

Gender Balance in Irish Credit Unions: The True Story

D.G. McKillop^{a*} R. Briscoe^b, O. McCarthy^b, M.Ward^b, and C. Ferguson^c

^aSchool of Management and Economics, Queens University Belfast.

^bCentre for Co-operative Studies, University College Cork.

^cSchool of Commerce and International Business, University of Ulster at Coleraine.

*Corresponding Author: Professor Donal McKillop, School of Management and Economics, Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT71NN.

The research reported here was supported by a grant from the Royal Irish Academy. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent those of the Royal Irish Academy.

Summary

Gender Balance in Irish Credit Unions: The True Story

Credit unions are financial institutions based upon co-operative principles. They are member owned, member organised financial intermediaries limited to serving the market for consumer credit and saving. Nearly every town and city in Ireland has a credit union office and the movement has assets of approximately £3.1 billion and a membership of approximately 2 million.

Membership discrimination of any kind, whether social, racial, religious, political or on the basis of gender is against fundamental co-operative principles. Against this backdrop the current study explores the gender mix of Irish credit unions. A survey methodology is employed with questionnaires sent to 500 credit unions in Ireland spread across three size categories based on membership size.

Gender imbalance and indeed a gender niche effect was identified although there has been improvement over the course of the last five years. Analysis of the gender composition of credit union boards highlighted the numerical domination of men and in addition suggested that the difference in gender mix is most pronounced for the largest credit unions. The situation is then compounded by the fact that the key positions of Chair and Vice-Chair are a male preserve.

Two key factors emerged as barriers to the involvement of women in credit unions - 'conflicting family responsibilities' and 'limited knowledge of how the credit union can help'. Furthermore an overview of the arrangements to achieve gender balance revealed an almost total absence of formal arrangements to promote the interests of women. Marginally greater prominence was given to the adoption of policy aimed at increasing the participation of women at board level. Although it was noted that, invariably, policy was formulated around the nominating committee with the policy being couched in terms of this committee being directed to seek out women for board positions.

Section I: Introduction

Credit unions are unique financial institutions in that they are consumer co-operatives and are limited to serving the market for consumer credit and saving. Membership of a credit union is voluntary and open to all within the accepted common bond of association who can make use of its services and are willing to accept the corresponding responsibilities.

In 1962 there were 18 credit unions in the Republic of Ireland and since that date this figure has grown exponentially until the late 1980s, whereafter there has been a leveling off in the establishment of new credit unions. At the end of 1998 there were 438 credit unions registered in the Republic of Ireland with a total asset base of approximately £2.8 billion and a total membership of 1.8 million. Credit unions did not feature in Northern Ireland until 1960 when the first credit union was established in Derry. Under the leadership of John Hume, the movement quickly spread and at the end of 1998 there were a total of 167 credit unions in Northern Ireland with total assets exceeding £300 million and membership of around 250,000.

Membership discrimination of any kind, whether social, racial, religious, political or on the basis of gender is against fundamental co-operative principles. (Quinn, 1999), in reference to credit unions in the Republic of Ireland states that “*gender inclusiveness is a fundamental co-operative concept...*” while in the model rules of the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions (UFCU), which accounts for 53 credit union affiliates in Northern Ireland, there is an obligation that at least two members of each sex should be on the Board of Directors and guidance is given as to how this may be achieved.

Gender inequality does, however, persist within many organisations. Most of the debate on likely reasons emanates from (Kanter, 1977) who argued the importance of structural conditions within organisations and, in particular, gender imbalance, which can result in an organisational culture that is hostile or resistant to women. Later studies focused on other perhaps less visible factors, which may give rise to gender inequality within organisations. These studies do not look at numeric gender imbalance per se but rather concentrate upon the processes that give rise to gender differences. A variety of processes are explored. Some commentators stressed the

importance of structural arrangements including factors such as gender segregation in career planning. Others considered the social interaction of men and women and emphasised the different role orientation of men and women as an important factor in gender imbalance. (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998) suggest that a further important gendering process relates to the identity of men and women within organisations

“People are identified – and they identify themselves as men and women.... Many people behave ‘gender appropriate’ and they like doing so! But, in so doing, they reinforce the gender subtext, both with its pleasant and unpleasant aspects.”

(Lupton, 2000) notes that the distinctions made between the males and females in the workplace *“has meant that most men and women work in occupations that are predominantly populated by members of the same sex”*. (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000) indicate that women now dominate positions in the marketing sector that involve interaction with customers. Other studies such as (Alvesson, 1998) and (Krider and Ross, 1997) examine the sales roles of women in advertising and public relations respectively. It is believed that women have qualities more suited to such jobs, as they may be more patient and friendly towards customers and prospective clients.

Many of the issues raised are as pertinent for credit unions as for any other organisational form. In terms of detailed research on gender imbalance within credit unions little is at present available. Material, where it is available, primarily focuses upon mature credit union movements such as those in the US and Canada. For example, the (Canadian InterSector Newsletter, 1997/1998) stressed that Canadian co-operatives and credit unions are not unlike other businesses when it comes to the composition of their board of directors – men make up either the majority or the entirety of boards. (Bradshaw et al., 1996) in a survey based analysis of women on nonprofit boards, which included credit unions, are also in agreement and state that *“women are more likely to be found in higher proportions on power-sharing boards rather than CEO-dominated boards”*. In a board where the power is shared, no one person can control the decision making process, and so members of such boards could be perceived as having less power than CEO-dominated board members.¹

¹ (Miller McPherson et al., 1982) also suggest that women are to be found in less prestigious organisations while (Tienari et al., 1999) in a study of the banking sector in Western Europe highlighted the dual occurrence of a downgrading of management decision-making at branch level and

In terms of responding to this imbalance the response is varied. For example, some co-operatives believe that nominating committees have a role to play while others believe that women should get involved at the committee level in order to gain experience and visibility. While an opposing view would be that under representation is more about personal choice and relates to the fact that women simply do not choose to become involved in certain roles within co-operative organisations. (Bradshaw et al., 1996), stress that increasing the representation of women on co-operative boards may lead to more effective organisations, more power sharing and more participative management.

Despite the penetration of credit unions into almost every community in Ireland, academic research on women's participation in credit unions is sparse². What limited material exists does, however, suggest that although women comprise over half the membership of Irish credit unions they are under-represented at decision-making levels within credit unions. For example, (McCarthy, 1998) identified that women held only 12% of voluntary decision-making positions within the structure of the Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU), one of the main credit union umbrella bodies. However, there is little or no prior data to establish the precise level of involvement by women in Irish credit unions themselves.

Set against this paucity of data this study, based primarily on questionnaire returns, aims to explore the gender mix of credit unions in Ireland. In the first instance, data from the questionnaires is employed to quantify the gender profile of employees and the board of directors. As well as quantifying relative positions, the questionnaire returns are analysed to identify the reasons behind the differential gender mix. Potential barriers to female participation within the credit union were pre-selected by the researchers and the respondents were then requested to rank these potential barriers. To ensure that other factors of importance were not omitted, there were a number of follow up questions that required an open-ended response with regard to barriers to female participation. Finally

a rise in female participation within branches. The authors concluded that as branch management became a dead-end position in terms of upward career mobility males sought more prestigious positions and women increasingly filled the vacancies.

the questionnaire sought to identify measures that credit unions have adopted to create a gender balance in their organisation.

In terms of the paper's presentation, a sectionalised framework is adopted. The following section (section II) details the survey methodology employed in the study. The empirical analysis based upon the survey returns is divided into two sections. In section III the primary emphasis is the documentation of the gender mix of credit union employees and the credit union board while in section IV the objective is to determine the reasons behind gender inequality. The discussion is completed with a number of concluding comments (section V).

Section II: Methodology

The size of an organisation may be an important variable in the determination of whether women have equality of opportunities. (Edwards et al., 1999) argue that as organisations grow the demand for managerial and administrative staff also increases which then strengthens the business case for measures to recruit and retain non-traditional sources of managerial labour. Questionnaires were therefore sent to 500 credit unions in Ireland spread across three size categories based on the membership size of credit unions.³⁴ The three size-related groups were credit unions with greater than 5,000 members; 2,500 to 5,000 members; and, less than 2,500 members. Approximately seven weeks after the initial mail shot, 165 credit unions had returned a completed questionnaire. At this point second requests, in the form of either a follow up telephone call or e-mail, were sent to those credit unions that had failed to respond. This resulted in the return of a further 30 questionnaires. Non-response bias was a potential problem. To test for this, chi-square tests were used to identify whether there were significant differences between early and late responses. The

² See (McKillop et al., 2002), for a review of some recent research on credit unions in a British Isles context.

³ The questionnaire posed 31 questions. Where appropriate a number of the questions also provided the respondent with the opportunity to provide a supplementary commentary. A copy of the questionnaire can be obtained from the authors.

⁴ The questionnaire also provided the opportunity to report findings separately for credit unions located in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. To disaggregate results by jurisdiction and by size would, however, have resulted in an overly lengthy paper. If required an analysis by jurisdiction is available from the authors.

results of the analysis of the first respondents (early respondents) were compared with those who returned questionnaires after the second request (late respondents). Late respondents were used as surrogates for non-respondents (Wallace and Mellor, 1988; Oppenheim, 1992; Babbie, 1998). No significant differences between the early and late respondents were found.

Details of the response rate across the three size groupings are documented in Table 1. It should be noted that survey requests were made in approximate proportion to the credit unions in each of the size categories. The differential number of questionnaire returns across size categories consequently reflects disparities in the actual number of credit unions in the respective membership groupings. The response rate by size category was marginally higher for large credit unions, and declined with size reduction. The probable reason for this is that smaller credit unions are less likely to have full-time paid employees staffing their offices who quickly channel correspondence and requests to relevant parties.

Table 1
Survey Response

Size Category (Total Assets)	Total	
	No	%
Greater than 5,000 members	75	38%
2,500 to 5,000 members	56	29%
Less than 2,500 members	64	33%
Total	195	100%

Section III: The Gender Mix

Full-time and part-time employees

A breakdown of full-time and part-time credit union employees by size classification is detailed in Table 2. This information is presented for both the present and five years past.

Table 2
Full-Time and Part-Time Employees

Emp. Status	Current Position			Position 5 years ago		
	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference
Greater than 5,000 members (F/time)	1.681	6.069	-4.388*	1.270	3.581	-2.311*
Greater than 5,000 members (P/time)	0.320	3.360	-3.04*	0.392	2.189	-1.797*
2,500-5,000 members (F/time)	0.296	1.907	-1.611*	0.309	1.155	-0.846*
2,500-5,000 members (P/time)	0.537	2.333	-1.796*	0.382	1.509	-1.127*
Less than 2,500 members (F/time)	0.194	0.742	-0.548*	0.164	0.410	-0.246**
Less than 2,500 members (P/time)	0.839	1.726	-0.887*	0.557	0.902	-0.345

*The t-test for equality of means assuming equal variances indicates that the average number of employees is significantly different between genders at the 5 percent level of significance.

**The t-test for equality of means assuming equal variances indicates that the average number of employees is significantly different between genders at the 10 percent level of significance.

In each of the three size classifications, women dominate in terms of both full-time and part-time employment within credit unions. The t-test for equality of means highlights that the documented differences are significant at the 5 percent level with the exception of part-time employees in credit unions with less than 2,500 members for the period five years past. It is also the case that the gender differential has widened over time for each of the size categories. Although the average number of employees within credit unions is small, explanations for the relative rise in female participation may be obtained from observations made about other professions. (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000) suggest that in the area of marketing “*women have come to dominate in marketing roles with a strong customer interface*”. This may apply in the case of credit unions in that the nature of credit union business has, in all its aspects, an overt emphasis on dealing with customers/members. Furthermore, credit unions as not-for-profit organisations may be viewed as non-prestigious organisations and one strand within the literature suggests that women have greater levels of representation within less prestigious organisations, see for example, (Miller McPherson et al., 1982).

The questionnaire returns allow a distinction to be made in the roles occupied by full-time and part-time employees. In particular, a distinction is drawn between those operating in managerial and teller roles (Table 3).

Table 3
Employees (Management and Tellers)

Emp. Status	Managerial Positions			Teller Positions		
	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference
Greater than 5,000 members (F/time)	1.197	1.132	0.065	0.288	3.507	-3.219*
Greater than 5,000 members (P/time)	0.039	0.066	-0.027	0.425	3.055	-2.630*
2,500-5,000 members (F/time)	0.236	0.509	-0.273*	0.109	1.000	-0.891*
2,500-5,000 members (P/time)	0.400	0.273	0.127	0.582	2.218	-1.636*
Less than 2,500 members (F/time)	0.097	0.242	-0.145*	0.016	0.484	-0.468**
Less than 2,500 members (P/time)	1.403	0.774	0.629**	1.000	2.226	-1.226

*The t-test for equality of means assuming equal variances indicates that the average number of managers/tellers is significantly different between gender at the 5 percent level of significance.

**The t-test for equality of means assuming equal variances indicates that the average number of managers/tellers is significantly different between gender at the 10 percent level of significance.

For each of the size classifications, women are more heavily represented than men in the role of teller, which is a role with a strong customer interface, and hence matches many of the 'labels' associated with females. These traits include empathy, helpfulness, caring, interpersonal sensitivity and recognition of community interests, see for example, (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000). Credit union size as a variable does not impact upon this situation. In the case of managerial positions, three of the mean difference values are not significant while of the three significant values one is positive indicating that a greater average number of men occupy managerial positions (part-time management positions in credit unions with a membership less than 2,500). It should also be noted that, although the result does not prove significant, men dominate in managerial positions in the largest group of credit unions where it might be assumed that better career opportunities pertain. A niche effect is highlighted in the literature for other professions. For example, (Kridler and Ross, 1997) in a study of the public relations profession states

“..... a majority of women fill the technical roles, i.e. those roles that co-ordinate events and keep the customer happy while men take those roles that are more powerful and prestigious.”

Membership of the Credit Union Board

Elections to the Board of Directors are held at the AGM where members vote by secret ballot. Elections are required even if candidates are not being opposed and there is no competition for specific positions. Immediately after the annual or special general meeting at which an election for directors is held, the Board of Directors elect directors to fill the principal posts that are vacant. These posts include (Chairman (or President), Vice-Chairman (or Vice-President), Treasurer and Secretary. (Quinn, 1999) states

“Chairman is construed in accordance with statutory interpretation to include chairwoman, chairperson, chair and cathaoirleach, terms which are not used in the legislation or rules. Gender inclusiveness is a fundamental co-operative concept since the pioneering days of Nora Herlihy, and many women serve in senior posts”

The opportunity is taken in Table 4 to examine the composition of the credit union board.

Table 4
Composition of the Credit Union Board

Emp. Status	Current Composition			Composition 5 years ago		
	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference	Male (mean no.)	Female (mean no.)	Mean difference
Greater than 5,000 members	9.206	4.274	4.932*	9.384	4.137	5.247*
2,500-5,000 members	7.173	5.308	1.865*	6.82	4.76	2.06*
Less than 2,500 members	6.87	5.378	1.492*	6.779	4.407	2.372*

*The t-test for equality of means assuming equal variances indicates that the average number of board/committee members is significantly different between genders at the 5 percent level of significance.

Three main points are discernible from Table 4. First, all mean difference values are positive and statistically significant in both tables. This emphasises that on credit union boards, men, in numerical terms, dominate. Second, a comparison of the composition now and five years ago indicates that the difference between genders has narrowed for each of the size classes although change over the period has been somewhat marginal. Third, the mean difference values are positively associated with credit union size. The largest difference in the gender mix, 4.932, is for credit unions with a membership in excess of 5,000 members. The other mean difference values are

of a much smaller magnitude, 1.865 for credit unions with a membership between 2,500 and 5,000 and 1.492 for credit unions with members less than 2,500.

Some research, most notably (Odendahl and Youmans, 1994), found “*greater representation of women on smaller, more community-based, lower-budget, and less powerful and connected non-profit boards....*” (Bradshaw et al., 1996) indicate that in looking for explanations Odendahl and Youmans turn towards the “*institutionalised sexism and racism of the non-profit sector*”. If credit union size is indeed associated with the power of the credit union in the local community and the esteem with which the credit union and its officers are held, then Table 4 might lend support to the assertions of Odendahl and Youmans. For credit unions with less than 2,500 members, 43 percent of board members are women, which contrasts with 32 percent for those credit unions with a membership in excess of 5,000.

The questionnaire returns also enable the gender composition of the principal office holders to be determined. This information is detailed in Table 5.

**Table 5
Principal Office Holders on the Credit Union Board**

	% Male	% Female	% Male & Female	% Two Male	% Two Female	% Other*
Greater than 5,000 members						
Chair	71%	25%	-	-	-	4%
Vice-Chair	74%	21%	-	-	-	5%
Treasurer	50%	18%	16%	11%	3%	2%
Secretary	43%	30%	11%	4%	9%	3%
2,500-5,000 members						
Chair	71%	22%	-	-	-	7%
Vice-Chair	60%	33%	-	2%	-	5%
Treasurer	38%	26%	7%	16%	9%	4%
Secretary	24%	46%	9%	4%	15%	2%
Less than 2,500 members						
Chair	77%	18%	-	-	-	5%
Vice-Chair	73%	18%	2%	3%	-	4%
Treasurer	21%	24%	21%	15%	16%	3%
Secretary	24%	27%	18%	3%	26%	2%

*Other relates to either missing values or in certain instances a credit union may have a different mix of a particular office holder than that detailed in the table.

In the case of Chair and Vice-Chair, the majority of credit unions in the sample have only one office holder. This contrasts with the positions of Treasurer and Secretary

where more than one person may be performing the function. For these latter cases, the respective tables also provide a percentage breakdown of credit unions which have a male and female, two males, or two females acting in the said capacity. For Chair and Vice-Chair, the clear picture is that these positions are very much a male preserve. In addition, and particularly in the case of Chair, the percentage weights are relatively constant across size class. The disparity between genders is much less when it comes to the position of Treasurer although only in the case of credit unions with members less than 2,500 do the number of women in the position outstrip the number of men. For the position of Secretary, the situation is reversed. In all cases bar one do a greater number of women perform this function than men. The earlier argument that credit union size may confer esteem on the credit union and its officers in its local community may be a part explanation for the outlier result for Secretary in the case of those credit unions with a membership in excess of 5,000.

Section IV: Reasons Behind Differential Gender Mix

The Annual General Meeting (AGM)

It has been suggested that the AGM may be more important in credit unions than other organisations. This, in particular, is related to the contention that in a co-operative context the ability of a body to meet members' needs *'is likely to depend upon the extent to which it treats them as origins of action, encourages mutual aid and involves members in designing products and services for use'* (Briscoe et al., 1982). Consequently, the AGM of a credit union might be expected to attract a much higher proportionate attendance than that of most large organisations.

The opportunity is taken in Table 6 to examine the attendance level at the AGM.

Table 6
AGM Attendance

Size Classification	Useable returns	Mean attendance	Standard deviation
Greater than 5,000 members	73	212.639	161.124
2,500 to 5,000 members	52	75.706	47.804
Less than 2,500 members	62	48.312	37.745

While the AGM may be more important in credit unions than in other organisations,

the evidence detailed in Table 6 is that attendance at the AGM is relatively low. Attendance appears to be higher for larger credit unions but this almost certainly relates to the fact that larger credit unions have by definition a larger membership pool from which to draw. Indeed, the figures would suggest that the average attendance at the AGM is approximately 2 percent of the credit union’s membership base and this holds across each of the size classes.

If the AGM attendance level is taken as a proxy of interest in the governance of credit unions, it may transpire that many credit unions will have difficulty in attracting a significant number of members of either gender to compete for election to the credit union board. A number of questions were included specifically to tease out this point, for example, – were there more, less, or the same number of candidates relative to the number of vacancies on the board? Answers are provided in Table 7.

Table 7
Candidature for Election to the Credit Union Board

Size Classification	More candidates than vacancies	Candidates equal to vacancies	Less candidates than vacancies
Greater than 5,000 members	32.9%	67.1%	0.0%
2,500 to 5,000 members	18.2%	70.9%	10.9%
Less than 2,500 members	9.7%	61.8%	28.5%

A number of points emerge from Table 7. First, it is clear that competition to achieve election to the board of a credit union could not be viewed as intense. In all cases, the dominant column is the one which is headed ‘candidates equal to vacancies’. The implication is that, once nominated, it is then in most instances a formality to achieve election to the board. Second, there is a correlation between credit union size and having more candidates than vacancies. This may reflect the fact that there are a finite number of potential board positions and larger credit unions have a greater probability of fielding more candidates than vacancies. Or there may be a more subtle effect at work where the ‘prestige effect’ within the local community of being a board member of a large credit union attracts greater competition for vacant positions. Third, small credit unions clearly have significant difficulties in generating candidates for the requisite number of vacancies. Table 7 highlights that 28.5 percent of those credit

unions with members less than 2,500 are unable to field sufficient members for election to vacant positions. The above analysis depicts election to the board of directors as a low priority event among credit union members, perhaps with the exception of the larger credit unions in the sample. The achievement of equanimity between genders on credit union boards may therefore be more about encouraging women to apply for such positions.

Nomination Committee

The nomination committee deals with vacancies that arise on the board of directors. Given the issues raised above, a natural extension is to consider the actual role and effectiveness of the nomination committee. This can be explored by examining how often the committee meets and whether the nominating committee is tasked with ensuring that there are candidates of both genders for available positions. Information is detailed in Table 8 on the frequency of meetings of the nominating committee.

Table 8
Frequency of Meeting of Nominating Committee

Size Classification	No meetings	One meeting	Two meetings	Three Meetings	More than three meetings	Chi-Square Test
Greater than 5,000 members	9.1%	15.2%	21.2%	30.3%	24.2%	31.455*
2,500 to 5,000 members	4.2%	14.6%	41.7%	14.6%	24.9%	63.250*
Less than 2,500 members	11.1%	20.0%	20.0%	28.9%	20.0%	23.800*

* The reported Chi-Square value is statistically significant at the 1 percent significance level.

The information detailed in Table 8 indicates that nominating committees across size categories are active. It should also be noted that there is some evidence that in larger credit unions the nominating committee meets more frequently. Some 54.5 percent of credit unions with a membership greater than 5,000 meet three or more times during the year prior to the AGM compared to 39.5 percent with membership between 2,500 and 5,000 and 48.9 percent for those with less than 2,500 members.

The overview of the questionnaires also revealed that 20 nominating committees were given instructions by their board to seek female candidates. In terms of credit union

size, six were from credit unions with more than 5,000 members, seven from credit unions with a membership between 2,500 and 5,000 and seven from credit unions with less than 2,500 members. Although these numbers are small, equating to just over 10 percent of credit unions sampled, they do suggest an awareness within the Irish movement of the issue of gender balance and that some credit unions recognise the importance of gender inclusiveness as a fundamental co-operative principle.

An effort was made to explore the characteristics of those credit unions which gave specific instructions to the nominating committee to seek out candidatures from women. A number of cross tabulations were undertaken. For example, is the number of women on the credit union board important? Or maybe the gender of the main office holders is important. The only result, which emerged with significance, related to the gender of the chair of the credit union board. Somewhat surprisingly, in 19 out of the 20 credit unions which gave instructions to the nominating committee to seek out female candidates, the chairperson was in fact male with only one board with a female chair giving similar instructions.⁵ This result is again encouraging in that it demonstrates that there is male awareness of the benefits of both genders being represented on the credit union board.

Formal Arrangements to Promote Gender Balance

The international co-operative movement has always stressed the importance of gender equality. Non-discrimination on the basis of gender is incorporated in its basic principles. In a communiqué prepared jointly by the (International Co-operative Alliance and the United Nations Department for Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development, 1995), it is argued that the principal global representative organisations, regional organisations and most national co-operative organisations now have strategies to increase women's membership in co-operatives. They add that these include attempts to increase women's full and effective participation in all areas of decision-making, including equal representation in management and in the voluntary member-elected boards of directors and supervisors which constitute

⁵ Cramer's V, a measure of association based on chi-square was employed to assess the association between the gender of the chairperson and whether the board gave instructions to the nominating committee to seek out female candidates for vacancies. The computed value was 0.27, which was significant at the 5 percent level. The value of Cramer's V ranges between zero and one, with zero

essential elements of the democratic structures by which every co-operative business enterprise is controlled.

In the context of the present study the issue of ‘arrangements to achieve gender balance’ was investigated at three levels. In the first instance, the questionnaire sought to determine whether credit unions have in place formal arrangements such as an Equality Officer or perhaps a non-statutory committee which specifically seek to promote the specific interests of women. In that other financial organisations in Ireland have appointed equality officers during recent years, the expectation was that some of the larger credit unions might have adopted a similar approach. The second level sought to determine whether individual credit unions had an explicit policy directed at increasing the participation of women on the board. The third strand was to investigate if the board itself regularly tabled for discussion issues pertinent to the participation of women within the credit union.

With respect to the question pertaining to the adoption by the credit union of formal arrangements to promote the interests of women, only one credit union in the sample indicated that they adopted such an approach. The credit union in question had recently appointed a staff officer with ‘women’s interests’ as an explicit brief. Further investigation revealed that the status awarded to this individual was that of advisor to the board of directors and that no financial resources were allocated to the individual to implement initiatives. The latter is, however, not to suggest that recommendations were not acted upon and it could simply be the case that funding for initiatives came directly from the board itself. Not surprisingly, the credit union in question was one of the largest in Ireland with a membership approaching 20,000. The gender composition of management, tellers, board of directors was very typical of the characteristics identified in Section III for those credit unions with membership in excess of 5,000. The credit union in question had seven full-time management positions, five of which were occupied by males. In addition, there were thirteen tellers (six part-time) of whom ten were female. The board had eleven directors of whom seven were male, although the chairperson was female.

indicating no association between the row and column variables and values close to one indicating a

Marginally greater prominence was given to the second level that investigated whether individual credit unions had an explicit policy directed at increasing the participation of women at board level. Thirteen credit unions indicated that they had a specific policy. In terms of membership size, six had a membership greater than 5,000, a further six had a membership between 2,500 and 5,000 while the remainder, one credit union, had a membership base less than 2,500. Again the characteristics of these credit unions conformed to the norms detailed in Section III. For example, of the six credit unions with members in excess of 5,000, all had male dominated boards although in two cases the chairperson was female. A broadly similar picture emerged for the middle-sized credit unions. In this case, five of the six boards had a greater number of male directors with the chairperson in each instance also male; one credit union had a greater number of female board members and a female chair.

Additional comments provided by some of these credit unions as to the type of policy adopted and the manner in which the policy manifested itself are noteworthy. Eight of the 13 credit unions provided additional comments and it emerged that in certain cases the policy was merely an aspiration. For example, a comment from one of the larger credit unions was

“There is a general view that more women should serve on the board of directors to balance it out.”

In a similar vein one of the middle-range credit unions stated

“All our staff are female. Half our voluntary tellers are female. We always encourage female participation on our board.”

While a further similar sized credit union described its policy in the following terms

“We try to keep the board as balanced as possible.”

The majority of the other credit unions formulated policy around the nominating committee. Explicit instructions were, for example, given to this committee to seek out women for a position on the board. A small number of credit unions, in addition, placed emphasis on their role as an ‘equal opportunities employer’. For example one large credit union stated:

high degree of association between the variables.

“We take every possible opportunity to advertise, encourage and promote the participation of women: at membership meetings, formal and informal gatherings, social functions etc. We have an approved equality code which is promoted at membership meetings and staff training.”

While a middle range credit union stressed:

“We have a programme and policy on equality of treatment of members, staff and volunteers.”

Again at this second level many credit unions clearly do not have in place a policy to promote the interests of women within the credit union. Furthermore a number of those credit unions that viewed themselves as having a policy in place were clearly defining the concept of policy in extremely broad terms.

The third level at which this study explored this issue was in terms of whether the board regularly tabled for discussion issues pertinent to the participation of women within the credit union. Table 9 provides answers to this question.

Table 9
Gender Issues Discussed by the Credit Union Board of Directors

Size Classification	Very Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Chi-Square Test
Greater than 5,000 members	1	10	24	37	41.67*
2,500 to 5,000 members	2	8	27	49	23.44*
Less than 2,500 members	2	3	4	14	53.57*

* The reported Chi-Square value is statistically significant at the 1 percent significance level.

Again the majority response is that gender issues are not explored at board level although there is some evidence that gender does appear on the agenda of the credit union board and that occurrence is to some extent linked to membership size. Some 49 percent of large credit unions, 43 percent of mid-range credit unions and 40 percent of small credit unions indicate that gender issues have been tabled although again at different degrees of frequency. The fact that a gender issue is tabled more often by larger credit unions may reflect the fact that in a larger organization there is greater probability of such issues emerging. It might also be a consequence of the fact that larger organisations are, for example, likely to recruit salaried workers to staff the credit union

office rather than rely solely on volunteers and hence fair employment practice may emerge as an issue. Nevertheless it should be emphasised that although larger credit unions may table gender issues more frequently for board discussion this still does not manifest in the adoption of programmes of action, policy measures or formal arrangements (described earlier as actions at level two and level three).

At this juncture it is important to note that many of the credit unions in the sample stressed that gender is simply not an issue because the credit union philosophy is one of equality for all and gender inclusiveness. An indicative comment from one credit union was

“We welcome and appreciate the work of the individual members, whether male or female, on the board or on various other committees. So women as individuals are welcome, not because of their sex or gender but because of their ability to further the aims and objectives of the credit union.”

These credit unions would therefore contend that gender policies, programmes of action and formal arrangement are redundant within an organisational form that espouses the principle of gender inclusiveness.

Barriers to the Involvement of Women in Credit Unions.

Specific barriers to the involvement of women in credit unions are now addressed. Respondents were asked to rank predetermined explanations from ‘most important’ to ‘least important’. This information is detailed in Table 10. It should be noted that a significant number of credit unions (approximately 25 percent) did not answer this question presumably because they viewed there to be no barriers to the involvement of women within the credit union. A further 15 percent answered this question in an incorrect format either ranking all reasons as most important or least important. Consequently in the respective tables valid percentages are documented rather than actual percentages.

Table 10 (part one)
Barriers to the Involvement of Women in Credit Unions

	Most Important	2nd Most Important	3rd Most Important	4th Most Important	5th Most Important	Least Important	Chi-Square Test
Credit Unions with membership greater than 5,000							
Limited knowledge of how C/U can help	38.5%	20.5%	17.9%	15.4%	0.0%	7.7%	10.163**
Conflicting family responsibilities	33.4%	30.6%	8.3%	11.1%	8.3%	8.3%	15.333*
Male-dominated culture of C/U	22.9%	2.9%	17.1%	25.7%	17.1%	14.3%	6.657
Women lack confidence to join C/U	10.9%	27.0%	21.6%	2.7%	32.4%	5.4%	16.351*
C/U not sensitive to the needs of women	2.9%	2.9%	17.0%	22.9%	22.9%	31.4%	14.20**
Objections to C/U from spouse or family	0.0%	14.3%	14.3%	22.9%	17.1%	31.4%	7.88
Credit Unions with membership between 2,500 and 5,000							
Limited knowledge of how C/U can help	45.8%	29.2%	20.8%	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%	8.667**
Conflicting family responsibilities	31.9%	18.2%	27.3%	13.6%	4.5%	4.5%	8.545***
Male-dominated culture of C/U	9.5%	4.8%	14.3%	9.5%	28.6%	33.3%	8.428***
Women lack confidence to join C/U	9.5%	19.0%	9.5%	42.9%	14.3%	4.8%	11.858**
C/U not sensitive to the needs of women	4.7%	9.5%	14.3%	4.8%	28.6%	38.1%	11.858**
Objections to C/U from spouse or family	4.5%	18.2%	13.6%	27.3%	22.7%	13.7%	4.182

Table 10 (part two)
Barriers to the Involvement of Women in Credit Unions

Credit Unions with membership less than 2,500							
	Most Important	2 nd Most Important	3 rd Most Important	4 th Most Important	5 th Most Important	Least Important	Chi-Square Test
Limited knowledge of how C/U can help	37.0%	11.1%	18.5%	22.2%	3.7%	7.5%	11.889**
Conflicting family responsibilities	46.7%	26.7%	6.7%	13.3%	3.3%	3.3%	26.40*
Male-dominated culture of C/U	12.5%	8.3%	12.5%	4.2%	41.7%	20.8%	13.00**
Women lack confidence to join C/U	7.5%	25.9%	25.9%	11.1%	14.8%	14.8%	4.778
C/U not sensitive to the needs of women	0.0%	8.3%	8.3%	41.7%	25.0%	16.7%	9.330**
Objections to C/U from spouse or family	8.0%	20.0%	24.0%	8.0%	8.0%	32.0%	3.714

* The reported Chi-Square value is statistically significant at the 1 percent significance level.

** The reported Chi-Square value is statistically significant at the 5 percent significance level.

***The reported Chi-Square value is statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level.

A number of issues of note emerge from Table 10. First, irrespective of credit union size, reduced involvement of women in credit unions does not appear to be strongly influenced by 'a lack of confidence by women'; 'credit unions not being sensitive to the needs of women'; nor 'objections from spouse or family'. In terms of the ranking exercise, these are rarely highlighted as either the most important or indeed the second most important factor. In that this aspect of the questionnaire is requesting information on perceptions, it could of course be the case that the response obtained may be influenced by the gender of the credit union officer completing the questionnaire. Characteristics of the credit union other than jurisdiction and size may also be of importance, such as the gender breakdown of the board and the gender of key office holders. A number of cross tabulations were undertaken to investigate this aspect and revealed no additional findings of significance.

Second, there does appear to be a perception, although marginal, that the credit union has a somewhat 'male-dominated culture' and that this may create a barrier for a number of women in becoming more involved with their credit union. This problem is most evident in the case of credit unions with a membership greater than 5,000 where 22.9 percent of respondents viewed 'the male-dominated culture' as the most important factor. While this is not the strongest result to emerge from this aspect of the analysis it does find a parallel in other studies. (Ketilson, 1996) in a study of women in Canadian co-operatives, which included some large credit unions, observed

“Co-operative leaders need to ask whether their board and delegate body create a climate that turns away women or members of other under-represented groups. Signs of a negative climate experienced by women in this study include: exclusion of women from prestigious committees or offices on the board; perception among board members that the recording role is appropriately filled by a woman; resistance to gender neutral language; the assumption that the lone woman at the table represents 'all women'.”

Third, 'conflicting family responsibilities' was clearly a factor of utmost importance for many respondent. Small credit unions in particular stressed the importance of this factor with 46.7 percent identifying it as the most important. (McCarthy, 1998) alluded to this conflict of interest in a study of women, entrepreneurship and co-operatives

“... it would not be legitimate to deduce from these figures that there has been deliberate discrimination against participation by women A more complex set of issues needs to be taken into consideration to explain this trend, not least of which is the traditional and often undervalued role of women in Ireland within the family home, as mother or carer.”

(Ketilson, 1996) highlights the same issue with respect to Canadian co-operatives and argues that to address the problem co-operatives should schedule meetings bearing in mind the constraints to which the mainstay of the family may be subject. If this is not feasible, and childcare or elder care is necessary, expenses should be reimbursed.

Finally, in certain instances most notably those with membership greater than 5,000, and those with membership between 2,500 and 5,000, the dominant factor inhibiting the involvement of women is ‘limited knowledge of how the credit union can help them’. Given that nearly every town and city in Ireland has a credit union office this is a somewhat surprising finding. A clue to this result may be found in a survey by (Lansdowne Market Research, 1995), which as part of its brief, examined awareness and interest in credit union services. One aspect highlighted by this study was that ‘even members exhibit worrying degrees of ignorance’ and the study provides an exemplar highlighting that well over half of all members are unaware of certain product ranges. It could be argued that our study reinforces the underlying point which is that credit union members including women are not becoming involved primarily because they are not fully aware of the contribution that they and the credit union can make within their community.

In a follow up question, respondents were requested to identify any further barriers to the involvement of women in credit unions. Most chose not to answer this question, which might suggest that, for the majority of credit unions, the main obstacles had already been identified. Of those (19 credit unions) that did provide additional commentary the majority (12 credit unions) took the opportunity to emphasise that there are no barriers and gender is not an issue of note.

Section V Concluding comments

Throughout this analysis it was suggested that many credit unions do not view gender as an important issue arguing that it is anathema to the core principles upon which

credit unions are based. Many respondents also argued that gender imbalance has much more of a supply side orientation in that it is inherently difficult to get credit union members of any gender to participate in the activities and functions of the credit union. Employing attendance at the AGM as a proxy for interest in becoming involved, it was apparent from the low attendance levels that election to the board of directors was a low priority event among credit union members, with perhaps the exception of the larger credit unions in the sample.

Nevertheless, gender imbalance and indeed a gender niche effect do exist within the credit union movement. Analysis of the gender composition of credit union boards highlighted the numerical domination of men and in addition suggested that the difference in gender mix is most pronounced for the largest credit unions. The situation is then compounded by the fact that the key positions of Chair and Vice-Chair are very much a male preserve. This contrasts with the position of Secretary where, with the sole exception of those credit unions with a membership in excess of 5,000, a greater number of women than men perform this function. This gender differential within credit unions was reinforced on examination of the profile of paid employees. In the role of teller, women dominate in terms of numbers in each of the size classifications. This singular and uniform result did not, however, hold for managerial positions.

Two key factors emerged as barriers to the involvement of women in credit unions - 'conflicting family responsibilities' and 'limited knowledge of how the credit union can help'. Both of course can be addressed. It was, however, clear that in general terms individual credit unions were doing little to promote gender balance. The nominating committee is likely to play a key role in promoting gender balance. However, it was noted that there was considerable variability in the frequency with which nominating committees met. Furthermore an overview of the arrangements to achieve gender balance revealed an almost total absence of formal arrangements to promote the interests of women. Marginally greater prominence was given to the adoption of policy aimed at increasing the participation of women at board level. Although it was noted that, invariably, policy was formulated around the nominating committee with the policy being couched in terms of this committee being directed to seek out women for board positions.

The intertemporal improvement in the gender mix over recent years is welcome. Furthermore, it is recognised that in certain instances, factors resulting in volunteer shortfalls may be outside the control of individual credit unions. Nevertheless, for a movement with a value system based on dignity and equality, gender imbalance is a concern. Co-operative philosophy is underpinned by the idea that people are *origins of action* who have the ability and creativity to take charge of their own lives and do not have to be passive members of society (Briscoe et al., 1982). This philosophy enables people to identify their own needs, and through the vehicle of the co-operative, join together in designing and implementing a way of meeting these needs. Irish credit unions can draw on this philosophy to achieve gender equality and in so doing become an exemplar to other organisations within Irish society.

References

Alvesson, M., (1998), Gender Relations and Identity at Work: A Case Study of Masculinities and Feminities in an Advertising Agency, *Human Relations*, Vol. 51, pp 969-1005.

Babbie, E., (1998), *The Practice of Social Research*, 8th edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Benschop, Y. and Doorewaard, H., (1998), Covered by Equality: The Gender Subtext of Organisations, *Organisation Studies*, Vol. 19, pp 787-805.

Bradshaw, P., Murray, V. and Wolpin, J., (1996), Women on Boards of Nonprofits: What Difference do they Make? *NonProfit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 6, pp 241-254.

Briscoe R. et al, (1982), *The Co-operative Idea*, Centre for Co-operative Studies, University College Cork.

Canadian Co-operative Association (1997/1998), Just How Many Women Sit at the Board Table?, *InterSector Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 3 pages.

Edwards, C., Robinson, O., Welchman, R. and Woodall, J., (1999), Lost Opportunities? Organisational Restructuring and Women Managers, *Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 9, pp 55-64.

Joint Communique International Co-operative Alliance and the United Nations Department for Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development resolution 49/155, (March 1995)

Kanter, R.M., (1977), *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Basic Books, New York.

Ketilson, L.H., (1996), Women in Co-operatives: A Canadian Perspective, Review of International Co-operation, ICA, Vol. 89 pp 27-33.

Krider, D.S. and Ross, P.G., (1997), The Experiences of Women in a Public Relations Firm: A Phenomenological Explication, The Journal of Business Communications, Vol. 34, pp 437-454.

Lansdowne Market Research Report, Irish League of Credit Unions, Dublin, 1995

Lupton, B., (2000), Maintaining Masculinity: Men who do 'Women's Work' British Journal of Management, Vol. 11, Special Issue, pp. S33-S48.

Maclaran, P. and Catterall, M., (2000), Bridging the Knowledge Divide, Journal of Marketing Management, Vol. 15, pp 635-646.

McCarthy O., (1998) The role of women entrepreneurs in the Irish credit union movement, unpublished paper to the International Co-operative Alliance Research Committee Conference on Women, Entrepreneurship and Co-ops, Paris, October 12/13, 1998

McKillop, D.G. and Wilson, J., (2002) Credit Unions in Britain: A Time for Change, Public Money and Management, (forthcoming)

Miller McPherson, J. and Smith-Lovin, L., (1982), Women and Weak Ties Differences by Sex in the Size of Voluntary Organizations, American Journal of Sociology, Vol., pp 883-904.

Odendahl, T. and Youmans, S., (1994), Women on Nonprofit Boards, in Odendahl, T. and O'Neill, M., (Eds), Women and Power in the NonProfit Sector, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Oppenheim, A.N., (1992), Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement, London: Pinter.

Quinn, A., (1999), Credit Unions in Ireland, Oak Tree Press Dublin.

Tienari, J., Quack, S. and Theobald, H., (1999), Managerial 'Mommy Track': Feminisation of Middle Management in German and Finnish Banking, paper presented to the Gender, Management and Organisation Stream, Critical Management Studies Conference, University of Manchester, UK, July 14-16.

Wallace, R.S.O. and Mellor, C.J., (1988), Non-response Bias in Mail Accounting Surveys: A Pedagogical Note, British Accounting Review, Vol. 20, pp. 131-139.