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# AUSTRIAN TRADE UNIONS: TOWARDS MAINSTREAMING GENDER?

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## **Introduction**

Changes in the structure of employment and the organisation of business have constituted growing challenges for the Austrian trade unions. Most important, union membership has been affected negatively by these changes. The groups of employees which have been growing during the last years are groups which have lower organisation rates and are harder to organise for various reasons. With some delay, the Austrian Trade Union Confederation ÖGB<sup>1</sup> reacted to these pressures on membership, it initiated organisational reforms in order to use resources more efficiently and to increase the possibilities for recruiting new members. In the future it will be crucial for the ÖGB to raise organisation among the growing groups of employees with lower organisation rates. The unions will have to adapt their modes of recruiting and catering, but they will also have to pay more attention to the interests of these groups.

Women seem to constitute one of those groups with lower unionisation rates: compared to men, women are less likely to be union members. It can be counter-argued that the gender gap in unionisation results to a considerable extent from differences in the employment structure: women are over-represented in categories of employees that in general have lower unionisation rates. Nevertheless, in certain of these categories women constitute a large portion of employees. For raising unionisation among those poorly organised employees, the unions have to represent the interests of the majority, i.e. the interests of women.

Though a large part of the gender gap in unionisation can be attributed to differences in the employment structure, there is some evidence that women tend to join the union less often than their male colleagues. One of the reasons why women do not join the union seems to be their feeling or even their experience that the union and the union-dominated bodies of co-determination on enterprise level do not represent their interests adequately (cf. Melegny et al. 1987: 165-6). This is related to the fact that the proportion of women union officials<sup>2</sup> is

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<sup>1</sup> The ÖGB is the only trade union confederation in Austria and there are virtually no unions outside the ÖGB.

<sup>2</sup> The ÖGB has a so-called dual structure consisting of a political and an administrative structure. The 'FunktionärInnen' are elected and part of the political structure. The 'SekretärInnen' are appointed and

far below the female share in membership. For raising organisation among women it is necessary to increase women's participation in decision making and to improve the advancement of women's interests.

The first section of this paper describes how the ÖGB was constituted as a male-dominated organisation, how women's position in the male-dominated ÖGB-structure developed over time, and how women's presence in the union structure improved slowly with some acceleration during the last years. The second section discusses the representation of women's interests by the ÖGB and argues that now they seem to be considered more often than in the past. Special attention will be paid to the situation two years after the ÖGB's decision to implement Gender Mainstreaming and three years after the start of the 'Equal Pay Now!' campaign. The conclusion gives an overall assessment of the developments described in the previous sections.

## **Trade Union Structure and Women in Austria**

### *'Women's Structure' in the ÖGB*

Already the (Social-Democratic) Confederation of Free Trade Unions (before 1934 when it was abolished by the Austro-Fascist regime) had a women's department. It was constituted in 1929 and by 1930 17 of the confederation's 45<sup>3</sup> affiliates had established women's departments (Frauenbericht 1975, Heft 7: 12). When the ÖGB was founded in spring 1945, its provisional statutes included the possibility of a women's department. In September 1945 the women's department was founded (Ranftl 1996: 31).

In the years and decades following the constitution of the women's department in the ÖGB, women's departments were established in the federal states and in the trade unions affiliated to the ÖGB. A few of the women's departments in the federal states were already established in the late 1940s, the rest of them were set up in the 1950s. Starting in the late 1940s by and by women's departments were established in the trade unions. By the end of the 1950s there existed (provisional) women's departments in more than half of the ÖGB-affiliates. In some trade unions, just as in some federal states, setting up and running women's departments was hindered by male resistance and especially lack of resources (which were allotted by male leaders) (cf. ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1995: 9).

In two types of trade unions it happened that at the beginning female trade unionists tended to refrain from efforts to establish a women's department: 1. In unions with a high percentage of female members, (e.g. in the Hotel, Restaurant and Personal Services Workers' Union) they argued that with such a large female share in membership it was not necessary to

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employees of the ÖGB, they belong to the administrative structure. Further, administrative staff is part of the administrative structure. In this article 'FunktionärInnen' will be referred to as 'functionaries' and 'SekretärInnen' will be referred to as '(trade) union officials'.

<sup>3</sup> 45 affiliates according to Traxler 1982: 150.

treat women as a special group. Later it became clear that in these unions, in spite of their large share in membership women continued to be underrepresented in decision making bodies. In consequence, women's departments got established in these unions, too. 2. In the four public sector unions the necessity of special catering for women was often denied because the laws of employment did not allow direct discrimination. With the exception of the Union of Municipal Workers, women's department were constituted rather late (the latest was the constitution of the women's department in the Union of Postal and Telegraph Workers in 1999). In the course of time, just like in the trade unions with a high female share in membership, women unionists in the public sector realised that women's departments are a necessity. It should be noted that the women's departments of the public sector unions often have been anxious to avoid any impression that they might be doing separatist politics for women (Leitgeb 1993: 77-78, 83).

The foundation of the ÖGB women's department guaranteed the articulation and organisation of women's interests, but within the centralist structure of the ÖGB that meant being controlled by higher hierarchical levels (cf. Appelt 1993: 250). And in general, these higher hierarchical level were occupied by men - as the federal board, which was for a long time (almost) exclusively male and later on predominantly male (cf. below).

#### *Women's representation in trade unions*

On all levels of trade union hierarchy, from the works councils to the federal board of the ÖGB, women's participation has been below their share in membership (cf. Schopf 1985: 45-47, 56-77; Pircher 2003: 106-116).

On the one hand, the low female share in union positions is a result of male resistance against female participation and of a masculine organisational culture. The main mechanism that leads to the strong male dominance in union bodies is the modus of getting there. The members of the higher ÖGB-bodies are elected indirectly, in general the lower level bodies elect their representatives to the next higher level (not infrequently without any competition in the actual elections). This principle of delegation fosters the exclusion of women, because male-dominated bodies usually delegate men (Neyer 1995: 616-617).<sup>4</sup> In consequence, the higher a union body the lower is the share of women.

On the other hand, female union activity is hindered by the double burden of paid labour and work at home. The double burden makes it difficult for a woman to take on the additional tasks of a works councillor or a trade union representative. E.g. it is difficult for women to attend courses and meetings which often take place in the evenings and weekends.

For decades the women's department has striven to increase women's representation on all levels of union hierarchy. An important struggle was to gain access to the highest trade union bodies (as the executive council and the federal board) which were almost exclusively male (see below). From 1955 on, delegates of the women's department (two from 1955 on,

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<sup>4</sup> On the difficulties to achieve fair representation by indirect elections cf. McBride (2001: 39, 54).

three from 1959 on) had been members of the federal board, but without voting rights (table 1). Finally, in 1979 the women's department achieved a change in statutes and from then on one of the ÖGB vice-presidents had to be a representative of the women's department (at the same time the number of vice-presidents was increased from three to six).<sup>5</sup> And in 1983 the three delegates of the women's department on the federal board got the right to vote. Similar changes took place on the level of federal states and in the trade unions: From 1995 on, one of the vice-presidents on the federal state level had to be a representative of the women's department. Also, several trade unions introduced that principle into their statutes.

So far, the president of the ÖGB has always been male. The heads of the federal states have always been male, too. But recently (2002) a woman has become head of a federal state. Among the heads of the ÖGB's affiliates there has been a female once: Eleonore Hostasch was the head of the GPA (Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees) from 1989 to 1994. Generally, until the 1980s women participated in the central bodies of the ÖGB only when they were granted this right by the statutes. Also within the ÖGB-affiliates and on the regional level women's participation in relevant decision-making bodies hardly moved beyond statutory rights (Scagnetti 1987: 49-51). On the federal board (the highest ÖGB-body) there was only one woman<sup>6</sup> among the members entitled to vote from 1948 till 1963 and no woman with voting right between 1963 and 1979. From 1979 till 1989 the representation of women on the federal board was restricted to representational rights guaranteed in the statutes, which were: one vice-president and three delegates of the women's department. The same applied to the executive council of the ÖGB (consisting of the president, the vice-presidents and the executive secretaries), which is part of the federal board. Thus, in the 1980s only four of the nearly 60 members<sup>7</sup> of the federal board were women: one of the vice-presidents and the three delegates of the women's department.

As late as in 1989 the number of women in the executive council and soon<sup>8</sup> also on the federal board exceeded statutory rights: this was when a woman became president of the GPA and thus (according to ÖGB-tradition) vice-president of the ÖGB. Further, in 1994 a woman became the representative of the pensioners' department on the federal board. Finally, in 1995, three unions elected a woman as one of their representatives on the federal board. Meanwhile<sup>9</sup> 11 of the 58 members on the federal board are women, this by far exceeds the

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<sup>5</sup> Before, from 1975 till 1979 a representative of the women's federal committee had the right to attend the meetings of the executive council.

<sup>6</sup> She was one of the two delegates of the Textile, Clothing and Leather Workers' Union (a union with a predominantly female membership). In 1963 that union's number of delegates on the federal board was reduced from two to one, from then on that one and only delegate was always a man (Schopf 1985: 66).

<sup>7</sup> The figures refer to members with voting rights.

<sup>8</sup> The female vice-president had before been one of the three delegates of the women's department, that seat remained vacant till 1991, therefore in sum the number of women on the federal board did not exceed statutory rights till 1991.

<sup>9</sup> spring 2003

statutory guaranteed female representation though there is still a long way to fair representation of women on the federal board (table 2). In 1999 for the first time a woman was included in the central control commission, a previously all-male body (consisting of 7 members in 1999). In the year 2000 it was quite a sensation when for the first time a woman became central secretary.<sup>10</sup>

The women's department set various activities to increase women's representation in the trade unions (cf. e.g. Curtin 1999: 75-77). In the 1990s the women's department worked out a step-by-step plan for achieving equal opportunities within the ÖGB. In 1995 the ÖGB congress decided that women should be represented on ÖGB bodies according to their share in membership. Since then, women's participation in trade unions has started to improve gradually; the GPA even implemented a positive action plan (women's quota regulation on all GPA bodies) in 1997.<sup>11</sup> In 1999 a company agreement on equal opportunities was concluded for the ÖGB. It applies to ÖGB-employees and requires the introduction of positive action measures in the fields of training, HRD and work/life balance as well as efforts to reach a representation of women proportional to their membership in virtually all relevant areas of the organisation. Its goal to reach a percentage of female union officials within the ÖGB and its member unions that is proportional to the average number of female employees in the workplace nationwide is seen to be of particular importance (Pircher 2003: 99). Since the 1980s there has been a remarkable improvement in the share of women among union officials (table 3). While in the central office of the ÖGB proportional representation of women among union officials has been reached, the situation in the ÖGB's member unions and in the federal states still lags behind.

On the level of works councillors the share of women remained more or less constant in the majority of unions during the 1980s and first half of the 1990s (table 4). In a few unions a notable increase could be observed and in one union a decline. In the first half of the 1990s the share of women among works councillors remained more or less constant in more than a third of the unions with available data, in a third it increased and in the rest it declined, the latter group comprises unions with a decline in the share of women among members caused by industrial restructuring. In the late 1990s and early 2000s again the largest group consists of unions in which the female share among works councillors stayed more or less on the same level. In two unions there was a decline (partly connected with a decrease of the female share in membership) and in two unions there were remarkable improvements: in the Union of Union of Food, Agriculture and Tobacco Workers and the GPA. Because of the GPA's size and the GPA's high ratio of works councillors to members, the GPA's increase resulted in a remarkable increase of the overall female share in works councillors. In 2002, in several unions the share of female works councillors equates or nearly equates the share of female

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<sup>10</sup> There are two central secretaries, they are the heads of the trade union officials.

<sup>11</sup> In 2000 the GPA amended its women's quota regulation.

members (table 4). The share of women among works council chairs has risen too, though it is still lower than the share of women among works councillors (Pircher 2003: 115).

Till the mid-1980s the share of women among the delegates to the ÖGB congresses<sup>12</sup> remained below 10 per cent, in contrast to a share of 26-30 per cent among the membership (Frauenbericht 1995: 639). After the 1983-congress, this gap got smaller (table 5). In 1999 19 per cent of the delegates were women compared to a female share of 32 per cent in membership.

To sum it up: Till the 1980s women's participation hardly moved beyond statutory rights in the central bodies of the ÖGB and was rather low on the other levels of trade union hierarchy. During the last years there have been improvements, women's share rose on most levels of union hierarchy. Some of these improvements in the representation of women are remarkable, some are only modest in quantitative terms. In sum these developments give hope for the future: overall, the participation of women in trade unions is rising. On lower levels proportional representation has already been achieved in some units, within some years this will probably lead to further increases in female representation in higher positions.

### **Trade Union Policy and Women's Interests**

Frequently, the ÖGB was criticised to treat women's interests as specific needs of a minority and to ignore in its policy the resolutions of the women's department. Resolutions of the women's department were only partly taken over and even then not pursued (cf. Artner 1990: 58-59; Ranftl 1996: 40). For decades, in its central policy fields, wage policy and working time policy, the ÖGB paid only little attention to women's interests (Artner 1990: 44-45, 78-83, 123-125). The last section has shown that the various efforts to increase women's participation in the union, have some success at last. Does this have an effect on trade union policy in the way that trade union policy addresses and pursues women's interests more than it used to?

The answer is a faint 'yes'. During the last years several indicators could be observed that point towards that direction. First, in press releases, public announcements and union publications women's concerns occur more often than in the past. E.g., in its recent protest against the pension reform in 2003, the ÖGB stressed that on average women will lose more than men. Also the incorporation of women's interests in actual union policies seems to get stronger: one example was the (at least partly) successful effort to include marginal part-timers (mainly women) into social insurance in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> During the last years Equal Pay and Gender Mainstreaming have become prominent issues. In 2000 the women's department

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<sup>12</sup> Delegates of the ÖGB-affiliates with voting rights.

<sup>13</sup> The law came into effect in 1998.

launched a ‘campaign’ for equal pay for comparable work in collective agreements,<sup>14</sup> and in 2001 the ÖGB's executive committee decided to implement gender mainstreaming. The following paragraphs will give an overview of Equal Pay and Gender Mainstreaming in the ÖGB.

From its start, the ÖGB women's department criticised the gender wage gap and demanded ‘equal pay for comparable work’ (cf. Ranftl 1996: 32, 37-38; Rypar 1995: 47-48, 59-61, 83-84). But progress on the issue of wage discrimination was very, very slow. On other issues (as maternal leave) the ÖGB women's department was more successful in influencing union policy in the interests of women (Rypar 1995: 89). It took decades till the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ (not ‘comparable work’!) was realised in all collective agreements (Rypar 1995: 61, et passim). More difficult and still ongoing is the women's department's struggle to make ‘equal pay for comparable work’ an issue of the ÖGB's policy. Some achievements could be made: In more and more collective bargaining rounds there are fixed-sum minimum wage increases which lead to higher percentage rises in low incomes. As women are over represented among low income categories this measure aims at decreasing the gender wage gap.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in 1991 the ÖGB congress passed a resolution on ‘equal pay for comparable work’. In 2000 the women's department proclaimed the campaign ‘Equal Pay Now!’. The proclamation was followed by various activities (research project, conferences, publication of a guide for participants of collective bargaining rounds). So far, there have not been concrete changes towards equal pay for comparable work in collective agreements. But two of the largest unions, the GPA and the GMT (Metal and Textile Workers' Union), seem to take serious steps to introduce ‘equal pay for comparable work’ into their collective agreements. Overall the issue of ‘equal pay for comparable work’ has been much more on the agenda during the last years. This gives hope that there will be some changes towards Equal Pay, but the process will be a slow one.

In 2001 the executive committee of the ÖGB decided that in the course of the ÖGB's organisational reform Gender Mainstreaming has to be implemented. A working group has been constituted, its task is to develop instruments and measures for implementing Gender Mainstreaming. Results are not likely before 2004. The process of implementation gets on slower than planned mainly for two reasons: First, there is some resistance against Gender Mainstreaming on the side of men. Second, during the last years the ÖGB has been under repeated pressure to react to plans and measures of the conservative-populist coalition, this reduces the time available for the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming. In 2000, in line with the ÖGB decision, Gender Mainstreaming was included in the merger agreement of five unions which plan to merge in a few years. One of them, the GPA, had included ‘women

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<sup>14</sup> The ÖGB's Equal Pay campaign was connected with the ETUC's campaign on Equal Pay which also started in 2000.

<sup>15</sup> In theory this measure should lead to a decrease of the gender wage gap, but in practice, on an aggregate level, the gender wage gap did not get smaller.



mainstreaming' (equivalent to Gender Mainstreaming) in its statutes in 2000. The GPA already developed guidelines and measures for Gender Mainstreaming and recently (end of 2002) has started the actual process of implementation.

## **Conclusion**

After World War II the ÖGB was established as a traditional, male-dominated institution. In the central bodies of the ÖGB women's participation hardly moved beyond statutory rights till the 1980s. Also on lower levels of trade union hierarchy women's participation usually was below their share in membership. Starting in the late 1980s there have been some improvements in women's representation in high-level union bodies. Though these improvements are still small in quantitative terms, they give hope for the future. On lower hierarchical levels women's participation has also increased, now in some units it even equals their share in membership. The various efforts to increase women's participation in the unions, have had some success at last. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to fair representation on all levels of union hierarchy.

The male-dominated ÖGB has a history of neglecting women's interests in its policies. But the rising participation of women in trade union positions and bodies has had the effect that the incorporation of women's interests in union policies has become stronger. Both with female participation and the incorporation of women's interests, advancements have been slow and uneven, e.g. in the highest positions women's participation has hardly increased and with 'equal pay for comparable work' progress has been rather small.

Striking are the differences between the ÖGB-affiliates: One extreme is the GPA which has women's quotas on all union bodies, which has started the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming and seems to take serious steps to introduce 'equal pay for comparable work' into its collective agreements. The other extreme are several unions which have not been active on any of these topics.

Overall one can observe slow gradual change. Step by step Austrian trade union structures and policies are getting more inclusive of women and their interests. In a situation of a growing female share in the workforce the continuation of this process will be a necessity for the trade unions to retain their position as representatives of the workforce and its interests.

## **Abbreviations**

GMT *Gewerkschaft Metall-Textil* (Metal and Textile Workers' Union)

GPA *Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten* (Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees)

ÖGB *Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund* (Austrian Trade Union Confederation)

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Table 1: Milestones towards gender democracy in the ÖGB

*1940s*

1945 from the beginning on the ÖGB comprises a women's department

*1950s*

1955 delegates of the women's department as non-voting members at the union congress and in the highest union bodies

1957 women's departments in each federal state

1959 (provisional) women's departments in more than half of the ÖGB-affiliates

*1970s*

1979 change in statutes: one of the ÖGB vice-presidents has to be a representative of the women's department

*1980s*

1983 the delegates of the women's department on the federal board get the right to vote

*1990s*

1995 change in statutes: engagement for equal opportunities becomes one of the ÖGB's tasks, proportional female representation in various union bodies is set up as a goal

1997 the largest ÖGB-affiliate GPA decides to implement women's quota regulations on all its bodies

1999 each ÖGB-affiliate has a women's department

1999 company agreement on equal opportunities (applies to ÖGB-employees)

*2000s*

2001 executive council decides to implement Gender Mainstreaming

Table 2: ÖGB federal board, members with voting rights

year	total number of members	female members	statutory guaranteed number of women	number of women above the statutory minimum	share of women (in %)
1945-47	23	0	0	no statutory minimum	0.0
1948-62	35-44 (varies)	1	0	no statutory minimum	2.3-2.9
1963-1978	44-48 (varies)	0	0	no statutory minimum	0.0
1979	54	1	1	0	1.9
1980	54	1	1	0	1.9
1981	54	1	1	0	1.9
1982	54	1	1	0	1.9
1983	59	4	4	0	6.8
1984	59	4	4	0	6.8
1985	57	4	4	0	7.0
1986	57	4	4	0	7.0
1987	58	4	4	0	6.9
1988	58	4	4	0	6.9
1989	57	4	4	0	7.0
1990	57	4	4	0	7.0
1991	56	5	4	1	8.9
1992	56	5	4	1	8.9
1993	56	5	4	1	8.9
1994	57	6	4	2	10.5
1995	56	8	4	4	14.3
1996	56	7	4	3	12.5
1997	56	7	4	3	12.5
1998	56	7	4	3	12.5
1999	59	9	4	5	15.3
2000	59	10	4	6	16.9
2001	58	10	4	6	17.2
2002	58	10	4	6	17.2
2003	58	11	4	7	19.0

Sources: ÖGB reports (misc. years), own calculations, ÖGB statutes (misc. years).

Table 3: Share of women among trade union officials/middle level management (in %)

	1985	2001
trade union officials, total ÖGB	8	28
middle management - ÖGB central office	9	33
middle management - ÖGB affiliates	7	21
middle management - federal states	5	21

Source: Pircher 2003: 113

Table 4: Share of women among works councillors in Austrian trade unions

	share of women among members (in %)	share of women among works councillors (in %)				share of women among members (in %)
		1980	1991	1997	2002	
Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees	43	24	30	32	42	43
Union of Public Employees	39	n.r.	39	43	n.a.	48
Union of Municipal Workers	43	27 <sup>2)</sup>	28	28	n.a.	49
Union for Arts, Media, Sports and Freelancers	31	16	20	26	25	31
Construction and Wood Workers' Union	4	3	3	3	4	4
Chemical Workers' Union	23	19	18	15	10	15
Railway Workers' Union	6	n.a.	n.a.	2	4	6
Printing and Paper Workers' Union	26	17	19	15	12	17
Commerce, Transport and Traffic Workers' Union	35	23	28	26	26	37
Hotel, Restaurant and Personal Services Workers' Union	72	54 <sup>2)</sup>	52	56	58	73
Union of Postal and Telegraph Workers	21	7	n.r.	14	13	24
Union of Food, Agriculture and Tobacco Workers	33	17	17	12	21	23
Metal, Mining and Energy Workers' Union <sup>1)</sup> /Metal and Textile Workers' Union	19	8 <sup>2)</sup>	11	10	16 <sup>3)</sup>	19
Textile, Clothing and Leather Workers' Union <sup>1)</sup>	72	67	70	66	-	-
All Unions	30.0		23.4	23.8		32.4
Unions with available data on works councillors	32.1	24.1 <sup>4)</sup>			32.5 <sup>5)</sup>	25.9

Notes:

n.a. = not available, n.r. = not reliable (not included in table)

<sup>1)</sup> In 2000 the Textile, Clothing and Leather Workers' Union and the Metal, Mining and Energy Workers' Union merged to form the Metal and Textile Workers' Union

<sup>2)</sup> 1981

<sup>3)</sup> because of merger not comparable with previous years

<sup>4)</sup> The data for the Union of Public Employees appeared not reliable and were not included in the table. It was not possible to exclude the composite of this affiliate from the overall figure. The corresponding figure on the female share in membership comprises all unions except the Railway Workers' Union.

<sup>5)</sup> The ratio of works councillors to members councillors differs between unions. The GPA, the Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees with an above-average share of female works councillors has a high ratio compared to the other unions and is the largest ÖGB affiliate, therefore the value of the GPA strongly influences the ÖGB average. In consequence, in 2002 the overall share of women among works councillors exceeds the share of women among members, though in several union the share of women among works councillors is below the female share in members and in no union it is above.

Sources: Appelt 1993: 253, 264; ÖGB Frauenabteilung 1981: 29, 35, 37, 40, 47; ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1982: 26; ÖGB Frauenabteilung 1986: 19; Neubauer 2002: 5-6; ÖGB Frauenabteilung 1992: 55, 61; ÖGB Frauenabteilung 1998: 58; ÖGB member statistics (misc. years); own calculations.

Table 5: Women's share among the delegates to the ÖGB Federal Congresses 1948 - 1999, (delegates of the ÖGB affiliates with voting rights)

year	women's share among delegates (in %)	women's share among union members (in %)
1948	7.3	26.7
1951	7.6	26.0
1955	8.6	26.5
1959	6.9	27.8
1963	7.1	28.3
1967	5.5	27.7
1971	6.3	27.7
1975	7.4	28.4
1979	8.5	29.8
1983	9.7	30.5
1987	10.4	30.9
1991	14.9	31.3
1995	15.9	31.7
1999	19.0	32.1

Sources: Frauenbericht 1995: 639; ÖGB 1995; ÖGB congress office; own calculations.