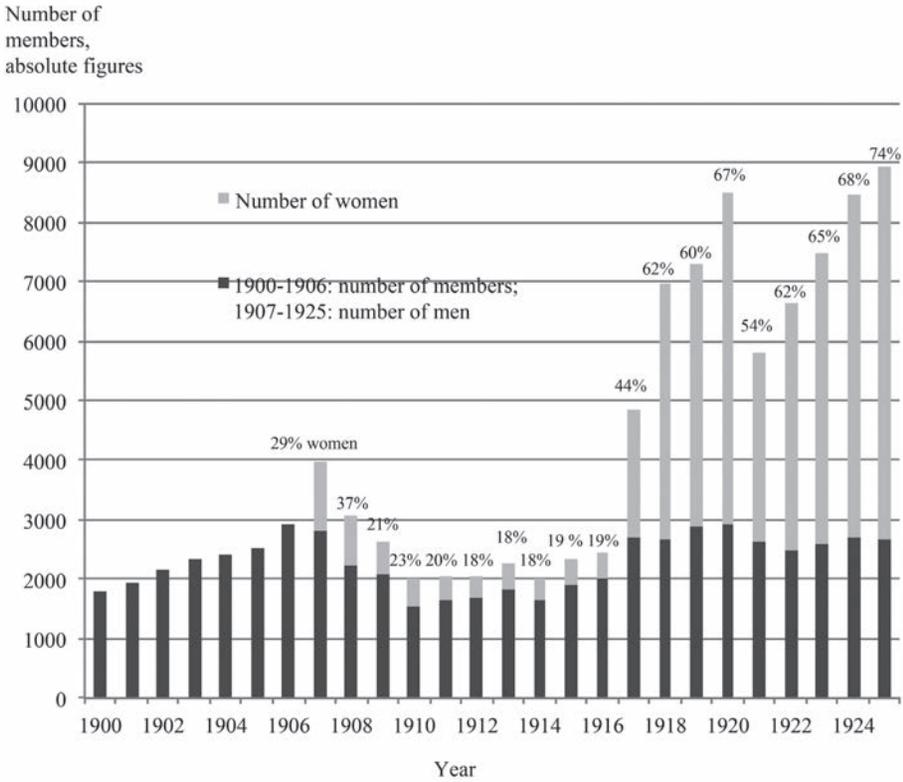
### Membership Trends in the Tailoring Workers' Union 1900–1925

Membership growth in the Tailoring Workers' Unions during this period and the percentages of women members between 1907 and 1925 are illustrated in Figure 3 below. Information about the proportion of women in the tailoring industry and their level of unionisation is particularly difficult to obtain, since the available statistics differentiate between tailoring and garment making. Membership growth in the Tailoring Workers' Union is similar to that in the Textile Workers' Union (even though the number of members was smaller): slow but steady growth between 1900 and 1905, then a sharp rise in 1906–1907, followed by a slump in 1910 to less than half the membership level of 1907. Between 1910 and 1916 the membership remained static at just over 2,000 and then doubled in 1917 and rose by a further 2,000 members in 1918. The economic crisis in the early 1920s also affected the membership of the Tailoring Workers' Unions, but by 1922 it had started to rise and continued to climb significantly each year until 1925.

In 1907–1908 the union began accepting women from an increasing number of female-dominated trades as members, which may explain the increase in the percentage of women then. But on 1 January 1909 the remaining trades that had previously been members of the Women's Trade Union were also incorporated in the Tailoring Workers' Union. At that time the Women's Trade Union had just under 1,000 members, almost all women, most of whom belonged to the area covered by the Tailoring Workers' Union. This compares with a membership total of around 3,000 for the Tailoring Workers' Union in 1908. This incorporation should have meant a considerable increase in the proportion of women in the Tailoring Workers' Union at a stroke. The reason why such an effect cannot be seen is presumably because of the general strike that took place in

21 Eva Hesselgren: *Vi äro tusenden. Arbets- och levnadsförhållanden inom svensk textilindustri med särskilt avseende på Gamlestadens Fabrikers AB 1890–1935*, Stockholm 1992, p. 29; Christer Winberg: *Fabriksfolket. Textilindustrin i Mark och arbetarrörelsens genombrott*, Stockholm 1999, p. 212; Christer Winberg: *Patriarker i kvinnoförbund. Textilarbetarförbundets kvinnoösyn*, in: Birgit Sawyer/Anita Göransson (eds.): *Manliga strukturer och kvinnliga strategier: en bok till Gunhild Kyle*, Göteborg 1987, pp. 255–275, p. 271.

*Figure 3: Number of Members of the Tailoring Workers' Union 1900–1925, Shown by Gender 1907–1925, and Percentage of Women Members 1907–1925.*



*Source:* Ture Nerman: Svenska beklädnadsarbetareförbundet 1889–1939: historik, Stockholm 1939, p. 164, p. 166.

the same year. What is more remarkable is that the proportion of women remained very low, considerably lower than in 1907, right up until 1916. The Tailoring Workers' Union gained several hundred women members for little effort in 1909, but they did not stay or return to the union. By 1917 the effect of incorporating the Women's Trade Union was probably outplayed, and the sharp rise that took place thereafter was more likely due to the increase in union organisation among women in the wake of the riots in 1917.

## Opportunities for Membership: Examining the Women's Trade Union

The conditions for membership differed in several ways between the unions, and this had consequences for women's opportunities to become and remain members. In the Textile Workers' Union women were welcome as members right from the day the union was formed.<sup>22</sup> In the Tailoring Workers' Union, women's rights to membership were a constant topic of discussion right up until the incorporation of the Women's Trade Union in 1909. Women were not actually expressly excluded, but the trades they worked in were excluded. To understand the debate that took place between the Tailoring Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union it is first necessary to describe the principles on which the Women's Trade Union was founded. The Women's Trade Union was formed by a number of trade unions for women, mainly in the seamstress trades that had the lowest status and lowest wages, and which were not welcome as members of the Tailoring Workers' Union, which otherwise would have been their natural union.<sup>23</sup> The decision to form their own trade union therefore arose from a situation in which a number of trades did not have access to an existing union, not expressly because they were women, although in practice it was mostly women who were affected. The years 1902–1907 were, as discussed above, a period of strong membership growth in the trade union movement, also for the Women's Trade Union. The union grew from 275 members in April 1904 to around 1,000 members in December 1907.<sup>24</sup>

Activities were clearly focused on organising women, but without competing with or excluding men.<sup>25</sup> The early statutes said that female workers who “belong to those trades where unions with women's sections already exist” could not join the union, but “exceptions may however be made for such trades where it may be considered that women's interests presently coincide more closely with those of the Women's Trade Union”.<sup>26</sup> This formulation meant that the union could not be accused of competing with other unions, but at the same time made allowance for the fact that even those unions that had

22 Swedish Textile Workers' Union (Text. WU) congress minutes 1899, p. 12; Text. WU congress minutes 1900, p. 19; Text. WU adopted statutes 1904, p. 35.

23 Minutes of meeting between committee for female agitation and the boards of Stockholm's women's trade unions and clubs 15/4 1900, 24/4 1901, 24/4 1902, 7/10 1902.

24 Swedish Women's Trade Union (WTU) annual meeting and auditor's reports 1/4 1904–30/3 1905, 1/1–31/12 1907. The final digit in „1000“ appears to be either a 1 or a 9, so it may be 1,000–1,009 members. This compares with the Tailoring Workers' Union, which had just under 4,000 members in 1907.

25 WTU statutes adopted 7/10 1902, 1/7 1904, 25–26/1 1907; WTU congress minutes 1907, p. 3; annual report 1/4 1904–30/3 1905, 1/4 1905–30/3 1906, 1/4–31/12 1906, 1/1–31/12 1907, 1/1–15/11 1908; board minutes 23/9 1903, 19/9 1906.

26 WTU statutes adopted 7/10 1902, p. 4.

women's sections did not necessarily pursue women's interests. By not excluding men, while at the same time acting for the strong unionisation of women, the union showed an ambivalence that remained throughout its existence.<sup>27</sup>

The question of which union should organise which workers was discussed in both the Tailoring Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union. At the Tailoring Workers' Union congress in 1901 there was a long but inconclusive debate about whether dressmakers and coat seamstresses, the female-dominated trades in the tailoring industry that had the highest wages and status, should be admitted as members of the union.<sup>28</sup> At the next congress in 1904 the union had received a request from the Executive Council (*Landssekreterariatet*) to the effect that the union should organise more groups.<sup>29</sup> Four male delegates made various recommendations on how this matter should be handled. Their recommendations show how the restriction of female-dominated trades from the union's sphere of activities was a key issue. One recommended that workers in men's tailoring and more refined women's tailoring should be entitled to admission, another that everyone who worked in branches of women's or men's tailoring that already included male workers should be admitted, and a third that all aspects of women's and men's tailoring should be included in the union's activities. The final recommendation, which was accepted by a large majority, was that those coat seamstresses who had already formed a trade union could be admitted as members of the union.<sup>30</sup> The recommendations show that the union's priority was to uphold the value of the members' work, not to extend its services to potential members. This decision meant that many of those who formed the core of the Women's Trade Union now had the opportunity to join the Tailoring Workers' Union, which was a larger and stronger union that also negotiated considerably higher wages for its members than the Women's Trade Union could achieve.

At the Women's Trade Union congress in January 1907 there was a debate on how the union should respond to the new principles of the Tailoring Workers' Union. A leading member of the board argued that they should inform the Tailoring Workers' Union that coat seamstresses and dressmakers should belong to the Women's Trade Union, since it had organised them from the start.<sup>31</sup> Several speakers agreed with this and criticised the Tailoring Workers' Union, which had previously not admitted seamstresses as members but now wanted to reap the benefits of the work that the Women's Trade Union had done in organising them. The congress decided to lodge a protest against the decision to the

27 Statutes adopted by the boards of Stockholm's women's trade unions and clubs 15/4 1900; WTU board minutes 29/3 1905; annual meeting minutes 7/5 1905; statutes adopted 25–26/1 1907; congress minutes 1907, p. 13.

28 Swedish Tailoring Workers' Union (Tail. WU) congress minutes 1901, pp. 21–22.

29 Tail. WU congress minutes 1904, p. 46.

30 Tail. WU congress minutes 1904, p. 46–47.

31 WTU congress minutes 1907, p. 15.

Tailoring Workers' Union and to the party press.<sup>32</sup> This protest had no effect, however. At the Tailoring Workers' Union congress in August 1907 the delegate from the Women's Trade Union defended their action and said that "the Tailoring Workers' Union had done extremely little to bring female workers in the trade into the organisation."<sup>33</sup> She met resistance however. A delegate from Falun argued that they had suffered

[...] some inconvenience [...] as a consequence of the activities of the Women's Trade Union, and harshly criticised the tactic of setting smaller dues than our own union. [...] Mr E. V. Johansson, from Stockholm, drew attention to the improper way in which the Women's Trade Union took members from the Stockholm section, who then left in order to avoid paying levies. He agreed with Viberg, that the lower union dues were the main reason for joining the Women's Trade Union. Mr Ericsson, from Malmö, rejected the assertion that too little had been done to organise women. The Malmö section for its part had expended considerable effort in this area, with some success, until the Women's Trade Union appeared with its lower dues. Mr Thurell, from Örebro, argued that when a trade does not comprise solely of women members, it is inconsistent to form *women's* trade unions.<sup>34</sup>

This implies that the reason the seamstresses had joined the Women's Trade Union was that it charged lower dues than the Tailoring Workers' Union, despite the fact that the Tailoring Workers' Union had not permitted all seamstresses to become members. The Tailoring Workers' Union had argued that seamstresses were difficult to organise and would lower their status and wages, but when the Women's Trade Union succeeded in attracting a membership of almost one-third that of the Tailoring Workers' Union they became more interested in seamstresses, or at least the more highly regarded groups among them. The above quotation also suggests it was the fact that the Women's Trade Union organised workers by gender rather than trade affiliation that was unacceptable to the members of the Tailoring Workers' Union.

As a result of dwindling membership numbers and aggressive recruitment campaigns by the Tailoring Workers' Unions, the Women's Trade Union decided at its second congress to incorporate its members in the Tailoring Workers' Union and to cease operating as an independent union.<sup>35</sup> As a result of this incorporation and subsequent overshadowing by the general strike in 1909, there was little further discussion of whether women should or should not be part of the Tailoring Workers' Union. From 1917 onwards, large numbers of female workers joined the union. But from the annual report of the congress

32 WTU congress minutes 1907, p. 16, p. 23.

33 Tail. WU congress minutes 1907, p. 51.

34 Tail. WU congress minutes 1907, pp. 51–52, italics in original text.

35 WTU annual report 1/1–15/11 1908, pp. 5–6; WTU congress minutes 1908, pp. 6–8.

in 1917 it appears that the union did not put any resources into agitating and recruiting women members.<sup>36</sup> Several delegates criticised the board of the union for having prioritised workers in bespoke tailoring over ready-to-wear garment workers in wage negotiations, and said that the latter group should now be given more attention to avoid the risk of them leaving the union. The board, however, argued that this was untrue, and that if they had not supported strikes among the ready-to-wear garment workers it was because they were too weakly organised.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the board of the union pointed to weak organisation for its lack of support of the ready-to-wear garment workers is however an indirect admission of the legitimacy of the criticism – it was due to weak organisation that the critics said the ready-to-wear garment workers needed more support. The extensive debates in the Tailoring Workers' Union about whether workers in female-dominated trades were entitled to be members, as well as the lack of action in recruiting more women members, together paint a picture of a union in which women found it very difficult to be active.

### Women as Weak and Difficult to Organise

There were repeated debates in both the Tailoring Workers' Union and the Textile Workers' Union over whether or not they should be members of the Trade Union Confederation (LO), but from different standpoints. Among the tailoring workers, LO was often described as a hindrance, whose frequent levies in favour of weaker unions made it more difficult for the tailoring workers to build up their union's cash reserves. But the majority in the board of the union, as well as several speakers, used the fact that the union also organised linen and bow seamstresses as an argument for their need for a membership of LO. However, even those who argued for leaving LO believed that it was the weaker groups who would benefit from this, since they did not have the financial means to support the constant levies that membership entailed.<sup>38</sup> A common factor among speakers was an assumption that the real union membership consisted of workers in men's tailoring and possibly the more refined aspects of women's tailoring, despite the fact this did not reflect the actual membership base.<sup>39</sup>

For the Textile Workers' Union, membership of LO was also associated with levies, which forced the union to charge higher dues than its members could manage, but in the Textile Workers' Union this was attributed to the fact that the union was too weak to have earned membership of LO. In discussions about LO membership both unions

36 Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, p. 10.

37 Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, p. 46.

38 Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, pp. 39–44.

39 Tail. WU congress minutes 1901, pp. 10–11; Tail. WU congress minutes 1913, p. 22; Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, pp. 39–44; Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, p. 89.

expressed the view that a large proportion of female members equated to a weak union. At the Textile Workers' Union congress in 1912, Gustaf Janzén, the influential union representative between 1906–1930, looked back in his opening speech on a period that had begun with the union's "high point with regard to membership", but had then been marked by unemployment, the devastating defeat of the general strike and employers' heavy-handed treatment of unionised workers. He criticised the lack of commitment shown by the members who had joined the union in 1908 and then left it after the general strike, saying that:

One reason why organisation among textile workers is weak and that a great loss of membership took place when adversity arose, in the speaker's opinion, is that the largest number of workers in this industry consists of women and underage workers, who, along with some male comrades, became absolutely terrified when the full weight of the employers' lockout came down upon them.<sup>40</sup>

Janzén was convinced that it was the women who were disinterested and frightened, and therefore did not join or remain members of the union. As discussed above, a greater proportion of women than men left the union following the general strike, but a greater proportion of women also joined the union before 1908, in other words the period that Janzen called the union's "high point with regard to membership". The congress in 1921 discussed the question of joining LO, and the board of the union argued that it was still not sufficiently strong "due in many respects to the peculiar situation of the textile workers and the fact that a large proportion of them are women." Such an affiliation would also mean "high dues and additional levies, a situation that experience has shown female members do not find acceptable".<sup>41</sup> Women, regardless of whether they formed a majority of the union's members, as in 1921, or a minority, as was the case at the 1912 congress, were the main reason for the union's weakness, at least according to the union representative and many of the delegates. This was a circular argument in the sense that the union was regarded as weak because it operated in an industry that had many women workers, who were less likely to join the union, but when a large proportion of members were women and the degree of organisation was equally high for men and for women (as it was in 1920) the union was regarded as weak because of its high proportion of female members.

40 Tail. WU congress minutes 1912, p. 4.

41 Tail. WU congress minutes 1921, pp. 140–141.

## Women's Issues in Male-Dominated Trade Unions: Female Agitation

So how did women's membership of trade unions affect the issues that were tackled and how they were tackled? The only issues discussed are female agitation and women's wages, and these debates are presented in more detail here. However, it is absolutely central to understanding women's conditions to keep the significant lack of discussion of women's issues in mind.

The issue of female agitation was central in the conflict between the Tailoring Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union. When the latter was incorporated with the Tailoring Workers' Union one of the main reasons for both unions accepting the incorporation was that LO offered to pay the costs to employ a female agitator. This meant that the Women's Trade Union saw its need for female agitation at least partly satisfied, while the Tailoring Workers' Union assured itself that female agitation would not have to be funded out of its own reserves. At the 1910 congress it was reported, however, that union activities for women still had not lived up to expectations, although this was ascribed to the general strike and the resulting increase in dues. Two women's sections had proposed a motion to the congress that a female agitator should be retained, but the union board would not commit themselves to this. Nevertheless the board's recommendations were voted down and the motion was accepted.<sup>42</sup> But at the next congress in 1913, it turned out that the board had acted in line with its own recommendations and gone against the decision of the congress. One year after incorporation of the Women's Trade Union, when the Executive Council proposed halving the contribution towards a female agitator, it was decided that the agitator's position should be phased out.<sup>43</sup> When this blatant violation of the congress decision came to light at the congress no one spoke up to criticise the board of the union. This indicates that the union management had a large part of the union on its side in its unwillingness to commit to female agitation. Little remained of the hopes expressed by women in the Women's Trade Union that female agitation would be given more resources. The Tailoring Workers' Union took the general strike of 1909 as justification for accepting the large downturn in female membership, even though incorporation of the Women's Trade Union should have paved the way for more women members. At the 1917 congress the general strike was still being used as an excuse for the female-dominated trades having poorer conditions than the male-dominated trades, and the decision was taken "to focus agitation on all special areas within the union",<sup>44</sup> in other words with no special measures aimed at women.

42 Tail. WU congress minutes 1910, pp. 14, pp. 38–39.

43 Tail. WU congress minutes 1913, pp. 14–15.

44 Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, p. 80.

The matter of a female agitator was also discussed in the Textile Workers' Union. At the congresses of 1900, 1908 and 1912, motions were granted to appoint a female agitator, but nothing in the subsequent annual reports or minutes indicates that these decisions were followed up by the board of the union, and no one spoke up to criticise these breaches of congress decisions.<sup>45</sup> On at least three occasions in 1915 a woman did however make agitation tours on behalf of the union board, visiting a total of fifteen locations, and the board was satisfied with her work. But after her last trip it was reported that she had found work and could not make any more agitation tours.<sup>46</sup> The board of the union thus had no plans to employ her for a longer period, as directed by the congress decision. At the 1916 congress, when the proportion of women members in the union had already started to rise, several speakers pointed to the general strike of 1909 as a cause of the union's difficulties and the low proportion of women members.<sup>47</sup> When the large influx of women members took place in 1917–1920 it was not attributed to intensive agitation. Instead, Janzén reported in his opening speech that “it was simple self-preservation” that had finally led women to the union.<sup>48</sup> At the 1926 congress Janzén said that the membership influx since the previous congress had been a consequence of “widespread unemployment, cutbacks, the threat of lockouts and actual lockouts”.<sup>49</sup> Paradoxically enough the difficult economic situation was both the reason for women not joining the union, and subsequently doing precisely that.

### Women's Issues in Male-Dominated Trade Unions: the Wage Issue

There are repeated statements in the reference material from the Tailoring Workers' Union (*Skrädderiarbetareförbundet*) that the union worked for equal wages for men and women.<sup>50</sup> But according to the available statistics and wage agreements that were presented at congresses and meetings, women did not receive the same wages as men. It was

45 Text. WU congress minutes 1900, p. 19; Text. WU congress minutes 1902; Text. WU congress minutes 1908, p. 104; Text. WU congress minutes 1912, p. 23; Text. WU congress minutes 1916. There is an interesting parallel with Norway. Gro Hagemann, in her article on women in the Norwegian trade unions, describes how in 1909 the Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) set up an office for the agitation of women, but just one year later the attempt was labelled as a failure at the LO congress and the office was incorporated in the Labour Party's Women's Organisation (*Arbeiderpartiets kvinneforbund*) and LO's funding was cut sharply, pp. 114–116.

46 Text. WU committee minutes 9/7 1915, 1/9 1915, 16/11 1915.

47 Text. WU congress minutes 1916, p. 5, p. 7, p. 75.

48 Text. WU congress minutes 1921, p. 4.

49 Text. WU congress minutes 1926, p. 1.

50 Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, pp. 11–12; Tail. WU congress minutes 1926, p. 46.

common to have different wage scales for men and women, even in the same trades.<sup>51</sup> However, the discrepancy between rhetoric and real-life wages are rarely discussed. It was employers' policy to pay women lower wages, but the question is how strongly the unions fought this.<sup>52</sup> At the union congress in 1898, one section asked in a motion if female members could be exempted half the membership fee for the union. The reply was:

Since the sections have the right on their behalf to set a lower fee, both for apprentices and for female members, even though equal wages are demanded for equal work, and where applicable they are paid equal welfare; congress has decided that the fee to the union shall be kept the same for all members.<sup>53</sup>

On one hand the union board was fully aware that women received lower wages than men, since the sections were allowed to reduce the fee for women, but on the other hand it asserted that further reduction was not necessary because the union demanded equal wages. The fact that the union set this demand as a principle in negotiations meant that women had to pay the full union fee, despite the demand not being reflected in women's wages. At the congress in 1917, Stockholm's Warehouse Tailoring Workers' Union motioned that women's wages were unfairly low, but the minutes do not make any reference to this motion, and the board of the union did not respond to it.<sup>54</sup> After the renegotiation of around one hundred contracts in 1920, a female weekly worker in Stockholm, after three years in employment, received 65 per cent of the starting wage of a male weekly worker.<sup>55</sup> The following year the union was forced to accept a contract that cut wages, and stated in its annual report to congress that the employers had tried to cut their costs by reducing wages more in women's tailoring than in men's tailoring, as well as proposing larger cuts in ready-to-wear garment-making than in bespoke tailoring, but that the union had succeeded in negotiating the same offer for both groups.<sup>56</sup> At the 1926 congress a delegate criticised the agreement for men's ready-to-wear tailoring that had been reached that year, and argued that the wage gap between sexes was reprehensible and should be abolished.<sup>57</sup> No comment was made on this point. On the whole it can be said that the employers were set on offering inferior contracts for women and

51 Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, p. 79; Tail. WU congress minutes 1926, p. 65.

52 Tail. WU congress minutes 1910, appendix; Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, pp. 15–16; Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, p. 25.

53 Tail. WU congress minutes 1898, p. 13.

54 Tail. WU congress minutes 1917, p. 79.

55 Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, p. 15, p. 18.

56 Tail. WU congress minutes 1922, pp. 25–26.

57 Tail. WU congress minutes 1926, p. 46.

female-dominated trades. Despite the occasional motion in favour of equal wages the lack of discussion of this issue at the congresses indicates that the majority were satisfied with the situation, or at least accepted it, and the issue was not a high priority for union management.

Several debates on wage principles took place at the congresses of the Textile Workers' Union and these often ended, at the suggestion of the union board, with the conclusion that men and women should have equal wages. It was common for the youngest workers to receive the same wages, regardless of gender, but for women's wages to increase only slightly as they got older. At the 1912 congress, agreement was reached on a recommendation from the boards that welfare levels should be different for men and women, and this was repeated at the 1921 congress. A union board meeting in 1920 discussed the wage agreements that would lead to intense negotiations and eventually a strike, and Janzén argued that the existing 15-per-cent difference between men's and women's wages should remain, and that it was therefore unnecessary to negotiate a higher percentage rise for women. This was then agreed by the union.<sup>58</sup> At the last of the congresses examined, in 1926, one section proposed that at wool-weaving works that mostly employed male workers, women who did the same work as men should get the same piecework rate as men. No decision was reached on this matter, as the union board decided to entrust it to the local negotiators.<sup>59</sup> But this is an interesting motion, as it suggests it was not very common for men and women to do the same work in a given workplace, since this situation required a special ruling according to the proposers. This motion also highlights something that would become a problem for the union when men and women did the same work, namely that women, if they received women's wages, would be able to outcompete men.

In a comparison of the unions' expressed ideals and actual results that wage negotiations achieved, their ideals appear to carry little weight. Even when the question of unfair gender wage gap is brought up at the congresses, there is a striking lack of discussion, and those discussions actually taking place show a great deal of ambivalence.<sup>60</sup>

58 Text. WU congress minutes 1908, p. 104; Text. WU Congress minutes 1912, p. 55; Text. WU Committee minutes 1/9 1913, 1/9 1915, 4/1 1916, 1/3 1916, 3/II 1916, 2/7 1920; WU Congress minutes 1921, pp. 126–128; Text. WU Congress minutes 1926, p. 31; board minutes (*styrelseprotokoll*) 21/6 1920, 7/II 1923; Text.

59 Text. WU congress minutes 1926, pp. 85, 94.

60 On Iceland, where women's trade unions have existed since the early 1900s, there were nevertheless similar attitudes. Rafnsdóttir gives an excellent example from 1925, when the employers wanted to cut the wages of both men and women. The men's union succeeded in resisting the wage cuts, while the women were unsuccessful and turned to the Confederation of Trade Unions (ASI). ASI recommended that the men should go out on a sympathy strike, which the board of the men's union accepted, despite the risk that their wages would also be cut if the strike failed. But when this risk became clear to ASI its board did a volte-face and reached an agreement to set women's wages at the level the employers had originally demanded, on

## Trade Union Issues and Women's Issues – Comparative Discussion

According to Alice Kessler-Harris and others there is a fundamental ambivalence in the view of male-dominated unions towards women as members, and this is also a prominent feature of the unions studied here. The Tailoring Workers' Union had a clear strategy from the start, which entailed preventing women from becoming members on the grounds that a strong trade union would be able to prevent employers from employing non-union-members. But this strategy was gradually broken down by the activities of the Women's Trade Union. The critical factor that persuaded the union to admit members from female-dominated trades was the independent organisation of women in the Women's Trade Union. According to Maud Eduards, independent women's organisations that expose men as a group and supposedly genderless organisations as gendered are perceived as the biggest threat and thus become "forbidden action" (*förbjuden handling*).<sup>61</sup> Despite the fact that the Women's Trade Union did not exclude male members, its strategy of organising workers primarily on the basis of gender (not trade affiliation, as other trade unions did) nevertheless meant that other organisations were exposed as male-gendered. Since it was mostly seamstresses who joined the Women's Trade Union, the challenge fell on the Tailoring Workers' Union. And it was precisely as a challenge that the Tailoring Workers' Union perceived the Women's Trade Union, as evidenced by the fierce attacks that congress delegates launched against the gendered organisation, and the decision to go against the request of the Women's Trade Union to entrust the organisation of all groups of seamstresses to them. The Textile Workers' Union took a different stance right from the start, and viewed the organisation of women as vital to the success of its activities, since so many of the workers in the industry were women. Although the Textile Workers' Union lost a large share of its members and even more of its female members after the general strike in 1909, it still appears that women found it slightly easier to become members of the Textile Workers' Union than the Tailoring Workers' Union, especially since the proportion of female members in the Tailoring Workers' Union was affected so little by the incorporation of the Women's Trade Union. Despite the Tailoring Workers' Union's formal acceptance of women as members after 1909, there was something that still prevented women from becoming or remaining members. Part of the explanation is the lack of female agitation, which in turn was presumably linked with the ambivalent view of women as members.

condition that the men's wages would not be cut. Guðbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir writes: „The management of ASI made a choice here that is reflected in their future actions, namely that they fought for higher wages and better conditions for women in employment as long as this did not have any negative effects on the wages or working conditions of men.“, p. 61.

61 The title of Eduards' book.

The similarities between the unions were greater when it came to their views on women as members. In the Tailoring Workers' Union and Textile Workers' Union the proportion of women ranged from 20–30 per cent at its lowest to 65–70 per cent at the peak, but regardless of the percentage of women their presence in the trade was considered a problem by the trade unions. The unions were formed to organise workers in the tailoring and textile industries, of whom a large proportion were women. The fact that a large sector of the unions' target group was defined as a problem – whether they were members or remained outside the union – illustrates how the concept of the trade union was itself male-gendered. The Women's Trade Union was an anomaly in this respect; it constantly had to defend its right to existence by pointing out that it only took members who were rejected by the other unions, and that it did not exclude men. But the Women's Trade Union also reaffirmed the image of women as weak union members. It was because only members of the most female-dominated branches of the seamstress trade remained in the union that it was concluded the union was weak and should join the Tailoring Workers' Union. In summary, the idea that women as a group were difficult to organise and represented a problem whether they were union members or not remained very strong throughout the period examined, regardless of how many women actually were members. This was therefore not a notion that was founded on real-life situations, but on a conception of gender. Anita Göransson's theoretical definition of femininity as absence of power was discussed earlier. The analysis indicates that this was an accepted view with very concrete effects. Because women were associated with the absence of power their membership of a union was not unequivocally positive, since the unions aimed to be organisations that gave the workers collective strength. But this discursive view of women as powerless was in direct opposition to the Marxist- and socialist-inspired trade-union ideal that it was the unification of the great mass of workers that gave the organisation power. Hence there was still an incentive for men to unionise women. This contradiction – that unionised men wanted to unionise female workers, but not women – made it impossible for women to do right.

The attitude of the Tailoring Workers' Union to women as members became more like that of the Textile Workers' Union following the incorporation of the Women's Trade Union, and both unions experienced a massive influx of female members after 1917. It was not a change in the activities of the unions that attracted more women members; the rising unionisation of women can be described as happening despite the efforts of the unions, rather than because of them. This result agrees well with the theory that revolutionary periods in history can provide openings for a shift in the power balance between the sexes, but that once the effects of the struggle are institutionalised women lose their influence.<sup>62</sup> This also happened when the Women's Trade Union was incorporated in the

62 Gro Hagemann has drawn similar conclusions on the situation of women active in Norwegian trade unions: „If we were to draw any conclusion from this, it must be that progress for

Tailoring Workers' Union: despite a massive rise in the number of female members the activities of the union and the share of female members appeared the same soon after the incorporation as it did before. The extensive political activity in which women engaged in spring 1917 had big effects on women's trade union membership, but their increased presence in the unions did not change the unions' policies. The general strike and the economic crisis in the early 1920s both hit female members harder than male members, and a larger proportion of women left the unions. These were times when the power status of the working class was weakened, and in line with view of women as weaker union members this trend was generally seen by the trade unions as predictable. None of the unions saw the particularly large falls in female membership as reason to step up their efforts to recruit more women. On the contrary, in debates the general strike was given as the reason why the proportion of women members was low, right up until 1917. On one hand the unions believed they could influence who became members by targeting agitation at particular groups, and on the other women's union activity was viewed as some kind of inherent female behaviour which assumed that women as a group took the path of least resistance, joining the union when times were relatively easy and leaving it when times were hard, a behaviour that the union could only lament, but not change.

In conclusion it can be said that the Tailoring Workers' Union had an attitude to women that was typical of craft unions until the incorporation of the Women's Trade Union, and that the Textile Workers' Union had an attitude that was typical of industrial unions, but that later in this time period the response of the unions in dealing with the problem of women as trade-union members were fairly similar, which means that they regarded women as weak participants in the labour market, whether they were members of a union or not. The strategy of the Women's Trade Union on the issue of gender entailed a constant balancing act between asserting the importance of their existence, without challenging male-dominated trade unions. In practice, however, the Women's Trade Union shared the view of women as weak trade union members.

**Carolina Uppenberg** is a doctoral student in economic history at the University of Gothenburg. Her thesis is about servants during the agrarian revolution in Sweden, part of the research project *Female labour during the early industrialization of Sweden: construction and reality*.

women in the labour movement has not been a result of the form of union organisation, but the degree of female protest.“, p. 128, as did Guðbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir concerning Iceland: „the essential question is in other words, not whether women are organised in a separate women's union or a mixed union intended for women and men. The essential factor is that management make women's reality the starting point for their activities“, p. 208.