

Women in trade unions

The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women's studies.

Nr. 20 • apr. 2009

In comparison with other European countries, the union density of women in Belgium, like Denmark and Italy, is fairly high: the share of union women fluctuates between 40 and 50%¹. The central question in this fact sheet is whether these numbers also reflect in the union's administrative bodies. In other words, are women well represented in the trade union, or are trade unions struggling with female underrepresentation?

To be able to answer this question, figures are obviously indispensable. Unfortunately, these are not widely available. Luckily, we could use figures of the MSU European research project², on gender mainstreaming and unions. The Belgian component of this research is performed by the ILS, in cooperation with the three big trade unions: CGSLB (Liberal trade union), FGTB (Socialist trade union) and CSC (Christian trade union)³. The MSU project examines the relationship between trade unions and gender mainstreaming in six European countries, including Belgium. A lot of intrinsic data and figures on the position of women on the job market, the presence of females in the trade unions and the efforts of the trade unions regarding gender mainstreaming, have already been collected in three extensive reports. We would very much like to thank Drs. Saskia Ravesloot, for allowing us to go through these materials and use them in this fact sheet.

The work situation of women in Belgium: an overview

BEFORE WORLD WAR II

The industrial revolution, which came to full speed in Belgium between 1850 – 1880 changed a lot: the traditional, agrarian society with a lot of small production units of domestic industry, had to make room for an industrial society. In those small domestic production units, house and business were one and the same space, as a result of which household and economic activity coincided. The industrial revolution, on the other hand, caused a clear split between living/household and economic activity. According to the bourgeois ideal, a man exercised his professional activities outdoors, while the wife did the household work at home. The bourgeoisie did not think much of the married female factory workers. Their place was at home, if they did not want

to be the cause of total, social degradation, since female labour supposedly destroyed the family. Moreover, men were supposed to provide for their wives, so female labour was conceived as a sign of poverty. Women were encouraged to make clothes or lace at home. But in fact women did also work in factories or mines in the industrial hearts of Ghent, Liège – Verviers and Mons – Charleroi. There was a considerable wage-gap between men and women.

Working conditions were tough, even for men: the long working days were filled with heavy and unhealthy work. The attitude of the labour movement to female labour was the same as the public opinion. Women were accused of unfair competition, because female labour would lower wages. In the socialist organisations, some people agreed with the anti-feminist point of view of the socialist philosopher Proudhon. He stated that a working woman was a thief because she deprived men of their jobs. The Christian organisations held on to the catholic principle of the “stay-at-home wife” and devoted themselves to the abolition of professional activity outdoors for married women. These organisations mainly emphasized the mother role women had to take up, so measures to protect children and mothers were a priority.

Women were a small minority within the Socialist Trade Union and they had no real influence. The authorities aimed at keeping married women at home. In 1886, however, Emily Claes stimulated the foundation of the *Socialistische propagandaclub voor werkvrouwen* (Socialist propaganda club for female workers). It strived not only for granting equal rights to women in family and politics, but also for equal working conditions and equal pay.

The Christian labour association included a number of paternalistic organisations starting from the principle that women had to stay at home. The Anti-socialist Women’s association was founded in Ghent in 1893, followed by the first female trade union, the *Syndicaat van naald en draad* (the Syndicate of needle and thread) in 1907, followed by the associations for other professional groups (e.g. ironing-ladies, lace workers,...) and coordinated by the *Algemeen Secretariaat der Christelijke beroepsverenigingen* (General Office for the Christian professional associations) in 1912.

The association *Socialistische Vooruitziende Vrouwen* (Socialist forward-looking Women) was founded by the Socialist Health Insurance Fund in 1922. Like the *Nationaal Verbond der Kristelijke Vrouwengilden* (National Union of the Christian Female guilds), which was founded in 1920, they mainly focussed on all sorts of recreational and educational initiatives aimed at housewives. During the depression of the 1930s, multiple proposals were made to forbid married women to work outside the home as it was considered to be competition for male employment. The proposals did not receive much support from socialist women even though they as well kept fighting for the recognition and remuneration of household work, a characteristic of this time.

More in general, it has to be noted that the trade unions were recognized as full social partners only from the early twentieth century onwards. The syndical freedom was only recognized in 1921, but people were still denied the right to strike.

Furthermore, the fact that women were not allowed to vote until 1948 affected their social battle in a negative way.

AFTER WORLD WAR II

In the fifties, the lives of housewives changed thoroughly as a consequence of the technological evolutions⁴. Domestic appliances like the vacuum cleaner were perfected and a number of ready-made food products came onto the market. These changes gave people, at least in theory, more leisure time. The professionally active women were mainly to be found in unskilled jobs with little chances of promotion. Furthermore, wages for female employees were up to 25% lower than those of their male colleagues. Women not only had professional duties to fulfil but they were also responsible for the household, giving them a double day’s work.

This situation didn't leave the women in the trade unions unmoved. At the congress of December 1945, a *Nationale Commissie voor Vrouwenarbeid* (national committee for women's labour) was founded by the ABVV/FGTB. In 1946 and 1947 national conferences for women's labour were organised⁵.

Also the *Syndicale Vrouwendienst* (Trade Union Women's Service), which was founded in 1947 within the ACV/CSC, worked very hard for equal pay under the impulse of Maria Nagels. This group dedicated itself to sensitizing and educating female employees and tried to integrate them into union governing bodies.

In 1968, the ACV/CSC published the '*Statuut van de Werkneemster*' (Female employee's Statute) which lists all the needs and demands of the working woman.

Within the ABVV/FGTB, The *Commissie Vrouwenarbeid* (1965) kept working hard for equal pay for equal work. In 1967, the ABVV/FGTB published its '*Rechten der Werkende Vrouw*' (Rights of the Working Woman).

The history of the late 1970s is marked by the general economic crisis. Female employees massively became victims of this situation: in 1977, 6.2 percent of the active men were unemployed, whereas 17.6 percent of the active woman could not find a job.

This negative situation was even reinforced by the introduction of three unemployment categories: heads of the family, cohabitants and singles, which had adverse consequences for women. They decided to combine their forces in the "*Vrouwen tegen de Krisis*" (Women against the Crisis) front.

In 1982, instead of referring them to parallel structures, the ACV/CSC decided to include women in the actual trade union structures. In the middle of the ninetenseventies, the socialistic ABVV/FGTB also took its first steps of integrating women into trade union structures. They appointed two women at the national level in 1974. These women were responsible for the female union members. The ABVV/FGTB paid a lot of attention to the equal treatment of men and women between 1986 and 1989. They fought for women's economic independence, respect for everyone and equal economic, social, political and cultural opportunities. The working group 'Women' that was later renamed 'equal opportunities' of the liberal ACLVB/CGSLB brought the equal opportunities issue to the attention via lists of demands.

CURRENT SITUATION

Where do trade unions stand on female representation today? The details will be discussed in the next section, but here we can already talk about a few efforts that trade unions have made to involve more women in management. On the ABVV/FGTB congress of 23 and 24 November 1990, it was decided to increase the number of women in regional departments and the union federations through affirmative action. In 1997, a women's bureau was founded.

At the congress of May-June 2002, it was decided to apply the zipper system for the 2004 social elections, alternately placing a man and a woman on the lists. That way, it was attempted to have equal representation of men and women. For the first time, a trade union had a female chairperson, Mia De Vits. Furthermore, the 'equal opportunities' committee of the ACLVB/CGSLB, kept formulating proposals to increase the number of female representatives, but their success was very limited. During its Statutory Congress of 24 to 28 November 1998, the ACV/CSC made an appeal to increase the number of female representatives in the trade unions depending on the number of union women.

FIGURES CONCERNING WOMEN AND TRADE UNIONS

PRESENCE OF WOMEN

In 2000, Belgium had a general union density of 69.2%, 53.8% of whom was a member of the Christian ACV/CSC, 39% of whom belonged to the socialist ABVV/FGTB and 7.2% to the liberal ACLVB/CGSLB. The table below reflects the active female population in the three major trade unions ABVV/FGTB, ACV/CSC and ACLVB/CGSLB. The union density of women is rather high, compared to the general rate (69.2%).

Presence of women in trade unions

Trade union	Number of members	Number of female members	% unionist women	% active women
ABVV / FGFB	1.208,242 (2000)		40,3% (2002)	42,5%
ACV / CSC (2002)	1.500,595	713,842	47,6%	42,5%
ACLVB / CGSLB (2002)	229,798	89,723	39,0%	42,5%

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 54.

When we subsequently look at the representation of women in union governing bodies, there is a striking gap between the number of unionist women and those who are effectively active at the top of the trade union.

Presence of women in union management committees

Trade union in the	% unionist women 2002	% women in national agencies	Proportion in absolute numbers	% women in daily management	Proportion in absolute numbers women / total	% female management representatives at the latest congress
ABVV / FGFB (2002)	40,3%	27,5%	11/40	28,6%	2/7	20%
ACV / CSC (2002)	47,6%	10,5%	3/35	11,1%	1/9	12%
ACLVB / CGSLB (2002)	39%	14,3%	3/21	0%	0/8	21%

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 55 and 57.

The following tables show the data, which are individually presented per trade union, as far as the data are available at the moment.

· ABVV / FGFB

Female presence in ABVV/FGTB (2002)

Body	Women	Men	% women
Federal bureau	11	29	27,5
Federal secretariat	2	5	28,6

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 73.

· ACV / CSC

Female presence in ACV/CSC (2002)

Body	Women	Men	% women
National bureau	3	32	10,5
Daily management	1	8	11,1

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 72.

· ACLVB / CGSLB

Female presence in ACLVB / CGSLB (2002)

Body	Women	Men	% women
National committee	21	116	15,3
National bureau	3	18	14,3
Executive committee	0	8	0

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 71.

When these numbers are compared to the general numbers of the percentage of unionist women, it turns out that women are severely underrepresented in central trade union bodies. The articles of association of other trade union bodies do not impose standards on the presence of women in management, except for the ACV/CSC General Council and the ABVV/FGTB Federal Bureau. The ACV/CSC General Council consists of representatives from the trade union federation and from the regional divisions. Since these bodies see to it that there is proportional representation of men and women based on the number of members in their ranks, this situation is also reflected in the composition of the General Council. The data of this council, however, are lacking. The ABVV/FGTB Federal Bureau is also bound to an arrangement for the presence of women, which results in a higher percentage of women.

EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBERS

The percentage of women in decision-making bodies (1986-2002)

Trade union	Organ	1986	1988	1990	1994	1996	1998	2002
ACVLB- CGSLB	Executive committee	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
	National agency	0,0	0,0	5,0	10,0	-	9,1	14,3
	National committee	-	1,9	9,6	12,5	-	8,9	15,3
ACV- CSC	Daily board	0,0	12,5	12,5	11,1	11,1	10,0	11,1
	National agency	8,3	5,4	10,8	10,8	10,5	7,7	10,5
	National committee	-	4,7	6,7	5,8	-	-	-
ABVV - FGTB	National secretariat	28,6	28,6	28,6	22,2	28,6		
	Federal bureau	2,5	9,1	10,6	4,3	4,8	14,0	27,5
	Federal committee	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 2, page 70.

This table shows that the peak of female presence in the years 1990-1994 was not lasting. However, the numbers do show a more positive trend for 2002.

Possible causes of female underrepresentation in higher trade union structures

In spite of all the efforts in the past few years, the numbers indicate the underrepresentation of women in higher trade union bodies. We will elaborate upon a number of possible causes in the next paragraph⁸.

When developing their careers, women are faced with the so-called 'glass ceiling'. In theory, nothing prevents women from launching their careers and being promoted in a company or – what matters here – in a trade union. In reality, however, they are faced with quite a few obstacles.

Working women have, in addition to their regular job, also a parallel task: doing the chores and taking care of the family. These caring tasks are still mainly carried out by women. Consequently, women very often have a double duty to perform.

Trade union work would make this task more arduous, so that a lot of women simply do not commit themselves. In addition, more women than men tend to choose for career interruption. Because of pregnancy or part-time employment, women also tend to interrupt their careers several times. This means they restrain themselves from being involved in any form of trade union activity for shorter or longer periods. When returning to the labour market, trade union duties are often not resumed anymore. The manly way of working in a union frightens many women. In conferences, which usually take place in the evenings, men do most of the talking, and so women can feel intimidated. The late hours put off many women as well. Moreover, women often have to compete against male prejudices. Women for example are supposedly not able to be in charge or to come up with suggestions that make sense.

Another possible cause of the underrepresentation is the upbringing of men and women. During their upbringing, men often get much more acquainted with managing people, with advocacy and representation than women. Because of this, there is a possibility that a number of women feel less self-confident and that they do not easily start a union career.

The structure of the trade unions itself does not actually help women to be fully represented in the unions. The union is organized according to the system of indirect democracy in which powers are delegated to higher levels time and again. Minority groups get fewer chances to reach the top that way. Since every higher level recruits from lower levels, the transfer of women, but also of youngsters or immigrants, to the higher levels of the union ladder is a problem.

Finally, it could be useful to look at the sectors and the occupational categories in which women are employed to find out why they are underrepresented. According to gender statistics of 1999⁹, women, much more than men, are employed in caring jobs, in education, in administrative jobs and in service industries. Women, again more often than men, hold subordinate positions in these sectors. Low paid jobs mean that women end up in the lower levels of work hierarchy, as a result of which they are taken less seriously, also in unions. Women and the problems they report are considered less important, which is of course detrimental for their commitment.

Conclusion

Despite efforts made by trade union management, trade unions are still a man's world. Returning to the central question of the introduction, we can conclude that although many women are present at the grass-roots level of the trade union, they do not often make it to the top. This means there still is a large gap between the trade union's plans and reality, due to family responsibilities, stereotypes and prejudices, the discriminating male trade union environment and, the professional duties of men and women.

Glossary

ACV (CSC)

- General Council: legislative body of the ACV, determines policy matters, approves the budget and annual accounts.
- National Committee: determines the ACV positions on current matters.
- National Executive Board: governs the ACV following decisions made by the Congress (highest authority, determines the general platform), the General Council (legislative body, determines the matters of policy, approves the budget and the annual accounts) and the National Committee.
- Daily Board: daily management of the ACV following the decisions made by the policy bodies.

<http://www.acv-csc.be/newacv/nl/voorstel/acvorg3.htm>

ABVV (FGTB)

- Federal Committee or the general administration: responsible for all general trade union matters. Delimiting the trade union frontiers of the branch trade unions and the regional organisations.
- Federal Bureau or general management: in charge of the implementation of the decisions made by the Federal Congress (the general assembly) and the Federal Committee.
- Federal Secretariat: daily management of the FGFB and its services.
<http://www.abvv.be/code/nl/fram007.htm>

ACLVB (CGSLB)

- National Committee: determines the trade union positions.
- National Bureau: sees to the general management of the ACLVB.
- Executive Committee: takes care of the daily management of the trade union.

Bibliography

- BRAITHWAITE, M. en BYRNE, C., *Les femmes et la prise de décisions dans les syndicats*. Brussel, 1995.
- COLGAN, F. en LEDWITH, S., 'Sisters organising – women and their trade unions'. In: COLGAN, F. en LEDWITH, S. (red), *Women in organisations. Challenging gender politics*. Londen, 1996, p. 152-185.
- DALEMANS, P., STEEGMANS, N., VALGAEREN, E. en VAN HAEGENDOREN, M., *Mannen en vrouwen op de drempel van de 21ste eeuw. Gebruikershandboek genderstatistiek*. Brussel, 2001.
- DE WEERDT, D., *De Dochters van Marianne, 75 jaar SVV*. Antwerpen-Baarn, AMSAB Gent, 1997.
- ISERES, R.I. ea., *MSU-WP1-Europe. Synthèse du rapport 1 : Etat des lieux des politiques en matière de gender mainstreaming. Autriche, Belgique, Danemark, France, Italie, Pays-Bas*. Parijs, 2002.
- ISERES, R.I. ea., *MSU-WP2-Europe. Synthèse du rapport 2 : Etat des lieux des relations sociales et évolution de la place des femmes dans le mouvement syndical. Autriche, Belgique, Danemark, France, Italie, Pays-Bas*. Parijs, 2002.
- KEYMOLEN, D. en COENEN, M.T., *Stap voor stap*. Brussel, 1991.
- LAWRENCE, E., *Gender and trade unions*. Londen, 1994.
- LEYESDORFF, S., *Verborgene arbeid, vergeten arbeid. Een verkenning in de geschiedenis van de vrouwenarbeid rond negentien-honderd*. Assen-Amsterdam, 1977.
- LIDAS vzw, *Oorzaken van vrouwelijke ondervertegenwoordiging in de sociale overlegstructuren*. Gent, 2000.
- RAVESLOOT, S. 'De uitdaging van mainstreaming voor de vakbeweging. Dossier Gender mainstreaming', *SOPHIA-bulletin*, 2e trim, 30, 2002, p. 34-39.
- RAVESLOOT, S. 'Gender mainstreaming en de vakbonden. Een onvoltooid toekomstige strijd?', *Over werk, Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt WAV*, nr.3, 2002, p. 163-166.
- SULLEROT, E., *Geschiedenis en sociologie van de vrouwenarbeid*. Nijmegen, 1979.
- TRUYENS, P., *De plaats van de vrouw in de vakbeweging*. Wilrijk, 1980.
- VAN EIJL, C., *Het werkzame verschil. Vrouwen in de slag om arbeid 1898-1940*. Hilversum, 1994.
- www.abvv.be
- www.acv-csc.be
- www.aclvb.be

For more information about the MSU project:

http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/projects/076_en.html

THE CHALLENGE OF MAINSTREAMING FOR TRADE UNIONS IN EUROPE: How can Trade Unions foster gender equality in the work place and in daily life?

<http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/finalreport/hpse-ct-2001-00061-final-report-not-approved.pdf>

Composed by Annemie Vanthienen – December 2002

Translated by Linguapolis – April 2009

(Footnotes)

¹ ISERES, Synthèse du rapport 1, page 54.

² http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/projects/076_en.html

³ The fact sheet also focuses on these three trade unions, and leaves professional federations or organizations for independents aside.

⁴ TRUYENS, *De plaats van de vrouw in de vakbeweging*, pagina 16-49. KEYMOLEN en COENEN, *Stap voor stap*, pagina 75-111.

⁵ DE WEERDT, *De Dochters van Marianne*, page 239.

⁸ TRUYENS, *De positie van de vrouw in de vakbeweging*, page 51-71. LAWRENCE, *Gender and trade unions*, page 95-97. COLGAN en LEDWITH, 'Sisters organising', 152-185. RAVESLOOT, 'Gender mainstreaming en de vakbonden', page x. BRAITHWAITE en BYRNE, *Les femmes et la prise de décisions*,

page 16-17.

⁹ DALEMANS, STEEGMANS, VALGAEREN en VAN HAEGENDOREN, *Mannen en vrouwen op de drempel van de 21e eeuw*, page 123-131.