

## TRADE UNION MOBILIZATION AND FEMALE-DOMINATED CARE WORK IN IRELAND: FEMINISED AND/OR FEMINIST?

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**Trade Union Mobilization and Female-Dominated Care Work in Ireland: Feminised and/or Feminist?**

This article adopts a feminist policy and politics perspective to examine gendered shifts in mobilization of Trade Unions in Ireland. While Unions enjoyed access to policy-setting contexts in a form of social partnership from the late 1980s to 2008, this process was abolished in the economic crisis and was replaced by austerity-era public pay stability agreements. Adopting a case study approach, this research scrutinizes Trade Union campaigns for feminised occupations to examine how gender is used to do political and ideational work in feminised campaigns. This analysis raises larger questions about what happens when national corporatist models decline and Unions in response look to 'gender' campaigns and mobilise feminised occupational sectors.

**Mobilisation syndicale et métiers du *care* à dominante féminine en Irlande : féminisés et/ou féministes ?**

Cet article adopte une perspective politique féministe pour examiner les changements liés au genre dans la mobilisation des syndicats en Irlande. Alors que les syndicats ont bénéficié d'un accès à l'élaboration des politiques dans une forme de partenariat social, de la fin des années 1980 à 2008, ce processus a été aboli par la crise économique et remplacé par des accords de stabilité des salaires publics en période d'austérité. En adoptant une approche d'étude de cas, nous nous intéressons aux campagnes syndicales pour les professions féminisées afin d'examiner comment le genre est utilisé pour mener un travail politique et un travail sur les idées dans les campagnes féminisées. Cette analyse soulève des questions plus larges sur les conséquences du déclin des modèles corporatistes nationaux et la réponse des syndicats, qui se tournent vers des campagnes de "genre" et mobilisent les secteurs professionnels féminisés.

# Trade Union Mobilization and Female-Dominated Care Work in Ireland: Feminised and/or Feminist?

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## Introduction

**R**esearch has revealed the gendered character of union organisation and the privileging of male workers bargaining priorities (Kirton and Healy, 1999; Briskin, 2014, Greene, 2015; Healy and Kirton, 2013; Kirton, 2019). Yet Unions have attracted increasing numbers of women members and commitments to gender equality are evident in how Unions have worked on issues including sexual harassment, domestic violence and the gender pay gap (Briskin, 2014; Rubery and Hebson, 2018; Greene, 2020). However, the fact that feminist trade unionists have struggled to maintain the visibility of gender in Union strategies is a function in part of the enduring centrality of class in framing union mobilisation (Kirton, 2019, 351).

Given the traction that some gender equality issues have gained, it seems timely to re-assess how gender features in contemporary Union campaigns. In this approach I leave aside the issue of the descriptive representation or presence of women in trade unions. Instead I examine Union approaches to organising female-dominated sectors through an analysis of how gender and care are framed in campaigns. I borrow from feminist perspectives on policy and politics (Bacchi, 2009; Cavaghan, 2017; Kantola and Lombardo, 2018) to examine how Union campaigns on care work act as forms of knowledge production about gender and care. Drawing on case studies of Union organising for female-dominated care work occupations in Ireland, in home care, and early childcare I ask: what ideas about gender and care work are produced in Trade Union campaigns and with what consequence?<sup>1</sup> Campaigns are understood as epistemological sites where competing ideas about gender and care are used to elicit worker and public support.

1 Here I refer to social constructions of roles and norms about gender and care (Cavanagh, 2017)

I identify two forms of knowledge<sup>2</sup> about gender and care I refer to as feminist and feminised that operate discursively as campaign frames. Feminised messaging includes gender essentialist ideas and "valorises" female-dominated care work, yet may risk reinforcing its undervaluation, especially when absent strong feminist messaging about the value of care.<sup>3</sup> When feminised framing is dominant it may also result in gendered and intersectional inequalities remaining unacknowledged. Feminist framing makes visible the gendered organisation of work and calls for the cultural, social and economic valuation of unpaid and paid care work.<sup>4</sup> Feminised and feminist framing both feature in campaigns, alongside anti-austerity and anti-marketization messaging that defines care as a public good. Overall feminist framing is rarely public facing, and strategic and instrumental approaches are evident suggesting continuity in the ambivalence of trade unionism towards the gendering of low-paid care work.

Of central concern is how such campaigns may have capacity to disrupt the consensus on care work. A related issue is how Unions might change to enhance their representation of feminist ideas. A contribution then is to revisit arguments for a gendered social unionism (Briskin, 2014) and a feminist trade union agenda (Munro, 2001) that gauges the purchase of feminist ideas in Unionism alongside other competing forms of knowledge (Cavaghan and Kulawik, 2021). Given the racialised and ethnic distribution of low-paid care work the presence or absence of intersectional framing is also relevant.

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- 2 Feminist policy analysis frameworks (Bacchi, 2009) and scholarship on gender knowledge (Cavaghan, 2017) reveal how knowledge production is gendered as well as how gender knowledge itself (how ideas about gender) features in different forms of knowledge including those advanced by social movements and Unions.
  - 3 Social reproduction is "valorised" but is not "valued". Moreover, where valorised, processes of valorisation themselves involve a systematic devaluation of the labour of social reproduction precisely in order to extract surplus value from it (Dowling, 2018).
  - 4 In making a distinction between feminised and feminist I am not arguing that strategic essentialism is always counterproductive. Maternalism has strong purchase in working class, ethnic minority and migrant communities in the form of activist motherhood (Naples, 1998, 112) and union motherhood (Cranford, 2007) used to promote women's leadership in unionism and disrupt traditional gender relations in the home. Black feminist thought has centred on experiences of black motherhood as forms of political subjectivity (Emejulu and Bassel, 2017). I am also not arguing that there is a pure feminist knowledge identifiable in campaigns as in reality the splitting of feminist knowledge in practice can result in means some elements of feminist ideas deemed valuable but also some are not (do Mar Pereira, 2017).

These concerns have particular purchase in the Covid-19 pandemic, which has simultaneously exalted and exhausted female frontline care workers (Branicki, 2020). The gendered effects of the pandemic, especially for female workers, as well as the gender-blind response to its management (Wenham et al, 2020; Cullen and Murphy, 2021) reveal resistances to acknowledging the gendered penalties of care work, yet may also create the impetus for a renewed feminist trade union agenda.

Irish society sits at the nexus of tensions in the European project, around austerity and fiscal policy, Brexit, and US corporate globalization that pose significant challenges to organised labour. Union recognition is not a right in Ireland<sup>5</sup> and a June 2020 High Court ruling struck down legislation that protected sectoral agreements for low-paid workers.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of ongoing decline unions struggled to protect low-paid workers exposed to the depth of Ireland's economic recession and austerity measures (Murphy et al., 2020). Ireland is in turn a conservative gender regime that operates a modified male breadwinner employment model and a marketized approach to public services. It lags behind developments in other EU and OECD countries in establishing public care infrastructure which results in a reliance on low-paid care workers and unpaid care that maintains low female employment rates (Sweeney, 2020). Ireland is then an interesting hard case to examine how Unions organise for female care workers in unfavourable conditions and to assess how knowledge about gender and care operates in Trade Unionism in Ireland and beyond.

Ireland is placed in the broader context of EU level trade union mobilisation. EU Directives are understood as epistemic opportunities for Trade Unions to link gender equality concerns with low-paid work (Elomäki and Kantola, 2020).

In what follows I detail the context for the cases including an overview of gendered employment in Ireland, and shifts in Trade Unionism. I follow with an account of the methodology and theoretical framework. Next I outline campaigns for Home Care Workers and Early childhood educators. I include an assessment of EU level strategies and the implications of Covid-19 for the trends identified. I conclude with a discussion of the cases and a reflection

5 Employees have the constitutional right to join a union, but employers have an equal right to refuse to negotiate with them or to use alternative non-union employee relations fora.

6 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/high-court-ruling-may-have-serious-implications-for-thousands-of-workers-ictu-warns-1.4286773>>.

on the potentials and limits of Union mobilization to reframe and revalue low-paid care work.

## **Ireland: Gendered Employment and Unionisation**

A study of gender equality in the Irish labour market (1966-2016) found that while there had been distinct change in the normative culture, a major upward shift in the scale of female employment, and a decline in gender segregation, women's and men's employment remained strongly gendered and care burdens remain absorbed by women (ESRI, 2019). This creates many social welfare, tax and pension gender gaps including on average 12% labour force participation gap, 14% gender pay gap and a 26% gender pension gap (CSO, 2019). 55.3% of those on minimum wage are women (CSO, 2019). Sectors where women predominate have been at the frontline of job and wage erosion, with low pay compounded by precarious work and non-fixed hour contracts (ESRI, 2019). These occupations have also been most adversely affected by Covid-19 shutdowns as low-paid women perform 70% of jobs in the essential economy (CSO, 2020). Other trends include a professionalization of care work without accompanying increases in pay (Bobeck, Pembroke and Wickham, 2018). Limited state-funded childcare and crisis-related labour market policy responses have also heightened the likelihood that women are locked into combining unpaid care work and low pay. This is particularly the case for single parents, for migrant women and for young women (ESRI, 2019).

Relative to many other European countries, Ireland's employment protection regime greatly limits the right to collective bargaining. While there is a right to association there is no attendant right to Union recognition in Ireland. Collective agreements exist in the public sector, with negotiated pay deals with unions in the private sector or by industry. In the private sector, unions operate in much more hostile environment, low levels of unionisation have pushed them beyond the workplace to seek a regulatory route (Geary and Gamwell, 2019, 197).

From 1986 to 2007 Ireland followed a process of social partnership with national wage agreements for both public and private sectors. This collapsed in the early years of the economic crisis to be partially replaced with interim public sector wage agreements and local level private sector wage bargaining. During the crisis, many 'anchor points' of Irish employment protection were

downgraded or removed with a reform of employment regulations, industrial relations bodies (Joint Labour Committees), and wage-setting mechanisms (Hickman and Dundon, 2016, 205–6).

Union density declined from a peak of 62 per cent in the early 1980s to 27 per cent following the economic crisis. Union density in the private sector is 16% (Murphy and Turner, 2016). The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is the umbrella organisation for all public and private sector unions. The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) remains the largest.

Up to the late 1980s, Irish trade unions' main concern was the creation of fulltime male jobs in manufacturing industries. Women activists began to gain some influence with the growth in female employment and membership. Although increasingly female, Trade Unions have had poor levels of female leadership and have operated in the context of economic redistributive demands that sit uneasily with gendered, racial and ethnic realities of low-paid female care work (Murphy et al., 2019). Interviews with feminist trade unionists indicate that Union involvement in casting sexual violence and reproductive health as workplace issues faced resistance and indifference and required significant activism. Gender issues "are not emerging from the shop floor but were engineered in a top down way" (Interview with female Trade Union official, 2020). There has been no clear 'feminist network' in Irish Trade Unions, rather an informal coalition of women working in tandem but often with individual employers to secure change. For example a feminist trade unionist in the Communications Workers Union negotiated domestic violence leave for employees with two large telecommunications companies, a concession rejected by the national employers' organisation.<sup>7</sup>

Union membership and density remain strong in the health and education sectors, however, these sectors have also been subject to marketization (Cullen, 2019). This includes 70% of childcare and 80% elder care provided by the private sector (ESRI, 2019). While Unions representing frontline occupations in health and education (nurses and teachers) have managed to secure some elements of pay restoration through collective bargaining with the state, they have not been able to stop privatisation of services, including the use of agency staff (Murphy et al., 2019). As is explored below, most recent campaigns reflect a sectoral approach to female-dominated occupations using ground level mobilization. Anti-austerity framing in these campaigns has evolved

7 <<https://bizplus.ie/vodafone-launches-domestic-violence-policy/>>.

into a broader anti-marketization approach that links wage demands to better public services. Given the connective tissue between the crises (Soener, 2020) the Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the relationship between systemic underinvestment in public services, the marketization of core pillars of social and personal services and pressure on frontline female-dominated care work occupations.

## Methodology

A case study approach is used as a ‘bounded entity’ (Yin, 2012, 6) to generate knowledge about the broader social phenomenon in a specific context. Two cases studies of Union campaigns for female-dominated low-paid care work provide the empirical basis. The case studies were chosen to represent the evolution of one large Trade Union’s approach to sectoral-based mobilisation in feminised workplaces. Home care workers are employed in the public and private sector while most early childcare workers remain in the private sector. Home care work is stratified in part by racial and ethnic status, both sectors are increasingly credentialed, yet remain poorly paid and lack access to income protections including sick pay (see Table 1). Analysis comprises desk research and semi-structured interviews with eight trade unionists including senior officials, as well as equality or gender equality officers and self-identified feminist trade unionists working at national and EU level. Interviewees were accorded anonymity and/or confidentiality and interviews lasted between one and three hours. Some quotations were approved for attribution. The earliest interviews were conducted in 2015 in connection with the homecare campaign, with follow-up interviews with the same trade unionist in 2020. Additional interviews and empirical data relate to campaigns conducted in the period between 2019 and 2021. Interviews focussed on the Union’s approach to gender equality and questions about strategies and frameworks used in campaigns, and provide context to the analysis.



**Table 1 Framing Female-Dominated Care Work**

	Occupational Identity	Framing	Intersectional	Allies
Home Care Time to Care	Fragmented	Feminised Rights-based Anti-Market Feminist Implicit	Evolving	Migrant Rights Clients Allied Health Workers
Early Care Big Start	Nascent	Feminised Feminist Implicit Anti-Market	Sublimated	Women's Rights Parents Small Employers

Desk analysis included a purposive sampling of materials on the case study campaigns, understood as strategic communications targeted to the general public and organisations' members and political elites. Campaign materials assessed were made up of outputs from annual general meetings, women's committee events of the SIPTU and ICTU and joint events held by the Irish Labour Party and the SIPTU as well as SIPTU monthly webinars held between July 2020 and March 2021. Other desk research included newspaper editorials, member newsletters in particular *Liberty* Magazine published by SIPTU, and worker fronted testimonies contained in videos and in social media campaigns. Frames were derived from thematic analysis of campaign slogans, content of campaign demands, social media hashtags, video clips and the visual representation of women's bodies in street demonstrations. Salient quotations from interviewees and from campaign communications are included to illustrate how gender and care were represented with categorizations made to identify feminised and feminist alongside anti-marketization frames (see Table 2). These are interpreted by the understandings of care work communicated (as a public good, vocation, professional status, soft skills or credentials), by how the carer and care recipient experience is naturalized as valorous and/or valued, and by how the gender of workers is operationalised as maternal, sacrificial or source of exploitation alongside the presence or absence of intersectional analysis.

**Table 2 Framing Gender and Care in Union Campaigns**

Care work as	Public Good	Professional Soft skills & credentials (Valorous & Valued)	Vocational Clients come first (Valorous)	Natural carers/ Front line heroes Covid-19 (Valorous)	Essential service Covid-19 Care Economy (Valued)
Frames	Feminist Anti-Market	Feminised Feminist	Feminised	Feminised	Feminist Anti-Market

The analytical approach is one where campaign materials are analysed to reveal how different ideas about gender and care privilege different representations of the ‘problem and solution over others, and by doing so, construct subjects in specific gendered ways’ (Kantola and Lombardo, 2018, 331; Bacchi, 2009, 9).

Taking this perspective I revisit research that gendered ‘social mobilization’ and recognised the influence of feminist ideas in discourse and framing of campaigns (Heery and Conley, 2007; Briskin, 2014; Kirton, 2017; Baines and Cunningham, 2017; Greene, 2020). Rather than the elements required for collective action or the outcome of campaigns, the analytical focus then is on the framing used and what it reveals about the forms of knowledge about gender and care that are circulated and communicated to diagnose the problems in low-paid care work and the solutions required (Bacchi, 2009). Analytically campaigns are assessed for how campaign frames presented problems and solutions which may challenge dominant ideas of care and/or leave the complexity of gender, race or ethnic power relations unexamined.

## **Trade Unions: Gendered Work and Gendered Organising**

Munro (2001, 457-459, 468) advanced a feminist trade union agenda to counter women’s exclusion from Unions and highlight the gendered nature of the labour market, gendered definition of skills and gendered wage structures. A feminist trade union agenda includes a commitment to making gender visible in Trade Union campaigns. It also underlines the importance of intersectional initiatives that help reconceptualise Union solidarity and challenge the notion of the generic worker with homogenous self-evident (class) interests (Munro, 2001, 468-470; Briskin, 2014, 124). Such engagement could help upend gendered segmentation of the labour market, undermine the legacy of union support

for traditionalist ideologies about women's work, alongside structures that marginalised women inside unions (Rubery and Hebson, 2018; Greene, 2020).

However even an implicit commitment to feminist frameworks has had mixed outcomes. In her study of a feminist-identified Trade Union in France, Guillaume (2018) found it exhibited less hierarchy and incubated feminist consciousness among its members. However, it did not escape the enduring centrality of class in framing union struggle nor a lack of gender parity in senior decision roles. While women trade unionists operated nuanced and often implicit feminist forms of identification, their union was met with indifference and hostility from large Trade Unions (2018, 566-569).

Scholars have also gendered social mobilization approaches to better understand how Unions organise women workers (Cox et al., 2007; Kirton and Healy, 2013; Briskin, 2014; Healy and Bergfeld, 2016; Baines and Cunningham, 2017). Healy and Bergfeld's (2016) overview of Union mobilization on women's work in contexts of increasing casualization found that where gender was emphasised it was often in instrumental ways rather than framed as a gender equality issue. In case studies they outlined how Unions used relational organising that drew on the social ties found in women's occupational roles especially in social and healthcare. However they draw attention to how using ideas about female workers subjectivities can help to mobilise unorganised sectors, but this may also fail to confront gendered power relations. Overall, they argue that changes for women workers require Unions to make gender equality explicit in campaigns in ways that move beyond short-term and instrumental approaches to feminised workplaces (Healy and Bergfeld, 2016).

Briskin (2014, 125-127) argued that linking social unionism and gender in gendered social unionism (GSU) offers a contrast to how gender has often operated in disguise in collective bargaining. GSU provided a radical frame for Trade Unions to challenge how austerity measures invoked outdated and conservative views of women's place and had contributed to women's return to the household (Briskin, 2014, 125-127). Eschewing gender essentialism, GSU embraces a feminist framing of care and work and links bargaining for women's economic equality to a more inclusive, and intersectional defence against austerity (Briskin, 2014). A focus on women's paid and unpaid work and the gendered relations of exploitation are central elements of GSU. This framing has relevance for the gendered consequences of Covid-19 for women workers, especially women's 'retreat' from the labour market to absorb care needs (OECD, 2020).

Care has been used to found oppositional worker identities especially in gendered resistance to austerity and precarisation (Clarke and Newman, 2012, 447). These campaigns have had success for some nursing Unions where power resources and a robust occupational identity were present (Baines and Cunningham, 2017, 445-447; O'Sullivan et al., 2020). However, care work remains saturated with gendered expectations held by female workers, state and management (Baines and Cunningham, 2020). Naturalized expectations that female-majority workforces can provide care (paid and unpaid) under any circumstance are a specific feature of austerity and now pandemic crisis management. The institutional undervaluation of female care work is embedded in gendered (racialised and classed) understandings of care (Conley, 2015; Koskinen Sandberg and Saari, 2019). Unless contested, these gendered understandings remain invisible and unrecognised as they are reproduced by employers, governments, trade unions and other social actors (Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos and Kohvakka, 2018, 709, 712).

Trade Union campaigns for female care workers do reflect the influence of feminist ideas especially when they attend to the gendered power relations that organise work. However feminist frames are often accompanied by feminised representations that sentimentalise care and can reinforce gender stereotypes. This framing can be used in campaigns as 'strategic essentialism' where gendered constructions of vocation and empathy are conveyed to secure public support for Union demands and align with aspects of female workers' subjectivities. Using this form of knowledge about gender and care can promote resonance and create solidarity, but it may also mean that gender features obliquely at best as a power relation.

Next I explore SIPTU campaigns for Home Care workers to investigate dynamics of knowledge production on gender and care. These workers are predominantly women, increasingly migrants. The state funds 80% of all home care provision but increasingly outsources it to private market actors and/or uses competitive tendering amongst faith and voluntary providers to reduce costs. This has depressed wages especially for non-unionised migrant workers working in the private sector (Cullen, 2019). Irish Unions have invested in ground level tactics to recruit migrant care workers. Unions have produced documents on migrant integration and SIPTU formally launched a migrant worker support network in 2016 (Geary and Gamwell, 2019). Strategies aimed at migrant integration tend to lack a gender focus.

## Time to Care: Home Care Workers

SIPTU had supported home care workers in three collectivised bargaining disputes between 2005 and 2012. The *Time to Care* campaign emerged from these earlier campaigns. Relational organising with migrant rights organisations was used to recruit migrant care workers.<sup>8</sup> Public protests began in 2013 in response to renewed cuts to home-help budgets, as well as the use of zero hour contracts to manage home care weekly work allocation.<sup>9</sup> Tactics included mobilising in red T-shirts with slogans valorising female home carers as ‘part of the family’ and as involved in a ‘labour of love’.<sup>10</sup> Women predominated in campaign materials in feminised framing of care as embodied in self-sacrificing female care worker. This devotion to clients despite severe cuts enabled vulnerable clients to stay in their own homes (Liberty, 2012a, 20).<sup>11</sup> Worker fronted testimonies included female workers’ concerns about inadequate time to provide their essential care for vulnerable clients (Murphy and Turner, 2014). Care was framed as emotional support and skilled assessment of needs and that went far beyond rudimentary physical care afforded by the limited time allocated and reflected in poor wages.<sup>12</sup>

Union campaigns situated female care workers as enabling the articulation of the right to access care at home now threatened by austerity, and the harms and risks posed by marketization (see table 2). This framing intensified in the later stages of the campaign and can be read as implicitly feminist in critique of a careless state and their advocacy for a right to access care outside of market forces.

Protests included Irish and migrant home care workers with support from nursing and allied health care professions.<sup>13</sup> However, hierarchies of gender, race and migrant status within care work were suppressed to mobilise a cohesive “carers against cuts” frame. Resolution relied on state industrial relations machinery and labour court recommendations securing collective bargaining rights for 12,000 home care workers. The outcome was a new agreement that secured improvements for those directly employed by the state. However

8 <[https://www.siptu.ie/media/publications/file\\_19530\\_en.pdf](https://www.siptu.ie/media/publications/file_19530_en.pdf)>.

9 <<https://siptuhealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PaulGavanHome-Helpfinal.pdf>>.

10 <[https://www.siptu.ie/media/media\\_16813\\_en.pdf](https://www.siptu.ie/media/media_16813_en.pdf)>.

11 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUGqymVEAwI&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUGqymVEAwI&feature=emb_logo)>.

12 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQHqtOYN2Xw>>.

13 <[https://www.siptu.ie/media/media\\_16813\\_en.pdf](https://www.siptu.ie/media/media_16813_en.pdf)>.

it did not reach workers employed by subcontracting voluntary organisations and private sector employers— where most migrants are located. As a result working conditions of home care workers still vary significantly across employers (Murphy and Turner, 2016).

One outcome of *Time to Care* was a reproduction of racialized divisions between unionised public sector and subcontracted private agency workers. Nevertheless, the *Time to Care* campaign was characterised by a senior trade unionist as a success story that required ten years of strategic organising in a fragmented sector (Interview with SIPTU official, 2020). Home helps and care workers had been paid informally without regular documentation of pay or benefits. The central gain claimed here was the formalisation of a large part of this sector and a corresponding increase in educational credentials and wage scales.

SIPTU trade unionists stated that high level of public awareness of the campaign and public support for the workers including from families of clients was key to its success. Interviewees were clear that this support was enabled by feminised representations of this work that framed carers as selfless and above all else devoted to their clients, rather than any specific wage-led demands. The uneven nature of gains was acknowledged but attributed to migrant women's subjectivity alongside the difficulties of operating in the private sector, "You can tell a teacher to pay their Unions fees, they see they will get pay deal and good quality representation, but for a migrant women worker with no registered agreement that is very difficult to convince them to collectivise" (Interview with SIPTU Trade Unionist, August 2020). More recent SIPTU mobilisation sought to address this and relates to pay restoration for those employed by private sector and voluntary and faith based organisations rather than directly by the state. While migrant, racial and ethnic minority workers now feature in campaigns, migrant status, race and ethnicity remain largely unacknowledged.<sup>14</sup>

In response to the pandemic SIPTU pivoted towards a more inclusive framing that campaigned against the mandatory redeployment of home care workers (including migrant workers on less favourable contracts) to the nursing home sector where high rates of Covid-19 infection were present.<sup>15</sup> However feminised

14 <<https://siptuhealth.ie/tag/home-helps/>>.

15 <<https://siptuhealth.ie/siptu-demands-government-action-to-combat-the-rising-numbers-of-health-workers-testing-positive-for-covid-19/>>.

frames remained central. A SIPTU social media worker fronted campaign # Frontline Heroes drew on predominantly female workers, underlining their role in “infection control, emotional support and maintaining clients safely at home”.<sup>16</sup>

The core aim here was to frame home care workers as essential workers and push the state to allow them access to pandemic income support protections. However, migrant home helps and homecare workers, some of whom reside in asylum seeker direct provision system or are undocumented, continue to fall outside these arrangements.<sup>17</sup>

Lacking the robust occupational identity of other care professions, home care which is further characterized by divides of race and migrant status, continues to be a challenging area for Unionisation. Feminised constructs of care proved resonant and effective in valorising home care as worthy and meaningful work. An implicit feminist frame of the right to access care outside of market logics underlined the essential nature of home care and the difficulties that privatisation created in securing quality care. Ideas about gender and care worked then to secure campaign goals, yet the gendered coding of care work remains intact, and racialized and minoritised dynamics are less acknowledged.

Early educators are the other main feminised occupation targeted by SIPTU and the campaign to defend them draws on similar framing to the *Time to Care* that ties quality care to well-paid committed workers. Anti-marketization framing is evident and aligned with feminised constructs of care work that reject monetisation and carelessness of for-profit services, and feminist frames of care as a public good.

## Big Start: Together for Early Years

A campaign launched as *Big Start* in 2015 framed the early year’s sector as one in crisis where state investment was required. SIPTU’s opening campaign statement read, “Parents are paying too much for childcare. Workers are paid too little to make ends meet. Providers are struggling to break even. Everyone

16 <[https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/mainnews/fullstory\\_22006\\_en.html](https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/mainnews/fullstory_22006_en.html)>.

17 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/asylum-seekers-who-worked-pre-pandemic-not-eligible-for-covid-19-support-1.4247887>>.

is getting a raw deal. A responsible government that values every child would recognise each Early Years professional”.<sup>18</sup> This campaign involved an expansive recruitment effort among this low-paid female-dominated occupational sector and mobilised in coalition with parents and smaller employers.<sup>19</sup> Female care workers featured in social media testifying to struggling on low pay while prioritising child welfare “working so hard to provide a home away from home, putting children first”.<sup>20</sup>

The pinnacle of the campaign came on February 5, 2020 with a national rally involving an alliance of child care providers (private and public sectors), early year’s educators, professional associations and parents (who had to agree to lose service for the event). The ‘Together for Early Years’ protest required regional organising committees that bused parents, children, workers and employers to the capital city.<sup>21</sup> The protest was overwhelmingly female, led by a line of mothers pushing children in prams with slogans including “Valuing Us is Valuing Children”.<sup>22</sup> Asked about the public protest dimension of the campaign a Trade Union official stated, “it was essential to have women and children with their prams stationed outside of the Union headquarters ‘Liberty Hall’ for the media to give a powerful message” (Interview with SIPTU official, 2020). Here a conscious framing exercise relied on deeply maternalist and familial messaging. For this official it was also essential to build solidarity between mothers and carers captured in the statement, “And the mothers themselves know there is a major problem; they are aware of workers’ poor working conditions, and are asking themselves why fees are so high. The interests of the childcare professionals, and the mothers coincide”. This framing is aimed at revealing gendered ‘bargains’ that women workers enter into by paying other women to care for low wages. At the same time the predominantly female populated protest (mothers and workers) communicated an implicit feminist message about the gender imbalance in care work.

Campaign materials invoked the developmental benefits for children of excellent public child care that “supports families, promotes social inclusion, reduces child poverty, enhances future employability and facilitates workforce

18 <<https://www.bigstart.ie/>>.

19 <<https://twitter.com/BigStartIreland>>.

20 <<https://www.bigstart.ie/>>.

21 <[https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/fullstory\\_21551\\_en.html](https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/fullstory_21551_en.html)>.

22 <<https://twitter.com/DarraghIsHere/status/1370465588099887115/photo/1>>.



participation for parents, particularly for women”.<sup>23</sup> Seeking care outside of marketized rationales and linking it to broader goals of social unionism indicate feminist framing, yet are tied to facilitating women’s access to the labour force, rather than a goal in itself.

At the same time media coverage showcased women workers asserting their professional status and seeking increased valuation, “we have degrees, we are graduates, we demand respect and recognition, we have an important job”.<sup>24</sup> As such feminised framing is modified by calls to value childcare as credentialed professional work.

Gendered assumptions also inform Union strategy including the decision to use younger women organisers trained in relational methods in ground recruitment, “those women under 35 with the most energy and the most in common with the workers” (Interview with SIPTU official 2020).

In continuity with the home care campaign, an anti-marketization framework is present as is a power resource assessment as to the likely outcome captured in this statement, “the childcare campaign was so difficult, more challenging that you can imagine, and may take a decade as the power base with big employers, state, civil servants, all want to maintain a private market and resist a public childcare model” (Interview with SIPTU Trade Union official). This was understood by this feminist trade unionist as part of a broader patriarchal socio-cultural construction of care as a private concern located in the home, unregulated, informal and outside of state control. While maintaining her own feminist analysis, she argued that the campaign itself required a form of framing that “all women can get behind”. The key to unlocking the potential of the sector, to transforming it into a modern public service, was located with female workers themselves and alliances with mothers and smaller providers.

Female care worker subjectivities were understood here again to colour this trade unionist’s analysis of the obstacles to the campaign: “women cannot stay in the sector when they have children, as it is too low paid, so young women predominate, they love kids and it is hard to collectivise their grievances”. From her perspective, existing forms of gendered solidarity in care work were in conflict with traditional organising models that relied on agitation.

23 <<https://medium.com/@BigStartIreland/campaign-platform-election-2020-a7e7697b00a7>>.

24 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/miriam-lord-childcare-workers-give-candidates-a-wake-up-call-1.4163155#.XjvLzsmqhys.twitter>>.

Collectivisation of early childcare educators required a way of campaigning that refocused aspects of feminised worker subjectivities towards longer term career aspirations and increased professional status.

Reflecting on the campaign in a webinar held in March 2021 SIPTU organisers detailed how marketization of the sector, pressure including from EU requirements on educational credentials had manufactured a more educated but disempowered workforce. An account of the campaign once again referenced female care worker subjectivities as “A workforce that did not want to disadvantage parents and disrupt children’s lives and required significant mobilisation”.<sup>25</sup>

Here tensions arise between campaign frames that essentialise aspects of care work and mobilising efforts that aim to break bonds of gendered vocation and solidarity cultivated by employers.

The pandemic closed all childcare facilities between March and June 2020, and again in late December 2020 to March 2021. The state provided emergency income support for these workers and for many this payment exceeded their original wage. This income support was heralded by Unions and women’s organisations as an indication that the state was on the precipice of the wholesale public provision of childcare.<sup>26</sup> However, a re-opening of services at reduced capacity (and reduced staffing) meant significant job losses and a reduction in pay, and for those re-employed concerns about infection control. Unions continued to campaign for a publically funded model of childcare drawing on public health messaging to demand a living wage and paid sick leave for early childhood educators, “Poor pay and conditions are driving high staff turnover in our sector. This directly undermines quality for children and the consistency of ‘play pods’, a key Covid-19 control measure”.<sup>27</sup> A *Big Start* social media campaign also framed the early care sector as an essential service<sup>28</sup> and in March 2021 the government initiated a process to negotiate for

25 <<https://www.siptu.ie/campaigns/workplacedemocracy/>>.

26 <[https://www.nwci.ie/news/article/nwci\\_welcomes\\_childcare\\_intervention\\_and\\_wage\\_subsidy](https://www.nwci.ie/news/article/nwci_welcomes_childcare_intervention_and_wage_subsidy)>.

27 <<https://www.facebook.com/BigStartIreland/>>.

28 <<https://youtu.be/aPna6M2Yxul>>.

the first time a sectoral pay agreement.<sup>29</sup> At the same time the state refused to commit additional funds to initiate a publicly funded childcare system.<sup>30</sup>

The *Time to care* campaign illustrated the challenges that women and especially migrant and ethnic minority women face in accessing rewards of successful Union mobilisation. A combination of feminised and anti-marketization frames underlined a rights-based claim to care and delivered client and public support. Yet the absence of a strong feminist and/or intersectional framing and the structural location of migrant women contributed to uneven outcomes for the lowest paid female workers.

*Big Start* also circulated feminised framing of the selfless early care professional putting children first while struggling on low pay. Mothers feature as the beneficiaries of state investment in childcare, while workers seek the benefits of public sector employment, where union density is higher and where gains have been made. Such investment is linked to the labour market activation of women rather than an assessment of women's disproportionate care burden. Care work is then coded as maternal care, yet feminist frames intrude with claims for recognition of professional credentials required to deliver early education and demands for public childcare.

International influences have shaped Irish Trade Unions tactics with US models a referent for sectoral ground campaigns such as those discussed here (Geary and Gamwel, 2019). However, the EU remains a significant reference point, in particular, in efforts to secure collective bargaining rights. How EU social partners work to shape EU employment directives reveals the ways that employers and Unions adopt instrumental and often economised understandings of gender equality (Elomäki and Kantola, 2020). The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) operates its own knowledge production about gender and work that has import for feminist trade unionists in Ireland.

29 <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0aa9a-statement-from-the-minister-for-children-equality-disability-integration-youth/>>.

30 <<https://www.rte.ie/news/analysis-and-comment/2020/1015/1171621-budget2021-childcare-analysis/>>.

## Female care workers and EU initiatives

The EU provided workers in Ireland with important protections and has been a source of leverage for women's movements and Trade Unions on equal treatment legislation and maternity leave (Murphy, 2014). Irish governments have often lobbied against or resisted transposition of EU employment initiatives.<sup>31</sup> European level influence features in other ways with the ETUC women's committee and the Polish Trade Unions credited with persuading the Irish trade Unions to support repealing the prohibition on abortion.<sup>32</sup> EU legislative proposals on collective bargaining rights also feature in ICTU efforts to secure rights of Union recognition.<sup>33</sup> EU initiatives considered most relevant to women workers include the EU Work Life Balance (WLB), Minimum Wage and proposed Pay Transparency Directives.

An Irish feminist Trade Unionist was appointed in 2019 to the senior role of Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC, a considerable achievement given the masculinist culture of Irish Trade Unionism. Interviews with the Deputy General Secretary focused on her efforts to advance issues of women's work at EU level. Detailing her work on the WLB Directive, she suggested that the presence of pro-familial actors in some Trade Unions had shaped her strategy. Feminist argumentation was delimited, with the directive framed as a family and parental issue to underline how men's interests have changed. For her "we needed to recruit younger male trade unionists and emphasize how the directive would protect men's interests to spend time with their children" (Interview with Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC, August 2020). In her view, feminist ideas were difficult to translate in EU level negotiations where "you have to hold on to what can you win at this moment and avoid losing support by introducing women's care issues". While a familial frame is predominant, broadening unpaid care work to include male carers and reframing care as valuable can be read as implicitly feminist. Yet it also reflects an epistemic strategy developed in an increasingly hostile context for feminist frameworks (Elomäki and Kantola, 2020).

All interviewees were asked about the relevance of EU legislation. The EU draft Directive on Gender Pay Transparency represented for most an opportunity to restart a stalled April 2019 Irish Gender Pay Gap Bill. The ETUC

31 <<https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2021/0218/1197911-minimum-wage/>>.

32 Interview with senior female Trade Unionist.

33 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/ictu-to-press-for-introduction-of-eu-collective-bargaining-directive-1.3943956>>.

proposal was to enhance the Transparency Directive and other initiatives to beyond reporting of pay gap data. The objective was to bypass individualized and legalistic equal treatment approaches that required a male comparator, impossible to establish in female-dominated work, towards a sector-based revaluation of female-dominated occupations. This would rely on valuation of psychosocial effort, emotional labour, high touch skills and levels of responsibility currently unrecognised in pay evaluations. These views resurfaced in an International Women's Day (IWD) webinar workshop held by SIPTU in March 2021 entitled 'How Trade Union Bargaining Shrinks the Gender Pay Gap'.<sup>34</sup> Present at the event, the Deputy General Secretary of ETUC detailed the potential of such sectoral-based comparisons to secure equal pay. Given that most low-paid female-dominated work in Ireland is not covered by sectoral wage agreements (Murphy et al., 2020), this approach could enable Unions to bargain for improved pay and conditions. In her remarks she stated, "If it wasn't women predominantly doing this work what would it be paid? It is not men versus women, we need to move the conversation to the valuation of the work in itself, it requires a collective approach, a sectoral approach works best". The intent here is to devise a gender neutral evaluation of tasks. Yet the starting point is to focus on the distinctive qualities of feminised work as a source of value and is not without risks. Making the gendered embodiment of care work visible and asserting emotional labour as a skill may justify gender segregation in work through valorising women and men's differences rather than challenging them (Rubery and Hebson, 2018, 429). This strategy may also work to deepen gender coding of work, especially culturally embedded in the Irish context (ESRI, 2019).

Overall, EU Directives are considered as the path to stronger collective bargaining mechanisms with gender equality listed alongside other secondary outcomes (ICTU, 2021). Feminist trade unionists do insert feminist argumentation into discourse on EU initiatives. In an IWD blog the SIPTU Deputy General Secretary for Organising outlined how the trade union movement lacked commitment to and leadership on issues relating to women's equality at work. While EU initiatives offered strategic opportunities, 'in house' expertise to disaggregate wage data by gender was missing on the domestic level. Unions needed to commit to acquiring this lens or pay transparency data would have little impact. She stated that, "But, most of all, we must continue to unionise women workers in both the public and private sector, especially those in the lower paid jobs. This requires us to work in environments outside

34 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RGUhzuhIP8>>.

our normal comfort zones. Any activist, shop steward or union official who has organised Early Years Educators or Home Care Workers knows this is not easy. In fact, it's a very hard slog, not for the faint-hearted and there are no silver bullets".<sup>35</sup> This analysis invokes aspects of gendered social unionism in underlining the need to make gender visible in collective bargaining and illustrates efforts to insert feminist ideas into trade unionism. However, this comment also acknowledges the 'discomfort' of organising low-paid women workers and how Unionisation in itself will deliver gender equality reflecting an attenuated feminist trade union agenda.

## Discussion

Using a knowledge and feminist policy and politics lens (Bacchi, 2009; Cavaghan, 2017) reveals the role that Trade Unions play in shaping ideas about gender and care. Forms of 'gender' knowledge, categorised here as feminist and feminised, circulate in Union campaigns where they combine to stabilise and/or undermine dominant constructs of female-dominated care work. Gendered assumptions about female workers subjectivities also shape organising responses and reveal instrumental yet also feminist approaches to the relationship between gender and care. Epistemic strategies are centred on feminised framing to attract client and public support. Anti-austerity and anti-marketization framing is also prevalent and can hold both feminist and feminised discourse that rejects the monetization and undervaluation of care.

Feminist perspectives and analysis feature in personal accounts of female trade unionists often working informally and disseminating this analysis in inward-facing materials directed at membership rather than public-facing campaigns. This indicates a commitment to a gendered social unionism (Briskin, 2014) and a feminist trade Union agenda (Munro, 2001), yet feminist analysis of female care work does not surface in a coherent or consistent way enough to influence Union discourse and strategy.

Anti-marketization can align with feminist anti-capitalist frameworks (Federici, 2016) and work in intersectional ways (Garofalo Geymonat et al., 2021). On the other hand, as the Irish case reveals, feminist critique can struggle to

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35 <https://www.forsa.ie/blog/iwd2021-how-unions-can-shrink-the-gender-pay-gap/>.

gain visibility when anti-market frames remain tied to class analysis alongside cultural logics that feminise care work. The particularities of modified male breadwinner model, reliance on market solutions and poor care infrastructure reflect elements of other contexts, but combined in this case create an inhospitable climate for a feminist trade union agenda.

Calls for public investment in care align with economic rationales for the retention of the female care workforce, especially evident in the *Big Start* campaign. In *Big Start*, public childcare is linked to child developmental outcomes and female labour market participation, absent strong feminist argumentation of the gendered care burden. Arguments for the right to home care in *Time to Care* rest on a critique of austerity that undermined care services, rather than an explicit feminist frame of care justice and the equal distribution of care. Campaigns also rely on solidarity within and across different groups of women, yet at the same time flatten class, racial and ethnic differences between them. EU directives offer opportunities to raise issues of undervaluation of women's work, yet are primarily understood as way to secure collective bargaining that could address sectoral wage disparities.

Feminists have argued for a care-led recovery (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021) warning of the gendered collateral damage of the pandemic and the potential of the gendered effects of post-Covid retrenchment on women's employment (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021). The pandemic created new opportunities for the public to value front line workers in female-dominated occupations as skilled and essential to the functioning of society, and Union campaigns aim to capitalise on this recognition as a way to reassert demands. However, such framing relies in large part on valorous construct of 'front line heroes' exalted for their sacrifice rather than a critique of the gendered cultural construction of care and its intersectional penalties. This framing risks undue emphasis on gendered norms of emotional attachment and moral commitment. The peril lies in how such framing may generate a 'currency of praise' rather than wage demands and adequate protections for personal safety. Epistemic strategies that fail to challenge care pay penalties limit the gains for female-dominated workers and especially for the less credentialed and lowest paid. Framing that is based on seeking the social recognition of care may not be strong enough to counter the widespread tendency to ignore or underestimate its social benefits (Folbre et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

In a rare recognition of the gender of the workforce, the president of ICTU stated in an opinion article in a major newspaper, “The Covid-19 global pandemic has highlighted more than ever just who constitutes our “essential workers”. They are the frontline workers in the private and public sectors who have kept us safe and sought to keep our economy and society going. They include nursing home and retail workers, many of whom are in precarious and low-paid work. It is no surprise that many of these jobs are carried out by women”.<sup>36</sup> The sudden creation of this new category of workers has dramatized the disjuncture between the social value of care work and its private monetary reward (Folbre et al., 2020). This may herald a more consistent and deeper engagement by Unions with feminist ideas and strategies including coalitions with service users and cross-occupational alliances that could contest the devaluation and privatization of care provision.

In the campaigns discussed here different forms of knowledge about gender understood as feminist and feminised sit in tension with each other and/or combine with anti-marketisation frames in ways that open up or close down a consideration of the systemic undervaluation of care work. In the *Big Start* Campaign, such framing was accompanied by mass demonstrations, and coupled with pandemic-induced public appreciation for care workers may have enabled early educators to gain access to wage determination processes. Yet calls for state investment in public childcare, a core feminist goal, gained less traction. In the *Time to Care*, a carers against cuts campaign argued for a right to care delivered by a homogenised valorous skilled carer that secured improving conditions albeit in a stratified way. These campaigns illustrate efforts to build a form of gendered social unionism (Briskin, 2014) and to highlight the exploitation of female-dominated workers. In line with this, feminist trade unionists have worked to insert feminist ideas and goals into campaigns. Yet, feminist framing is implicit at best as Unions rely on feminised and broader anti-marketization framing suggesting continuity in the ambivalence of trade unionism towards gendering of low-paid care work. Strategies also work from gendered assumptions and economic frameworks reflected in EU social partnership discourse that limit capacity to challenge gender inequality. Tackling the undervaluation of female care work in a conservative gender and marketized regime requires a robust epistemic shift that centres on feminist

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36 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/retail-and-services/there-should-be-a-threshold-of-dignity-for-debenhams-workers-1.4352654>>.



critique of the material, policy and cultural logics that maintain dominant gendered constructs of care. This is never more urgent than now given how the pandemic response has relied on assumptions of women's capacity to provide paid and unpaid care under any conditions.

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