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The interconnections of industrial relations context, union culture and size: implications for women's participation in a professional union

Introduction

Research on British unions tends to focus on the ten largest resulting in a dearth of studies located in the many smaller unions. As Sayce et al. (2006) note, such research that does exist tends to examine mergers and transfers of undertakings of small unions to large. While the smaller unions account for only a minority share of membership, they are interesting to study for what they can tell us about (re)building and sustaining strong unionism in specific occupational and industrial relations (IR) contexts (Black et al. 1997). The literature on women's participation also usually investigates the largest, often general unions representing workers in a multiplicity of job groups, occupations and industries. While this body of literature has produced many insights about the barriers to women's union participation and strategies for overcoming them, it does tend to detach union members somewhat from the particularities of their workplaces/occupations and therefore from their immediate IR contexts. Therefore, from a gender perspective there remains much to learn from studies of small unions about the extent to which occupational and IR context matter for women members' participation/inclusion (Sayce et al. 2006).

In the light of this research gap, the questions this article seeks to address are: (i) Is union leadership/decision-making of small professional unions reflective of the gender composition of membership? (ii) What aspects of union culture and policy encourage/improve women's participation/representation? (iii) What are the IR and occupational factors that might contribute to or hinder a shift towards gender proportionality/equal representation of women in such unions? Thus, this article's contribution lies in its investigation of the interconnections between IR context, union culture and size, and women's participation. Using secondary data sourced from SERTUC surveys[1] the article briefly delineates women's representation in leadership/decision-making in nine selected small professional unions. Based largely on primary research it offers a case study of one small professional union – Napo – mainly representing probation service staff.

The article begins with a short review of the literature on women, professional and small unionism. The multiple data sources the case study draws upon are described next before proceeding to a discussion in two parts of the findings: (i) women's

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[1] These surveys have been published every 3-4 years by SERTUC (Southern and Eastern Region TUC) since 1987. The 1989 survey was the first one to gather systemic data on women's representation in national structures.

participation in small professional unions; (ii) women's participation in a hostile IR context. Finally, the conclusion offers reflections on the interconnections between IR context, union culture and size and women's participation in professional unions.

Professional and small unionism and women's participation

The greater part of the article is given over to the case study of Napo since the main thrust of the discussion – women's under-representation and unequal participation in unions – is now well covered in existing literature, but not specifically in relation to small professional unions. However, this section necessarily visits three strands of literature: professional unionism, small unionism and women's union participation; the discussion of each is therefore brief with only the most salient points for this article considered.

Despite the fact that some commentators believe that ideologies of professionalism militate against collective organization and militancy (Carter 2000), union density of professional occupations remains higher than average in many countries; in the UK it is about 45 per cent compared to an average of about 28 per cent and is higher among professional *women* (at 60%) (BIS 2013). Many feminised professional occupations are found in the public sector and show a high propensity to unionise (including teachers, nurses, social workers, etc). Women have been central to many professional unions' bucking of the trend of membership decline over the last 25 years. Curiously, the relationship between professional work and trade unionism is somewhat neglected in recent literature and rarely does gender specifically enter the discussion.

Nevertheless, extant literature on union joining and participation makes theoretical points that are relevant for understanding professional unionism generally and specifically among women. Klandermans' (1992) work identified the need for unions to engender the sense of an 'occupational community' and he also drew attention to the way that group identification fosters participation (1984; 2002). Small unions representing professional workers often double up as professional associations that have at least some role in setting and safeguarding the standards and goals of the profession as well as terms and conditions of employment. Thus the union may be the locus of the occupational community in a holistic sense handling professional as well as union issues. Research on union women has shown that many female professional workers, especially in the public sector, have a strong moral or vocational commitment to their work that is a significant element of their occupational identity and one that can be complementary to union identity (Healy and Kirton 2002).

However, representing professional workers is complex and the traditional union agenda – job security and wages – will inevitably sometimes collide with professional concerns often related to the needs of the 'client group'. In a study of teachers for example, Healy (1997: 124) argued that in the education sector there is an uneasy relationship between the teacher as 'professional' and as 'trade unionist'. Consequently, she says, education unions' dual role of pursuing both professional and IR objectives carries 'inherent tensions'. Further, the recent public sector culture of marketisation and managerialism has led to interventions that often have the effect of eroding professional freedom to exercise judgement and discretion in relation to clients as well as working conditions (e.g. hours of work). In the midst of reform, managers/government often invoke the concept of 'professionalism' as an instrument

of control to deflect organized resistance and to force compliance with change, for example promulgating that the 'professional' would not take strike action potentially damaging to 'clients'. However, assaults on professional identity can have the opposite effect and stimulate unionism as the primary or only voice-giver for besieged professionals (Healy 1997; Healy and Kirton 2002). Healy (1997: 140-41) concludes that the more the state asserts control without the involvement of the relevant professionals, the more professionals will regard their unions in a solidaristic rather than purely instrumental way. Further, Healy's (ibid) study shows that the frustration that can grow during periods of imposed reform may stimulate greater commitment to the union as theorised by Klandermans' (1984) frustration-aggression perspective.

Despite the fact that most unions have very low levels of activism, there seems to be no escaping the fact that female activism and union office-holding remain at lower levels than male (Kirton 2005; Bradley and Healy 2008; Munro 2001; Colgan and Ledwith 2002). The women and unions literature has extensively explored this and both external and internal factors are cited as putative causes. High on the list are the gender-segregated nature of employment and women's role as primary care-givers in the family, plus union factors including masculine culture and leadership styles combined with lack of attention to 'women's issues' (Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Bradley and Healy 2008; Kirton 2005; Munro 2001; Parker 2009).

As state, most of this research has been conducted in the large (usually general) unions. Exploring whether smaller union size could provide a more female inclusive union culture, Sayce et al. (2006) found that members and activists in a manufacturing case study were close-knit with strong ties to the wider local community, conditions that encouraged women's involvement. This finding potentially has salience for independent professional unions which outside of education are typically smaller and deeply rooted in the profession in question. Thus, extant literature tells us that IR context, union culture and size all have implications for women's participation, but unpicking the interconnections is rare.

Research methods

The latest SERTUC (2012) survey was used to compile information on gender proportionality (GP) in national structures in nine selected small professional unions (Table 1). This provides a point of comparison for the Napo case study. Eight SERTUC surveys conducted between 1989 and 2012 were used to produce a timeline of GP and equality action in Napo (Table 2). The primary research involved multiple methods and was carried out in full collaboration with Napo over a two year period 2011-13.

Napo describes itself as a trade union, professional association and campaigning group; the bulk of its approximately 9,000 members are concentrated in the two main probation roles working directly with offenders (probation officer and probation service officer). The main roles have become feminised over time: probation officer is now 70 per cent women and probation service officer 67 per cent women. Further, there has been increasing feminisation of senior levels, with women now comprising 46 per cent of Chief Officers, 54 per cent of Deputy Chief Officers and 57 per cent of Assistant Chief Officers[1]. The vast majority of female probation practitioners work full-time, with only 10 per cent working part-time (ONS 2011). At national level, the

union has a small national paid officials group (General Secretary plus four others), a small national lay officers' group (six), an executive committee (47 seats) and an annual conference (approximately 500 delegates). On the whole the union is run by former and current probation practitioners and lay members active at national level are a relatively small close-knit group.

As a very small union, Napo does not have a research department/officer or a dedicated equality specialist/officer. The author advised the national lay officer responsible for women's issues on the union's three-year strategy towards the goal of GP in leadership and decision-making structures. Research data was gathered from several sources that allowed the author to be immersed in the union for the two-year period: (i) Napo records of women's representation in national and branch committees; (ii) a survey of Napo women members; (iii) roundtable discussions with women committee members of two Napo branches; (iv) author's full participation in quarterly half-day Women in Napo (WiN)[2] Steering Group meetings and WiN conferences 2011 and 2013 (author spoke at and ran workshops at both conferences); (v) a series of one-to-one planning and de-briefing meetings with the WiN co-ordinator over the period of the research; (vi) interview with former female General Secretary (1993-2008); (vii) Napo annual reports and online discussion forum. The findings presented draw on these multiple methods. When the views of Napo women or activists are discuss, this means those the author encountered in the course of the research via one or more of the methods.

Napo survey
All Napo women members were invited by email to complete the internet-based survey: 1,069 women participated representing a response rate of approximately 17 per cent. Although the response rate is quite low, the survey captured the views of a sizeable sample of women members who were interested enough in the union and its workings to complete it. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents were white; approximately 10 per cent were black and minority ethnic (BME) (against about 12 per cent of Napo women members). The vast majority were free of dependent children (70%) and other caring responsibilities (72%), despite the overwhelming majority (81%) being in the childrearing age groups (26 – 55). 24 closed questions covered: (i) Napo membership and involvement; (ii) factors that encourage activism/office holding; (iii) barriers to activism/office holding; (iv) attitudes towards Napo gender equality strategies and efforts. Selected questions contained a Likert scale to measure strength of feelings/attitudes/belief. No questions were compulsory. In addition there was one open text question at the end of the survey: 'Why do you think women are under-represented in Napo decision-making and leadership structures?' 575 respondents (54%) chose to answer this question. The internet survey tool allowed responses to be filtered, cross-tabulations to be created and simple descriptive/univariate/bivariate data to be produced.

Women's participation in small professional unions

This section first briefly examines women's representation in nine small professional unions that participated in the 2012 SERTUC equality survey. It then considers the case of women in Napo in more detail. Table 1 shows women's representation in membership and in key national leadership and decision-making structures; the sex of the general secretary is also shown. Women dominate membership in two of the Table

1 unions, one is gender-balanced, they comprise a substantial minority of five and there is an overwhelming male majority in only one. Overall membership in these small professional unions is a little less feminised compared with the largest unions (see Kirton 2014).

Women's representation in the Table 1 unions' leadership and decision-making structures looks woefully inadequate at first glance when measured against GP. None of these unions can claim GP in all three structures, whereas in three unions women are under-represented in all three structures. However, in four unions women are fairly well represented in all three structures; these unions are reasonably close to GP (NUJ, MU, BECTU, **Napo**) and the WGGB exceeds GP in the two structures where data is collected. Napo is one of two Table 2 unions where women's share of at least two national structures is at least equal to men's.

Comparing the small unions in Table 1 with the ten largest, the average GP gap in the small unions is narrower in NECs (8% compared with 21%) and among national paid officials (9% compared with 21%) (see Kirton 2014). This data thus lends some support to the small is beautiful thesis suggested by Sayce et al. (2006) from the perspective of women's representation/participation.

Women in Napo
The gradual feminisation of Napo membership (see Table 2) mirrors the feminisation of probation mentioned earlier, but this has not been entirely matched by a commensurate feminisation of national leadership/decision-making structures. This section first examines women's participation in Napo's national leadership and decision-making structures and then branch level.

It is obvious, but worth stating, that GP in Napo would mean female domination of key structures. Table 2 reveals that women's representation has been relatively high (and more or less equal to men's in conference and the NEC) for more than two decades, but has fluctuated somewhat over time in the different structures. Most activists supported the *goal* of GP, but in practice most were content if women were at least equally represented. In conference GP was achieved or exceeded at four points in time, but not since 2000. Further, Napo's latest annual report exposes an on-going concern about a bias towards male contributions at annual conference (40/60 female/male share), and the fact that few BME women attend and among those that do very few speak (Napo 2013).

With regard to the NEC, in 1992 a rule change was introduced which established a principle of equal representation of women/men – branches required to elect one woman and one man – explaining the consistent figure of 50 per cent female representation since then. However, even though in theory one of two branch NEC delegates must be a woman, this conceals a more mixed picture of actual participation in meetings. These meetings are held in London and activists reported that in practice female delegates attended to a lesser extent, meaning that NEC decisions were disproportionately taken by men. Further, annual reports reveal that women are under-represented in 11 of the 12 sub-committees of the NEC and less likely than men to *chair* these. There was some concern about this as many Napo women were highly conscious that chairing experience is important for activists wanting to move up the lay union hierarchy or across into a paid official position.

Table 2 shows that the female proportion of paid national officials stands at its lowest since 1989 and the female proportion of elected national officers has declined since 1997 when data were first recorded. Because of the small numbers involved, these proportions in both cases amount to one actual female official/officer.

When it comes to the union's 33 branches, overall women are only marginally under-represented in committees – 63 per cent of branch officers are female, compared with 69 per cent of members. However, as with national committees, women were significantly under-represented among branch chairs (36% women) in 2010-11; they had increased their share in 2011-12 to 50 per cent (equal representation), but this still represents a GP gap of 19 per cent.

Napo – an example of a 'woman-friendly' union culture?
Although Napo has not achieved GP in any of its national structures and the proportion of female national officials/officers remains low, women are well represented in the conference, NEC and in branch committees (at least in equal proportion with men). Napo women did not seem to experience the union as the strongly masculine environment found in some other larger unions (Healy and Kirton 2000; Munro 2001). This is likely partly because the wider organizational climate of probation, rooted historically in social work where women's presence is longstanding, is not infused with hyper-masculine values (Petrillo 2007). Also, small size and the concomitant close ties among officials, lay officers and activists created opportunities to nurture individual women and to bring them into the fold and thus as shown in Table 2 women have long been a significant presence in Napo's structures. The former (and second) female general secretary described Napo culture in her time (1993-2008) as 'right on' and genuinely committed to equality. Indeed this commitment is evidenced by the union's record on equality action that is again longstanding (see Table 2 summary). Currently there is: a national equality committee (seats reserved for activists to represent all equality strands); an annual women's course; a national women's network (Women in Napo (WiN) established in 1983); a biennial women's conference. Again, small size means that active women very often circulate among these structures, getting to know their way around, making connections and gradually feeling more confident as well as developing a sense of responsibility to take on union roles. It was quite clear from participation levels as well as from supportive comments made in the survey and in interviews/conversations that women valued these structures.

Further, in the survey very few women answered the following affirmatively: 'women don't stand much chance of being elected' (1.5%); 'black and minority ethnic women don't get elected' (8% of BME women); 'Napo leadership is male dominated and I wouldn't fit in' (3%); 'people prefer men in union leadership roles' (0.75%); 'nobody would support me [as a candidate for union office]' (3.5%) (see Table 3). Nevertheless, women expressed concerns that underneath the relatively positive headline figures in Table 1 there is still work to be done to improve women's representation across all union structures, but perhaps more importantly the qualitative nature of women's participation. Women voiced criticisms of the way the union's national committees and conference operate to exclude women even if formally they are present. For example, in the light of the changes in probation work and the decline in flexibility and autonomy, the fact that national committee meetings

are held in London where the union's national office is located, was seen as acting as a deterrent for many people, but particularly for women with dependants or other family responsibilities (Table 3). Napo was frequently described by activists as London- or head office-centric. Women also frequently talked about the 'top table' at annual conference being male dominated while the 'audience' is female dominated. The common use of the word 'audience' is striking because it implies passivity, whereas union conferences are meant to be a space for debate and lay officer/activist participation. Some women found the formality of the conference intimidating and silencing; most had never spoken there.

Some women also drew attention to women's higher representation in externally facing national committees compared with internal trade union organisation committees. Some felt that this was women's choice and might reflect a greater interest in using the union as a vehicle for advancing a professional agenda (e.g. maintaining standards of professional practice and service delivery, etc). However, others believed that it might also indicate that women find it harder to take their place at the table in traditional union structures which can become self-reproducing male-dominated cliques that perpetuate male power (see also Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Healy and Kirton 2000; 2002):

> 'Women are under-represented in leadership because male power perpetuates male power and some officials/members do not seem to realise when they are behaving in a way which is more inclusive to one gender rather than another.' (Survey respondent)

Similarly, there were some concerns about the gender culture of some branches where women's engagement with the union often takes place. However, women officers in both branch roundtables and those represented in the WiN steering group believed that the shift over time in favour of women in the gender mix of branch committees had created a more woman-friendly environment that was attracting far more women into local activism. Some larger branches are entirely female led which some Napo women attribute to the fact that larger branches offer more openings and opportunities for participation and that they are typically less 'cliquey'. Yet, even in this professional environment which demands self-confidence, assertion of authority, ability to make decisions and other skills and attributes associated with union activism, some women could still experience a crisis of confidence similar to women in other non-professional unions (Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Munro 2001). One woman talked about how she had been scared to get involved because she did not understand what was being talked about and did not have the confidence to ask. She said:

> You assume that people know so much more than you and a lot of the time people don't get involved because they're scared of what will be expected. Someone asked me if you have to stand up and do a speech [at branch meetings]… you don't get lessons about what's involved and that's off-putting. (Branch roundtable participant)

Another stated:

I'm passionate about unions, but the first meeting I went to, I found quite intimidating with all these older men sitting around, but with more women around now, that has to have changed things. (Branch roundtable participant)

Women's union participation in a hostile industrial relations context

Napo is very deeply rooted in probation workplaces; union density is high with active branch committees in receipt of locally negotiated facility time. Facility time is obviously important in enabling union branches to function effectively, but also for the ability of branches to attract and retain activists willing to take office. Within this seemingly union enabling context there were, however, conditions that made getting/being involved in Napo feel onerous and risky.

The intersections of workplace, professional and domestic pressures
There was much talk among activists about the erosion of job satisfaction and of the good terms and conditions that many had experienced when they first joined probation. The study found a highly pressured and stressful work environment in contrast to earlier research using the British Household Panel Survey 2001 which ranked probation officer 17th out of 371 occupations for job satisfaction (Rose 2003). But in 2006 a survey noted that stress, anxiety and depression related sickness absence was quite widespread (National Audit Office 2006. This was also reported by activists as one of the biggest reasons for disciplinary action currently. In one branch where employment relations were described positively, although stress-related sickness absence was said to be high, the Chief Probation Officer was sympathetic, whereas in another branch (with poor employment relations) there was a significant concern about stress-related disciplinary actions/dismissals that disproportionately involved women.   The current pressured environment results from a combination of recruitment freezes in some regions; changes in the values, priorities, training, management structures and policies, etc, of probation practice; creeping managerialism (as seen in the mandatory implementation of standard 'practice tools') and reduced scope for professional judgement (see also Gregory 2009; 2010). A number of research participants commented that the way the probation service had changed with closer supervision of work, quantitative performance targets and closer surveillance of staff, had not only made the work more stressful but it also presented practical difficulties for union activists:

> 'The days are gone when you could just say that you're going to London for the day for a meeting, even if it is using annual leave or facility time.' (Branch roundtable participant)

Further trenchant reforms to probation are underway: in May 2013, Justice Secretary Chris Grayling announced plans to outsource 70 per cent of probation work to the private and third sector. The union fears that the IR climate (including working terms and conditions), along with client service provision, will worsen further and it has mounted a campaign of opposition (http://www.napo.org.uk/about/probationunderthreat.cfm).

In this highly pressured context, work-life balance has become a major concern particularly for women. For example, a recent study of probation trainees found part-timers (generally women) and women with children were especially likely to

experience poor well-being, high demands and high levels of exhaustion (Collins et al. 2009). This study accords with the claims of extant literature that careers in probation are not particularly family-friendly and that maintaining a satisfactory work-life-balance is likely to prove challenging, especially for women with dependent children. Some comments also implied that work in probation is organised around a full-time norm, making it difficult for female part-time workers to cope with their workload let alone take on union responsibilities in addition:

> 'I work part-time and this is not taken into account in workload management tool. I may have a proportional caseload, but though I work $3/5^{th}$ of time, I do not get to open $3/5^{th}$ of emails, do $3/5^{th}$ of training or meetings, which thus take a higher proportion of my time than for others - 1/2 a day out is $1/6^{th}$ of my week but $1/10^{th}$ of others. Also have less time for any task with deadlines. Most have e.g. 20 days - I have 12 days. I do not have any time therefore for anything but essential stuff and am constantly stressed. ' (Survey respondent)

However Annison (2007) contends that the packages of probation roles and tasks do lend themselves to the possibility of flexible work arrangements that might be attractive to some women. There was some concern expressed though that as in other types of professional work and organisations, the reality is that taking up flexible working could be detrimental to career progress in probation. To remedy this, the Fawcett Society recommended that the probation service consider how job-sharing and flexible working could be introduced at senior levels as has happened elsewhere in the public sector (Fawcett Society 2006). This study uncovered little evidence of this.

Against this context, even though women are active in relatively large proportions in Napo compared with many other small and large unions, it was clear from the research that the standard gender narrative of women having little time for union activism applied to some extent. Lack of time (reported by 57%) and pressure of work (43%) emerged from the survey as the by far most reported barriers to union office-holding. Interestingly, BME women felt pressure of work more acutely (51%). Most office-holders did not have dependent children and those that did perceived several inter-related barriers to activism. Survey respondents (see Table 3) with dependent children were more likely than those without to see 'too much travelling' (19% compared with 13%) and 'too many meetings' (24% compared with 14%) as significant barriers. The pressures women were experiencing often meant that something had to give and the 'something' was most likely to be union activism as one survey respondent explained in thoughtful detail:

'Natural career breaks and multi-stranded responsibilities mean that often female probation officers are already stretching themselves thin. Certainly there is a significant group of female staff who were more active in Napo before having children myself included. Negotiating flexible working and trying to ensure a professional service to clients when in the office 3.5 days per week means that Napo meetings take a larger proportion of my working week at the moment. That does not mean I am no less committed to the principles and direction of Napo ….'

Scope for alignment of professional and union values

The above quotation suggests plenty of scope for alignment of professional and union values. However, similar to other studies involving professionals (e.g. Kirton 2006), activists felt that if someone wants to get promoted, they should not go too far down the union path as the time/effort consuming nature of being a branch officer could be detrimental to a probation career. Further, officers in one branch roundtable expressed concern that managers were discouraging members from becoming union active. They reported feeling under closer management surveillance and scrutiny and one had experienced what she believed was victimisation for union activism. It is worth noting that perceived lack of management support for union activism and inability to take time off for union duties also emerged from the survey and were more keenly felt by BME women. Another branch had experienced a large non-negotiated reduction in facility time – down from seven full-time equivalent (FTE) days per week to three very recently. The branch committee felt that this unilateral action symbolised a hostile attitude towards the union which they felt deterred many members from getting involved.

The hostile climate described did not, however, imply a permanent conflict between professional and union values. While it is claimed that the professional identity of probation practitioners has changed from court missionary to welfare officer to social worker to law enforcer (Napo 2012), many trained and entered when probation was still under the auspices of social work (rather than the National Offender Management System as now). It was clear from the research that despite the reforms, many probation practitioners' personal and professional values still align more with social workers rather than with practitioners associated with the correctional agencies, e.g. prison officers (see also Gregory 2010). A May 2013 contribution by one woman activist to an online Napo discussion forum about the impending privatisation of probation conveys more widely felt profound dismay:

> 'He [the Justice Secretary] believes the markets should rule all aspects of life, period. But, people are not the scum or units for processing he believes. I still believe that it is a strong humane and moral ethos that brings many into public service in the first place. That it is this meaning and moral value that we and other public services, must re-connect with and build upon if we are to survive in the long run.'

Although there are multiple explanations in the literature for why people get involved in unions, it is argued that many activists see unions as vehicles for working towards social justice (Kelly 1998; Kirton and Healy 2013) and in this sense the moral project (Kirton 2006) of union activism is in tune with the values that, as reflected in the above quotation, many probation practitioners hold dear and want to retain.

However, the current climate of worsening terms and conditions and erosion of professional autonomy has focused Napo on traditional union issues. The many government led changes in policy and working practices are often experienced as negative and seen as detrimental to terms and conditions. 'Operational need' was described as the management 'buzz phrase' that underpins the rationale for changes. In this climate it is hardly surprising that the union is currently on the defensive and professional concerns take a back seat. One branch officer expressed the view that although changes might be detrimental to service users too, the union's primary concern is the impact on staff because they do not get the same level of respect as

service users. The impending reforms have stimulated branch/member activity as in the NHS during periods of reform (see Kessler and Heron 2001). For example, women in some branches have organised local protests and a group of women has written and performed a protest song available for download from YouTube.[3]

However, national and branch officers were acutely aware of the potential conflict between focusing on their own terms and conditions and on clients' needs. Strong commitment to delivering a client-centred valuable service exists and it is the central concern for the client that many women believed was being undermined by the increased managerialism that as discussed earlier now defines probation practice. At WiN meetings members frequently discussed professional issues whether or not they were on the formal agenda, sharing stories about cases they have dealt with and professional challenges they are facing. Plus there was deep concern that privatisation of probation could compromise the principles of equality and valuing diversity that underpin the union's approach to professional issues (see also Napo 2012).

Discussion and conclusion

The article now returns to reflect on the research questions articulated in the introduction. First, is union leadership/decision-making in small professional unions reflective of the gender composition of membership? The latest SERTUC survey reveals that this is generally not the case and moreover women are not generally represented in *equal proportion* to men. Against this general picture of women's under-representation in small professional unions, this article has explored one such union in depth – Napo, the union for probation staff. Napo emerges as more representative of women than most of the other small professional unions in Table 1 even though there are some caveats, such as women's under-representation in senior branch officer positions and among national officials. The article has provided a textured understanding of the interconnections of IR context, union culture and size, and women's representation/participation in Napo.

Second, what aspects of union culture and policy encourage/improve women's representation/participation? Although as in other (larger) unions, there were some residual complaints about the masculine culture of Napo, from this research and relative to other unions studied in previous research (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Healy and Kirton 2000; Munro 2001), the culture of the union seems to have feminized and become more woman-centred alongside the feminization of the probation service. The former general secretary Judy McKnight stated that in her view 'good women' were 'unstoppable' in Napo. She regarded this woman-centred union culture as a function of the union's small size combined with its niche and feminised occupational context. From the study, it appears that with women so well represented in leadership and decision-making and several enabling strategies in place such as a women's network, a women's conference and women-only courses, Napo offers a very real possibility for a committed female activist to achieve her goals whether they are to climb the union hierarchy or simply to work towards defending her members effectively without the gendered game-playing so frequently talked about in the context of large unions (Colgan and Ledwith 2000; 2002; Kirton and Healy 2013). However, small size can also be a drawback for women juggling work, union and family responsibilities. For a small union like Napo, it is probably inevitable that a union position, even a branch one, will involve more travelling than would be

necessary in a large union and that this alone will act as a deterrent to office-holding for some women in caring phases of their lives. Some women felt that solutions to these gendered barriers needed to be sought.

Third, what are the IR and occupational factors that might contribute to or hinder a shift towards gender proportionality/equal representation of women in such unions? The currently tense IR climate of this small professional union provided conditions that both constrained and fostered women's participation. It is clear that IR and professional activities interact in complex ways in Napo as in other professional unions (see also Kessler and Heron 2001). A hostile IR climate increases the sense of unequal workplace power relations and the importance of union solidarity and a strong occupational community for protecting service provision as well as terms and conditions (Kirton and Healy 2013). The values of probation – ethic of care, social justice, equal and fair treatment – complement those of unionism. Thus, the prospect of privatisation of a public service – and introducing the profit motive – clearly offends probation practitioners' moral sensibilities. There were deep concerns expressed about impending privatisation – protecting staff terms and conditions and defending service provision were seen as intricately connected. Against this context, on the one hand, there seemed to be an ethos of 'collective professionalism' that Healy (1997: 141) noticed in teaching, but the potential tension between professionalism and unionism did not seem to be very apparent in Napo. There was huge support for the union campaign of opposition for example. For many, the union was in some ways seen as less of a service to members than part of a cause – the altruistic and moral cause of probation practitioners' profession, i.e. rehabilitating offenders. It was clear that these professional women had an investment in union values and goals and that in their view in addition to impending privatisation, the loss of professional autonomy experienced over recent years constituted a detriment to their service to clients as well as to their own work lives. The problem is that the battle over professional autonomy and privatisation of probation appears to have been lost and so the member-facing services the union is able to provide to protect individual members have become paramount and time-consuming for national and branch officers. For example, the small size of probation workplaces meant that branch officers place a premium on close contact with members including home visits for anyone on long-term sick leave or other absence. Although from discussions it appeared that branch officers have the basic capabilities and capacity to respond to individual member concerns, the increasing legalisation of employment relations combined with a somewhat dwindling supply of activists troubled some to the extent that some women experienced office-holding as something of a responsibility burden and thus deterrent to activism. Nevertheless, the small size of the union meant that there were close connections with national officers who could offer support.

One obvious limitation of this article is that it does not compare the small independent professional union with a larger professional union or with a professional section within a large general union. Further research on small professional unions would help us to understand whether the findings presented here reflect broader experiences or whether they are specific to one union at a critical juncture in its history. However, similar to Sayce et al. (2006), the case of women's participation in Napo seems to highlight the value of small unions with deep roots in and close ties to their occupational community.

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Table 1: Women in nine selected small professional unions (< 40,000 members) 2012

Union	No. of Members	General Secretary Male/ Female	M'ship % women	Conference % women (< or > GP)	NEC % women (< or > GP)	Paid officials % women (< or > GP)
Equity (Performers)	36,740	Female	50	n/a	53 (>)	28 (<)
NUJ (Journalists)	33,213	Female	39	33 (<)	32 (<)	52 (>)
MU (Musicians)	30,262	Male	28	30 (>)	21 (<)	53 (>)
BECTU (media and entertainment professionals)	24,326	Male	29	18 (<)	27 (<)	25 (<)
FDA (Senior civil servants)	18,284	Male	47	36 (<)	28 (<)	30 (<)
BALPA (Airline pilots)	11,000	Male	5	1.6 (<)	0 (<)	17 (>)
Napo (Probation staff)	9,053	Male	69	57 (<)	50 (<)	25 (<)
BDA (Dieticians)	6,500	Female	96	n/a	71 (<)	33 (<)
WGGB (Writers)	1,908	Male	38	n/a	55 (>)	50 (>)

Source: SERTUC (2012)

Table 2: Napo – timeline of gender proportionality (GP) and equality structures/policies 1989 – 2012

Year	M'ship total no. and % women	General Secretary Gender M/F	Conference % women (<, = or > GP)	NEC % women (<, = or > GP)	Paid (appointed) national officials % women (<, = or > GP)	Elected national officers % women (<, = or > GP)	Key women's equality structures and policies
1989	6,310 46%	M	50 (>)	33 (<)	0 (<)	N/A	• Informal network – Women in Napo (established 1983) • Equal Opportunities Committee established
1992	6800 51%	M	50 (=)	50 (=)	50 (=)	N/A	• Women's courses established • Introduced positive action and rule change to ensure at least equal representation of women on all national committees
1994	7,200 56%	F	47 (<)	50 (<)	75 (>)	N/A	• Women in NAPO biennial women's conference established
1997	7,107 58%	F	60 (>)	50 (<)	50 (<)	60 (>)	• Equality Committee replaces Equal Opportunities Committee
2000	7,000 60%	F	59 (=)	50 (<)	50 (<)	40 (<)	• New NEC rule – one of two delegates from each branch must be a woman. • Equality Committee established sub-committees on anti-sexism, anti-racism, disability rights and lesbian and gay rights
2004	7,200 61%	F	55 (<)	50 (<)	40 (<)	17 (<)	• Multi-strand Equal Rights Committee replaces Equality Committee and its sub-committees

2008	9,000	M					• Branches to report annually on action taken to implement anti-racism and other equality policies
	67%		54 (<)	50 (<)	50 (<)	17 (<)	• National courses on public speaking for women held
2012	9,053	M					• Women in Napo 3-year (2011-2014) women's strategy focusing on women in leadership
	69%		57 (<)	50 (<)	25 (<)	17 (<)	positions and structures.

Source: SERTUC reports 1989-2012

Table 3: What would stop you standing for a branch level union position?
(All respondents currently without positions)

Answer options	No dependent children % (N = 619)	Dependent children % (N = 295)	All % (N = 914)
Lack of time	**53**	**66**	**57**
Childcare commitments	1	63	32
Eldercare commitments	6	4	5.5
Other care commitments	5	5	5
My career would suffer	5	4	4.5
Not interested	22	16	19
NAPO leadership is male dominated and I wouldn't fit in	2	4	3
Women don't seem to stand much chance of getting elected	0.5	2	1
Nobody would support me	3	3	3
People prefer men in union leadership roles	0.5	1	0.5
Too much travelling would be involved	13	19	16
Too many meetings would be involved	14	24	19
Unsupportive partner	0.1	1	0.5
I don't agree with the union's objectives	0.5	1	1
Lack of confidence	20	23	21
I don't know what would be involved	21	18	20
I wouldn't be able to get time off work for union duties	11	12	11.5
Management would not be supportive	9	9	9
Pressure of work	**41**	**45**	**43**

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[1] Data were supplied directly to author upon request to NOMS in March 2012.

[2] WiN is the official Napo national women's network. While the network is not constituted as a committee, it does receive resources from the union in the form of funding for steering group members' WiN meeting travel/subsistence costs, funding for a biannual women's conference, national lay officer and national paid official time for co-ordination tasks/responsibilities.

[3] The song is entitled 'It's Criminal - (Probation Against Privatisation)' and is available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L2uD0D69o0.