

Women & the OGBL



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A long March
The OGBL, its predecessors and women



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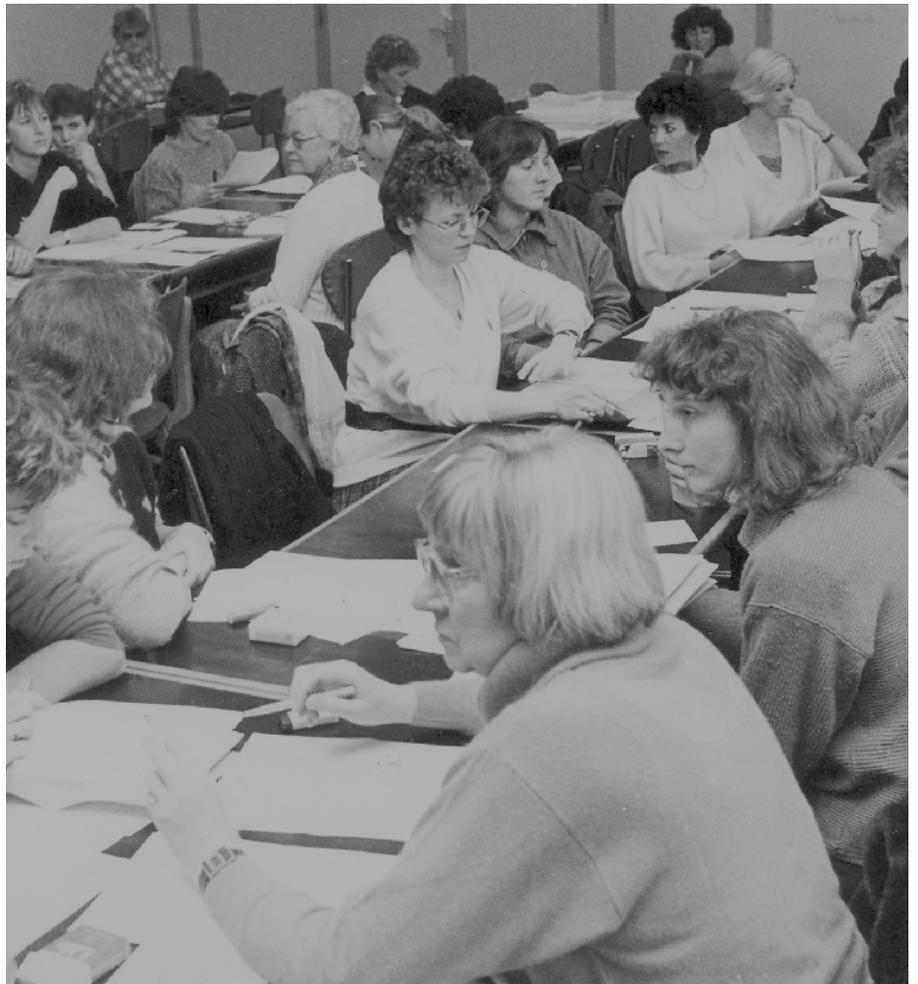
Women's Strike Movements
Trade union and „political“ strikes of women
from the beginning of the last century
until today



summary

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The memorandum
of the women's
A document to put equality to the test



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Voices of Women -
Ways for women
Women in the OGBL - today

summary

Women's place is in the union!

Women need the union and the union needs women. This dual social and societal necessity explains the importance and relevance of this booklet.

While the union has long been a predominantly male domain, the place of women has always been a subject of debate and a reality that has continued to evolve and take hold. For the history of emancipation cannot be dissociated from the history of social struggles.

This brochure highlights the historical evolution of the place of women in the history of free trade unions in Luxembourg and in the OGBL, which is the first representative

trade union to vote a woman to the highest level of responsibility, i.e. to the national presidency.

At the same time, OGBL Equality also wanted to elucidate the various women's strikes across countries and decades, since the long march towards equality necessarily takes place in an international political and social context.

If we turn our gaze to the past, it is obviously to put the present in perspective and to envisage the future. This is why the place of women today and the re-emergence of the OGBL Equality department is also the subject of current reflection in this publication.



MICHELLE CLOOS

MEMBER OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD
HEAD OF OGBL EQUALITY

Along march

The OGBL, its predecessors and women

The first trade unions in Luxembourg - the most distant ancestors of the OGBL - were created in the 1860s. They were mostly specialized workers: typographers in the printing sector, glove makers, tobacco workers... Although they did not formally prohibit the membership of women, these first trade union and mutual aid associations were at first purely male associations.

Nonetheless, in the middle of the 19th century, women were working... whether in agriculture, commerce, catering or even in industry, particularly in the textile industry. The bourgeois ideal of the "housewife", who is only concerned with the management of the home and the education of the children, is often very far from the reality of the working classes. Nevertheless, this ideal is becoming more and more important. The matrimonial regime, put in place with the Civil Code in 1803, provided in practice that the married woman was under the guardianship of her husband. Thus, for example, she was not allowed to open a bank account in her name or to withdraw money without her husband's consent (this legal provision was not changed until... 1972!).

Women are perceived as beings to be protected from the vagaries and rigors of the working world. This was also reflected in the emerging labor law. Thus, one of the very first laws regulating working conditions in companies was the law of December 6, 1876 concerning child and fe-

Women are perceived as beings to be protected from the vagaries and rigors of the working world.

male labor. In addition to prohibiting the employment of children under the age of 12 in general, this law prohibited the employment of women in mines, quarries and mines. This restriction of jobs open to women was not lifted until... 1969.

In 1907, Luxembourg ratified the Berne Convention signed the previous year, which prohibited night work for women in industry. This ban was extended to all commercial enterprises by the law of 5 March 1928. The prohibition for the industrial sector is confirmed by the convention no. 89 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), which was transposed by Luxembourg in 1958. It should be noted that the corresponding laws have never been repealed, even though they are no longer really applicable and have not been included in the Labor Code (introduced in 2006).

Special restrictions on women's work in cafés and hotels were introduced in 1915. In towns with more than 1,500 inhabit-

ants, such work is subject to authorization by the municipality and special examinations, in particular to see whether the woman concerned has contracted sexually transmitted diseases. The fact that a woman worked in a café or a hotel, if she was not a member of the owner's family, was thus practically considered as prostitution!

Positive reforms were introduced in 1928 with the transposition of ILO Convention No. 3 of 1919 on maternity protection. The law of March 5, 1928 provided for the first time for a paid maternity leave of 12 weeks (6 weeks before and 6 weeks after the birth of the child) and for a nursing break of twice 30 minutes per day.

The attitude of the unions at that time

Although they did not directly call for its prohibition, before the First World War the unions were often rather reticent about women's work. For example, the typographers' association saw it as a "danger" in the 1870s. This danger was mainly due to the fact that women were usually paid much less than men for the same work. Women's work could then be perceived by some trade unionists as "wage dumping". In addition, even progressive trade union circles were not unfamiliar with the idea that women must be protected from the proletarian condition, and trade unionists often share the ideal of the housewife, married and protected by her working-class (and unionized) husband.



The long road to equal pay

The fact that lower pay for the same work was provided for women was so universally accepted that it was still present during the implementation of a major social conquest - the introduction of the legal social minimum wage by ministerial decree on 30 December 1944, following an agreement reached by the OGBL's predecessor, the LAV. This decree, which for the first time set a minimum threshold for the remuneration of work, provided that the minimum wage was "80-90%" of the male rate (skilled or unskilled) for women.

It should be noted, however, that initially the unions had started with the principle of equal pay and it was only under pressure from employers' representatives that this lower rate was retained by the government. It was not until 1963 that a single minimum wage for men and women was introduced.

→ Lily Becker's speech at the union demonstration on August 13, 1919 in front of the Chamber of Deputies

Lily Krier-Becker

Born in 1898, Lily Becker worked as a shop assistant in 1919, when she joined the Socialist Party and became involved in the trade unions. She made a name for herself when she spoke in front of an audience of 10,000 workers on August 12, 1919, during a demonstration in front of the Chamber of Deputies against the rising cost of living. Her attempts to organize a trade union for female employees were unsuccessful, but she was a regular contributor to the *Proletarier*, the newspaper of the free trade unions, from 1920. She then became permanent union secretary, alongside former railway worker Pierre Krier, whom she married in 1923. From 1924 to 1937, she held the position of secretary of the newly created Chamber of Labor, a position she was forced to abandon in 1937 when her husband became Minister of Labor. She continued to contribute regularly to the trade union press until the 1960s and wrote, among other things, a biography of Pierre Krier and the fiftieth anniversary book of the *Foyer de la Femme*. She died on September 29, 1981.



The principle of equal pay was first introduced into legislation in 1974. This was again the transposition of an ILO convention, this time No. 100 adopted in 1967. This principle was reinforced by the Collective Agreements Act of 2004, which stipulates that every CBA must provide for the implementation of the principle of equal pay for men and women. Following the enshrinement of gender equality in the Constitution in 2006, a 2016 law further strengthened the principle of equal pay, providing for fines for employers for non-compliance. Despite these positive developments, today there is still a gender pay gap of 4.6% (2018 figures). It is true, however, that this range has become progressively smaller, which is also the result of trade union commitment to equal pay and to increasing the number of collective labor agreements, which at best ensure the principle of equal pay for equal work. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) estimated in 2020 that equal pay would be achieved in Luxembourg by 2027.

Women in the free trade unions

A new trade union dynamic was established in the middle of the First World War, in 1916, when the first mass trade unions in industry were created, the Confederation of Iron and Steel Workers (Berg- und Hüttenarbeiterverband, BHAV) and the Confederation of Metalworkers (Luxemburger Metallarbeiterverband, LMAV). These two unions merged in 1920 to form the Luxemburger Berg- und Metallindustriearbeiterverband (LBMIAV), which was renamed LAV (Letzeburger Arbechterverband) after the Second World War.

Together with the Fédération Nationale des Cheminots, this powerful industrial confederation formed the core of the free (i.e. non-confessional) trade unions, which later joined the Confédération générale du travail luxembourgeoise (CGT), and which today are all members of the OGBL (Confédération syndicale indépendante du Luxembourg, founded in 1979).

The low representation of women in the trade unions is also reflected at the level of the professional chambers.

Like the first trade unions in the 19th century, the free trade unions remained for a long time a largely male territory, with one notable exception at the beginning: Lily Krier-Becker (see Box 1). In particular, the LBMIAV, and later the LAV, were strictly workers' organizations, and as such primarily organized men - indeed, very few women worked in the iron and steel industry at that time outside the administration, and this was also felt at the organizational level. Even if one looks at the reports of the central committee (Hauptvorstand) of the LAV in the 1970s, one sees that the composition was exclusively male, with the exception of the administrative secretary, who was responsible for writing the minutes.

... and in the Professional Chambers

The low representation of women in the trade unions is also reflected at the level of the professional chambers. In fact, at this level there was even a deterioration: while initially women were elected to the Chamber of Private Employees (CEP-L) - the saleswoman Marguerite Koenig for the session of 1925-29, then Anne Rasquin in 1933, who however resigned on December 6 of the same year - no woman sat in it until 1964. In the Chamber of Labor (AK), no woman sat until 1981, when Anny Kintzelé of the OGBL began her mandate. As for the Chamber of Civil Servants and Public Employees, it was not until 1990 that a woman was elected.

Today, out of the 60 effective members of the Chamber of Employees (Chambre des salariés, CSL), 21 are women. The proportion is even higher if we look at the 35 elected members of the OGBL, 15 of whom are women.

→ The Chamber of Private Employees 1925-1929;
Marguerite Koenig is in the 1st row



The Foyer de la Femme

For a long time, the free trade unions did not have any specific structures for women. If the trade union newspaper *Der Proletarier* published an appeal to women, it was to convince their reluctant husbands to join the union. However, from 1926 onwards, local women's committees were set up, mainly under the leadership of Lily Krier-Becker. In 1927, the Foyer de la Femme of Esch/Alzette was created, which was described as "the first progressive women's organization in Luxembourg". Other sections soon joined and in 1930, the Foyer de la Femme was officially created on a national level. Henriette Clement-Bessling, a teacher and wife of the director of the *Tageblatt* Hubert Clément, became president.

The Foyer de la Femme was a sort of women's section of the free trade unions and the Workers' Party. Indeed, since 1924 and the takeover of the former Socialist Party by the trade unionists, the Workers' Party can

practically be seen as the parliamentary arm of the free unions. Party, trade unions, and the Foyer de la Femme were all part of the same milieu, of a real working-class counter-culture, which also included the daily newspaper *Escher Tageblatt*, the cooperative printing house, the trade union houses, consumer cooperatives, local and travelling libraries, the Gemuso culture and leisure association, and later the ATOL tourist association...

Within this framework, the Foyer de la Femme offers women, often housewives, wives of trade unionists, leisure activities, convivial meetings between women, courses of hygiene and for young mothers, vacation camps for the children of the working families... At the same time, this is always combined with a political component, it is an effective means to relay the trade union claims and proposals.

It is moreover within the framework of the Foyer de la Femme that the first demon-

Astrid Lulling

Originally from Schifflange, where she was born on June 11, 1929, the young Astrid Lulling joined the LAV as secretary - the first with a high school diploma - in 1949, to assist Antoine Krier, general secretary and later president of the union. A protégé of Lily Krier-Becker, she also handled international relations and contributed regularly to the union press. However, she left the LAV in 1963 because her request for a salary increase was refused, and she subsequently worked for the European Federation of Agricultural and Food Workers. At the same time, from 1963 to 1968, she represented private employees in the executive committee of the FNCT-TFEL. From 1962 to 1980, she was president of the Foyer de la Femme. In 1965, she became a deputy for the LSAP, replacing Antoine Krier, who had become Minister of Labor. She was only the second woman to sit in the House, after Marguerite Thomas-Clement (1919-1931). In 1971, she participated in the split of the LSAP to create the social democratic party SDB, of which she became one of the main leaders. Evolving more and more to the right, she broke all links with her political and trade union origins and ended up joining the Christian Social Party in 1984.



Danièle Nieves

Danièle Nieves was hired at the age of 23. She had previously worked as a helper, then as a bank employee, and had been part of the OGB since 1984, where she was a member of the executive committee and responsible for the 'Fraegrupp' (the OGB's mixed women's and men's working group for equal opportunities). Initially she worked exclusively in the Women's Department and was responsible for its reorganization in 1987. It is highlighted in the publications of the time that she is the first female trade union secretary hired by the OGBL. She remained the central secretary responsible for the department until 2014. In addition to her work for the Women's department, she was also responsible for the Youth Department from October 1987 until 1990. In 1989 she joined the OGBL's tariff department and took charge of the Printing and Media syndicate, and in 1990 the Trade syndicate. Then, from 1999, she was assigned to the Education and Science union (SEW/OGBL) to take care of the socio-educational aspect. She has been the General Secretary of SEW since 2002. In the meantime, she was also elected to the Chamber of Private Employees in the 1993 elections. She joined the Chamber's committee in January 1994 and was vice-president from 2003 to 2008. She continued to serve on the CEP-L and then on the Chamber of Employees CSL until 2013. From 2003 to 2014, she was a member of the OGBL Executive Bureau. She is only the 2nd woman to sit on the Executive Bureau. Within the Executive Bureau, she is responsible for education, women and youth. Since the end of her mandate on the Executive Bureau, she has assumed the position of Director of the General Organization of OGBL.



strations on the occasion of the International Women's Day took place. The first "JIF" took place at the Maison du Peuple in Esch on 8 March 1929. During the following years, renowned international speakers, as well as trade union leaders such as Pierre Krier, took part.

From 1946 onwards, the unity between the Workers' Party and the free trade unions began to crumble little by little. As the historian Ben Fayot has shown, the change of name of the Workers' Party to LSAP also testifies to the desire of the leaders of this party to be more independent of the unions. Thus began a slow evolution of mutual emancipation. After the failure of the Action commune in 1965, and then the integration of the communist-oriented union FLA the following year, there were no longer any structural links between LAV and LSAP. Trade union independence from any political party was openly declared at the creation of the OGBL, the Independent Trade Union Confederation of Luxembourg, in 1979, and remains a central basic principle for the OGBL today.

In view of these developments, the Foyer de la Femme was defined in 1946 as a socialist women's organization, although it opened up again to non-party women in 1962. In any case, at this moment the links with the free unions disintegrated, even if collaborations persisted at the local level (until today). In particular, the political evolution of its president Astrid Lulling contributed to distancing the Foyer de la Femme from both the Socialist Party and the free unions.

Towards the creation of the OGBL Women's Department

In the course of the 1970s, the question of the creation of a women's department in the trade union became more and more important. It became even more important with the creation of the OGBL in 1978/79. The new confederation brought together not only all workers, regardless of their status, and therefore no longer just workers, but also began to organize a whole series

of new sectors, which are largely more feminized than the traditional areas of intervention of the LAV (heavy industry, construction, state and municipal workers, etc.). The syndicates Trade (1978), Health and Social Affairs (1979), Banks and Insurance (1979), Education and Science (1979), Services (1981), Private Cleaning Services (1992), etc. are gradually set up.

Nevertheless, while the first version of the OGBL statutes from the end of 1978 provided for this, it was not until a few years later that the OGBL Women's department was officially constituted. In the meantime, a working group to organize and supervise women was set up at the level of the CGT.

It was not until October 8, 1981, when the constitutive meeting of the OGBL Women's Department took place at the Maison du Peuple in Esch. A provisional committee had already been functioning since April 1981.

A committee of 29 women was elected, chaired by Danny Hoenen, with vice-presidents Thers Bodé and Gilberte Kennerknecht and secretary Gaby Biermann.

Already in 1983, the OGBL-Women's Department is among the organizations that organize a common demonstration on the occasion of the International Women's Day. Thus, a street demonstration followed by a meeting at the Cercle municipal took place on March 5, 1983. The demonstration combined the struggle for women's rights with the struggle against the government's austerity policy (it is to be reminded that in April 1982 there had been a general strike against the manipulation of the index).

The following year, the OGBL-Women's Department invited Helga Kohler of the Swiss Federation of Metal and Watch Workers (FTMH) to speak during a women's week, from March 8 to 14, 1984. The Swiss trade unionist put forward the demand for a 35-hour week, also with a view to a better reconciliation between work and family life.

→ Constitutive meeting of the
OGBL Women's Department, 1981



→ Demonstration for the International Women's
Day, Luxembourg, 9 March 1985



Nora Back

Born in 1979, the year the OGBL was founded, Nora Back studied occupational psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. After a period as an employee in the private sector, she was hired as deputy central secretary of the Health and Socio-Educational Services union in November 2004. Working alongside André Roeltgen, Pit Schreiner, and Danièle Nieles for the SAS sector, this union grew rapidly during this period, to become the largest professional union of the OGBL in terms of membership in the 2010s. After André Roeltgen was elected General Secretary of the confederation in 2009, Nora Back became Central Secretary of the Health union. In 2011, she also took charge of the Public Service Department and was elected to the Executive Bureau in December 2014. During her term as Central Secretary of the Health union, the most important mobilizations in the history of the sector took place, including the large demonstration of June 4, 2016 with 9,000 participants, which allowed the following year to achieve a long-standing goal of the union: the revaluation of careers in the sector. In order to ensure the correct implementation of the agreements reached, Nora Back and her union lead three simultaneous strikes in care homes in June 2018 - also a historic first. They were successful across the board. Shortly afterwards, on July 3, 2018, the National Committee elected her as General Secretary of the OGBL. In the elections for the Chamber of Employees CSL, she is the candidate who gets the most votes and she logically accedes to the presidency of the Chamber in June 2019. Finally, at the OGBL Congress on 6 and 7 December 2019, she was elected OGBL President with 97.5% of the votes.



Dissolution and reorganization of the Women's Department

The relationship between the young department and the national leadership of the OGBL is not free of tensions. The department demanded a more important place for women within the trade union confederation, whose Executive Bureau was still, at that time, exclusively male.

On January 28, 1986, the representatives of OGBL-Women's Department submitted a motion to the National Committee asking for

- 1) the hiring of a permanent secretary for the Women's Department
- 2) that one of the two speeches at the central May Day demonstration in Bascharage be given by a woman.

If the second request was not successful (the speakers were the respective presidents of the Landesverband and the OGBL, Josy Konz and John Castegnaro), the National Committee agreed to hire a specific central secretary for the Women's department, a position that would be occupied from January 1, 1987 by Danièle Nieles.

In the meantime, the National Committee has elected for the first time a woman to one of the leading positions of the trade union confederation. Andrée Gerson, the representative of the Women's Department on the Executive Committee, was elected as OGBL Vice-President at the meeting of the OGBL governing body on 11 November 1986. She held this position until December 1995. Subsequently, Vera Spautz (1995-2004) and Marie-Jeanne Leblond-Reuter (2004-2019) will also serve as OGBL Vice Presidents.

However, shortly after these advances, the OGBL-Women's Department experienced its greatest crisis and the department was even temporarily dissolved. This crisis came to light at the National Committee meeting of June 30, 1987, when representatives of the department distributed a position paper to the members of the National Committee, in which the department criticized John Castegnaro's radio intervention in the run-up to May Day and in general raised the union's shortcomings in terms of commitment to the feminist cause. In reaction, the National Committee decided to dissolve the Women's Department in its present form, believing that the structure no longer fulfilled its original purpose. Lucien Lux was asked to draw up a new concept for reorganizing the department.

This project was presented and adopted at the National Committee meeting on November 10, 1987. In order to link the Women's Department more closely to the other structures of the OGBL, it is foreseen that the professional unions, the regions and the other departments appoint representatives to the department.

The reorganized department sets new standards at an OGBL Women's Conference on March 27, 1988 and adopts a resolution on the subject "Women and Social Issues".

In the following years, the department maintains a regular activity and participates every year in the events of the International Women's Day, where it plays a major role in the preparation and in the supervision.

The department regularly publishes brochures and organizes trainings and conferences on various topics. It tackles subjects

that have rarely been dealt with by the union before, such as pregnancy, sexual harassment in the workplace and divorce.

In January 1993, the department presents a first plan for the promotion of women within the OGBL at the OGBL syndicate day. It is the first plan of its kind adopted in Luxembourg. It aims at increasing the proportion of women in the different management bodies of the union structures, but also at better career opportunities for OGBL staff.

Nevertheless, despite this plan, the evolution remains relatively slow, even if the proportion of women at the level of the National Committee and in the different regional committees and professional union boards is slowly increasing.

It was not until 1999 that the first woman was elected to the OGBL Executive Bureau in the person of Marie-Thérèse Sannipoli, who had until then been in charge of the Executive Bureau secretariat. A second woman is elected in 2003 (Danièle Nieves), then the number of women increases to 3 (Danièle Nieves, Viviane Jeblick, Véronique Eischen) in 2009.

Towards new horizons

Today, while three out of seven members of the Executive Bureau are women (Nora Back, Véronique Eischen, Michelle Cloos),

women are still in a relatively small minority on the National Committee and the Executive Committee. Nevertheless, a new moment is reached at the December 2019 Congress, when Nora Back is elected president of the country's leading union, the first time a woman has held this position.

In general, the election of a first woman as head of the trade union confederation also reflects the growing weight of women in the OGBL. This is evident not only at the level of the membership, where the last few years have shown an increase in the proportion of women - within ten years this proportion has risen from one third to around 40% - but also at the level of OGBL staff, who are now predominantly female, even though the governing bodies at national level still have a male majority.

The Women's Department has also found a new lease of life in recent years, appearing since 2020 under the acronym "OGBL Equality - OGBL Women's Department". This commitment and renewal is also reflected in the mobilization for the International Women's Day, which has been given a new lease of life since 2011 (100th anniversary of the establishment of the International Women's Day), with the holding of a feminist festival at Neumünster Abbey from 2013 onwards and especially with the massive mobilization during the two "women's strikes" that took place on the occasion of the International Women's Day in 2020 and 2021.



FRÉDÉRIC KRIER
MEMBER OF THE
EXECUTIVE BOARD

-> The female staff of the OGBL, 2020



Women's Strike Movements

At the beginning of the last century, working class women led numerous strikes of varying magnitude. Then another series of women's strikes took place in the 60s and 70s, with another wave in the 90s. Most of them were related to work in sectors or companies where the majority of workers were women. Often women had difficult working conditions and low wages.

The first International Women's Day in 1911 was based on the strike of women garment workers in New York 2 years earlier and shows how the actions of some women often inspired others.

What we know today as the "Uprising of the 20,000" began on November 23, 1909, when more than twenty thousand Jewish immigrants (90%), mostly young women (70%) and teenagers, launched an eleven-week general strike in the New York garment industry. It was the largest women's strike in the United States to that date. The courage, tenacity and solidarity of the young strikers forced the predominantly male leaders of the "needle trades" and the American Federation of Labor to reconsider their prejudice against women's unionization. The uprising sparked five years of struggle that transformed the garment industry into one of the most organized trades. Workers shared grievances about wages, hours, workplace safety and abuses such as unwanted sexual advances, threats and invasions of privacy. The bosses hired gangs to abuse the strikers, the police arrested them on false charges. In court, the strikers faced hostile magistrates who fined them.

The blouse makers' union asked the Women's Trade Union League - WTUL, formed by bourgeois suffragists in 1904 to promote the welfare of working women, to monitor the pickets. The WTUL

proved to be a valuable ally; its members walked the picket lines, raised funds, and advocated for the strikers to the general public.

The "learners" and "operators" did much of the day-to-day work. They distributed leaflets, raised funds, distributed strike pay, organized meetings and kept the morale of the crowd up.

The strikers won a 52-hour work week, at least four paid holidays a year, no discrimination against loyal union members, free access to tools and equipment, equal distribution of work during off-peak periods, and wage negotiations with employees.

The general strike convinced the men in the union to accept the women as competent activists. The young women themselves discovered their own value. Many of them remembered the 20,000 uprising as the defining event of their adult lives.

It was this strike that inspired Clara Zetkin, among other women at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in 1911 in Copenhagen, to propose an annual "Women's Day" to promote equal rights and suffrage for women.

Six years after the first International Women's Day, it was the women garment workers of Petrograd who went on strike and sparked the February Revolution.

Unskilled, poorly paid, working twelve or thirteen hours a day in unhealthy conditions, the women demanded the solidarity of men. Women's experience as workers and heads of households forced them to stand in line for hours to feed their families, led them to demand bread and an end to the war. Hunger and poverty led to a rejection of the war and the politicians who waged it.

Bolshevik women had worked hard to organize unskilled women workers for years, despite the attitude of the men in their own party who saw organizing women as a distraction from the struggle against czarism and would play into the hands of upper class feminists who would draw women away from the class struggle. It was the women members, a minority within the party, who advocated a meeting of women workers to discuss the war and inflation and who called for an anti-war demonstration for International Women's Day.

In 1936, General Motors auto workers in Flint, north of Detroit, U.S.A., won a historic victory after occupying their plant for several weeks. On a Saturday morning in 1936, at a Woolworth's retail chain in Detroit, female employees followed the example of their colleagues in the auto industry and went on strike. It was a classic occupation strike, but for the first time, the strikers were all women working in a store, not men in a factory. They

won a whole list of demands: first, the company agreed to a five-cent-an-hour raise for all female employees, entitled to an hour and a half of overtime, after a 48-hour work week. Future workers would be hired through the union and their uniforms would be provided and washed free of charge by the company.

In 1968, in Dagenham, U.K., after a wage change that saw sewing machinists classified as "unskilled labor", 187 of these machinists - all women - decided to strike. The strike brought the factory to its knees - after all, you can't sell cars without seat covers, and nobody else knew how to make them. After four weeks on strike, the machinists voted to return to work following a 92% offer of a male "B" rate. The women were not reclassified to "C" until after another six-week strike in 1984. Inspired by the machinists at Ford, women trade unionists founded the "National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Equal Rights for Women". In May 1969, this group organized an equal pay demonstration in Trafalgar Square. This led directly to the Equal Pay Act of 1970. For the first time, employers were required to treat men and women

doing the same job the same in their pay and conditions.

Political" women's strikes

One of the most remarkable women's strikes took place in 1975 in Iceland. This day is so remarkable because 90% of the female population went on strike. It was called "Women's Day Off" and it was exactly that: women refused to work, cook and take care of children for one day. Banks, factories and some stores were forced to close, as were schools and day care centers,



→ *Hearts starve as much as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!*

"If I betray the cause I am here to defend, let my hand come off the arm I raise."

Clara Lemlich Shavelson, 1909

→ *General strike of women workers in New York, 1909*



leaving many fathers with no choice but to take their children to work. There were stories of men armed with candy and crayons entertaining overexcited children at their workplaces. Sausages - easy to cook and popular with children - were in such high demand that the stores sold out. Fathers called this day "Long Friday."

In 1991, on June 14, 500,000 women went on strike throughout Switzerland. Although equal pay had been enshrined in the constitution ten years earlier, wage inequalities still persisted. This is why the

women watchmakers brought the idea of a women's strike to the attention of union representatives. After some persuasion and despite resistance from some male unionists, the union convention voted for a real strike, not just a day of action. Despite attempts at intimidation, an unexpected number of women participated.

The Swiss strike law is similar to the one in Luxembourg, so it is very restricted. Strike bans were circumvented in many places by actions such as taking long breaks, hanging banners, wearing the strike button or demonstrative inaction. Women stopped work for a short time, gathered at work, in the streets, in parks, in public places, in front of factories, stores and businesses. The strikers demanded the real implementation of equal pay, equal training for women, the fight against sexual harassment, more childcare places and an equal distribution of household tasks between men and women.

Since the 2010s, we have seen a new wave of feminist strikes around the world.

The Ni Una Menos movement was born because of the very high number of murdered women in Latin American countries. Since June 2015, starting in Argentina, the movement has brought attention to the issue of femicide through mass protests. Feminist movements around the world have begun to raise awareness about femicide and have realized that we often lack statistics.

In October 2016, 30,000 women in Poland went on strike against the planned abortion ban. They all wore black, symbolizing the mourning of their reproductive rights. The women abstained from work and school and refused to do housework,



inspired by the 1975 women's strike in Iceland. The strike persuaded the government to withdraw a controversial anti-abortion bill. This year, Polish women are fighting a court decision that essentially made the abortion law even harsher.

In 2018, on International Women's Day, the women's movement in Spain rallied 5 million women to speak out against gender discrimination, domestic violence and the wage gap.

The campaign "Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito" was launched in 2005 in Argentina. Every two years, they have presented a bill to Congress for legal, safe and free abortions. In 2018, the campaign exploded and the "green wave" began. The bill was finally adopted on December 30, 2020.

In 2019, women in Switzerland essentially re-staged their 1991 strike. Across the country, women's strike committees planned a 24-hour action-packed strike



→ Illustration by graphic designer Agnes Weber
Swiss National Museum

→ Luxemburg, 2020



day. Their slogan was “wages, time, respect,” summarizing their demands for equal pay, more time for themselves and a life free of gender-based violence.

Inspired by the women’s strike movements growing around the world, in the fall of 2019, the JIF Luxembourg platform invited organizers from Switzerland to Luxembourg. The stories and photos of their strike convinced us that we could also start a women’s strike movement in

Luxembourg. The 2020 women’s strike in Luxembourg was not only the first political women’s strike, but also one of the largest feminist marches ever organized in Luxembourg. In 2021, the JIF Luxembourg platform organized for a second time the “Fraestreik” with a march and an online event because of the Covid-19 health crisis.

More information: fraestreik.lu

Non-exhaustive list of the most important women's/feminist strikes

06.07.1888

Match Girls Strike, London

Children who made matches in a London factory, working 12 hours a day, very poorly paid and exposed to “seal jaw” (caused by phosphorus exposure) led a huge walkout.

03.11.1909

The Uprising of the 20,000, New York, USA

About 20,000 workers protested against low wages and working conditions in the New York garment industry.

It was the largest women's strike ever undertaken in the United States.

The workers shared a common set of underlying grievances regarding wages, hours, workplace safety, and indignities suffered specifically by women (such as unwanted sexual advances, threats, and invasions of privacy).

08.03.1917

women spark the Russian February Revolution

On International Women's Day in 1917, women textile workers in the Vyborg district of Petrograd went on strike, left the factories and moved by the hundreds from factory to factory, calling other workers out on strike and engaging in violent clashes with police and troops.

Unskilled, poorly paid, working twelve or thirteen hours a day in dirty and unhealthy conditions, the women demanded solidarity and insisted that the men take action. The women revolted for bread and against the war.

→ *Dagenham Women's Strike, UK, 1968*



17.08.1918

London Transport Women's Strike

Since the women working at the Willesden bus garage were not entitled to receive the war bonus given to their male counterparts, they decided to go on strike.

After a week, the strike spread to several other transport stations, which finally led the company to grant the bonus to its female workers.

27.2.1937

Sit-Down Strike by Woolworth's employees, Detroit, USA

About 100 clerks at Woolworth's Detroit store stopped work, drawing attention to the workers' demand for a raise to compensate for the 40-hour week and overtime. After a week, the company reached an agreement with the union.

01.11.1961

Women's Strike for Peace

Thousands of women around the world demonstrated against nuclear testing.

07.06.1968

Dagenham Women's Strike, UK

Women workers at the Ford plant in Dagenham went on strike for three weeks for equal pay.

The women workers ended up getting 92% of the rate of pay for men, which was still not parity. However, the strike also led to the British Equal Pay Act.

26.08.1970

Women's Strike for Equality, USA

50,000 demonstrators in New York City call for reproductive rights, childcare provisions and equal employment rights.

24.10.1975

Women's Day Off, Iceland

Etwa 90 % der in Island lebenden Frauen nahmen sich einen freien Tag heraus, um zu zeigen, welchen Beitrag sie mit ihrer Arbeit leisten, sowohl am Arbeitsplatz als auch zu Hause.

23.08.1977

The Grunwick dispute, UK

100 immigrant workers went on strike at the London-based Grunwick film processing plant to protest their poor treatment in the factory. The conflict aroused the interest of the whole trade union movement.

14.06.1991

Frauenstreik, Switzerland

Under the motto "If the woman wills it, everything stops", hundreds of thousands of women throughout Switzerland took part in protest and strike actions on June 14, 1991. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the anchoring of the article on equal rights in the Federal Constitution, the Swiss Trade Union called for a protest against the hesitant implementation of the article in the Constitution and the persistence of inequalities in many areas of society, economy and politics. Most of the country's women's organizations joined the call.

→ Women's Strike for Equality, 1970



→ Latin America, 2016



08.03.1994

Frauenstreiktag, Germany

One million women were on strike on March 8, 1994 in Germany. German women believe that women's and workers' rights are being rolled back.

They planned to go on strike from their paid work and unpaid housework, not to buy anything that day, not to smile at anyone and to leave the men with the children.

The German women were inspired by women in Iceland (1975) and Switzerland (1991).

03.06.2016

Ni Una Menos (Not One Less), Latin America

Ni una menos is a Latin American feminist movement that began in Argentina and has spread to several Latin American countries.

On June 3, 2016, women marched against femicides in Buenos Aires.

03.10.2016

Black Monday, Poland

30,000 demonstrators wore all black in a protest strike in solidarity with the government's near-total ban on abortion in Poland. The strike persuaded the government to back down on a controversial anti-abortion bill.

08.03.2018

Feminist Strike, Spain

Tens of thousands of women protesters marched through the streets of Madrid and other Spanish cities to oppose violence against women.

14.06.2019

Frauenstreik, Switzerland

In Switzerland, hundreds of thousands of women took to the streets to demand higher wages, more equality and more respect.

29.05.2019

Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, Argentina

Across Argentina, thousands flocked along the arteries of the capital Buenos Aires for a massive demonstration that marked the next chapter in the fight to legalize abortion in the country.

30.10.2020

Demonstrations against abortion ban, Poland

Outraged by a court decision to ban nearly all abortions, tens of thousands of women took to the streets of Warsaw. Global protests led to the postponement of the abortion ban.



MILENA STEINMETZER
DEPUTY CENTRAL SECRETARY

The memorandum of the women's department

A document to put equality to the test

39 years ago, almost a whole working life, on February 1, 1983, two years after its creation, the OGBL Women's Department presented a memorandum on the specific problems and demands of women to the National Committee of the trade union confederation. It was ratified and the Women's Department welcomed this as a recognition of the specific problems of women by the whole union.

The issues, arguments and resulting demands have been an important guide to gender equality and its promotion throughout my time as OGBL Women's Secretary.

Even though much has improved today, thanks to the education of many adults by mothers, sometimes also fathers, who think and act, consciously or unconsciously, in a feminist way and thanks to a policy which, because of the perseverance of the feminist movement, could not and can no longer take the issues of equal opportunities and gender equality off the agenda, we must not forget what society was like in the 80s. Women were *particularly incapacitated and exploited inside and outside the production process, subjected to centuries of double oppression,*

- *on the one hand, by capital, which extracted extra profits from the discrimination of women (wage discrimination, short-term contracts, dismissals, non-employment in times of crisis, employment on unfavorable conditions for the performance of the most monotonous and grueling work, division of men and women and thus weakening of the trade union movement according to the motto "divide and rule" etc. etc.),*
- *on the other hand, on the general so-*

cial plan, by a "men's world" that treats women as dependent, immature beings who have very little part in social life (politics, union work, etc.).

It was not always easy as a young woman, a mother and for a long time a single parent to stand one's ground in a "man's job" - this category included the union officials. The main topic of my work and that of many female union militants, without whom nothing would have moved, the equality of women and men, was felt to be necessary, but not advocated with the same vigor as the supposed rights of men, especially when it came to collective bargaining policy.

Today, many young women and men in Luxembourg take it for granted that they have the same starting conditions and the same rights. However, ideas about the scope of equality differ depending on gender, education and background. While more highly educated women by no means regard the process as complete and would naturally like to push it further, men with less education, in particular, believe that the goal has long since been reached and that many efforts are beyond the mark, superfluous or even useless. We should therefore continue to make clear what still needs to be done so that everyone has the same opportunities and can live and work on an equal footing - taking into account that there are more than two gender identities today.

Below are the different topics of the memorandum, excerpts from the corresponding demands and some comments, so that everyone can make up their own mind and get an idea of what the starting point was, even in the 1980s.

Education and training

The effective equality of women in working life will only be achieved when no one distinguishes between “women’s jobs” and “men’s jobs”; because jobs will no longer be carried out according to the conception of roles.

In order to get closer to this goal, the OGBL Women’s Department opposes all arguments in the name of so-called economic considerations, which once again aim to set up stereotypical ideologies about the roles of girls and boys, and demands

- equal learning and teaching contents for girls and boys at all school levels,
- equal access opportunities for girls and women in all areas of education,
- increased support measures to develop girls’ technical skills,
- state-supported pilot projects for girls in industrial and technical enterprises,
- introduction of a systematic subject “learning to work” in the last years of compulsory education, with preparation for the world of work and preparation for choosing a profession,
- development of work with parents with the aim of convincing especially working parents of the importance of vocational training for their daughters,
- continuing education courses for unskilled female workers and adaptation and retraining courses for women whose jobs are threatened (these courses should be integrated into working hours),
- development of adult education to facilitate the reintegration of women into professional life after a break from work
- development of childcare facilities to give mothers the opportunity to remain active.

School and vocational training: Until recently, there was no real analysis of school textbooks and their content. In 2021, the University of Luxembourg published a study on gender representations in Luxembourg elementary schoolbooks. This study concludes that there is a need to develop principles to ensure gender equality in schoolbooks and in the school environment in general. The study points to several tracks and also proposes to examine teaching materials for secondary education.

The rather meager record of government actions taken to increase girls’ access to technical and vocational education and to keep them in these programs in order to end them is the in-depth review conducted in 2019 by the Ministry of Gender Equality (MEGA) on issues related to the 25th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995): in order to be able to increase girls’ access to technical and vocational training, the “Girls’ Day Boys’ Day”, created in 2002 by CID Femmes as “Girls’ Day”, was taken over by the government in 2006 and held until 2017. OGBL participated in Girls’ Day Boys’ Day until 2009 and introduced young women to the job and possibilities of a trade unionist.

Some gender and human rights training for teachers and other education professionals is offered by IFEN (a department of the Ministry of National Education).

However, MEGA’s gender stereotyping awareness campaign has been underway since 2020. It is to be hoped that the Ministry will in the coming years, in its own words, fully play its role as a driving force in the development of a comprehensive strategy for “equality between women and men and education”.

Unfortunately, the Vocational Information Center (BIZ) has still not understood that pictures speak volumes. The online section “How do I find my profession?” might lead one to believe that only male professions exist.

Life long learning: in 1992, the INFPC was created as a public institution for the development of continuing vocational training. Equality through continuing education is not one of its missions.

The former Chamber of Private Employees, the Chamber of Employees and the OGBL have, through their training offer, through provisions in the collective agreements, done their part for continuing education and professional retraining in sectors where employment is predominantly female.

Childcare: in all honesty, it must be said that since 1983, much has been done in this area, even if, as trade unionists, we did not always agree with the government’s decisions regarding the number and qualification standards of people working in the sector.



- Presentation of the memorandum in the *Aktuell*
- Conference of the Women's Department, 1984
- Side event at the Extraordinary European Council on Employment, Luxembourg, 1997





Right to work

In order to fight against the dysfunctions in the labor market, the OGBL Women's Department demands:

- *the right to work for men and women, regardless of their marital status,,*
- *short-term measures to maintain existing jobs and create new ones,*
- *access for women to all professions and training centers, equal opportunities for*
- *hiring and promotion,*
- *equal pay for work of equal value,*
- *prohibition of privatization of public services, prohibition of temporary work companies,*
- *elimination of tax discrimination against working spouses,*
- *legal measures to protect part-time workers.*

Marital status no longer plays a role today, but in 1983 this was not the case everywhere for women. Although equal treatment in access to employment, professional training and promotion, and working conditions was enshrined in law as early as 1981, the reality is still different in some places. The 1974 Equal Pay Act is still not properly enforced, and for as long as I can remember it has been a central issue for women in OGBL. Since MEGA started to set up the equality observatory, it is in any case easier to get figures for our analyses.

We still oppose the privatization of public services and have negotiated a sectoral collective agreement for temporary work companies and have been able to obtain legal guarantees.

Since 2017 tax reform, there is a possibility for married or partnered couples to choose between collective taxation or individual taxation, which promotes financial autonomy and limits financial responsibility to the amount of taxes owed individually.

Voluntary part-time work was not regulated by law until 1993; until then, overtime worked by part-time employees was not considered as such until it exceeded the 40-hour week. We all know that there is still a lot to be done in terms of part-time employment - the right to work part-time, the return to full-time work.... - we all know. Reducing working hours without losing wages would be best for both sexes anyway. The memorandum already stated at that time: *There are a lot of good reasons for the demand for a reduction of working hours. Mostly, however, the arguments are based on economics. However, in our opinion, one essential aspect should not be forgotten in the propaganda for this demand, namely the resulting possibility of a better division of work in the household (between both partners), the increase of free time, i.e. also the possibility for women to find free time for themselves, for their interests and for their trade union and political commitment.*

Social security

The OGBL Women's Department proposes to the OGBL that the following considerations be taken into account in the discussions on pension reform:

- the woman, who is still primarily forced by the births and the education of the children to interrupt or even break off her professional career, should have the right to insure herself personally with the pension insurances or to insure herself further,
- ...
- in case of career interruption or abandonment, the rights acquired by her in the social insurances shall be preserved and redemption of insurance periods shall be possible at any time without a

staging clause,

- for the upbringing of each of her children, the woman should be credited with 6 years of insurance time, both for the calculation of the pension and for the calculation of the majorations (insurance periods),
- for each child a so-called baby year (insurance contribution) should be credited, the financing of which should be borne by the state.
- Furthermore, we believe that the legal regulation of the survivor's pension in case of divorce should be improved (e.g. widower's pension for men).

...

Most of the demands of the time and the fairness of pensions have occupied trade unionists and the women's movement for many long years. Our male colleagues were often a hindrance rather than a help with arguments such as "why divide a man's small pension into even smaller shares". In 1987, the widower's pension

and the "baby-years" were introduced.

We must not lose sight of the issue of women's pensions, because according to the latest Eurostat figures (2021), Luxembourg is the European champion in terms of pension differences between men and women.



In order to facilitate the situation of working mothers, we demand:

- *that the current law on maternity be developed to allow the mother or father to stay at home for one year after the birth of a child, without losing the guarantee of employment in the same job,*
- *that the state pays the pension and health insurance contributions during this period,*
- *that, if necessary, appropriate remuneration be paid from public funds during this special leave to compensate for lost income,*
- *that state-funded public day-care centers be established in all residential areas, in which fees are regulated according to social criteria, which are open 24 hours a day and which may employ only qualified personnel, whereby one educator may not care for more than 5 children,*
- *that, for parents who do not want to or cannot make use of the special leave, all day-care centers must accept children from the age of two months,*
- *that the illness of a child or other family member entitles the man or woman to exceptional leave.*

Working mothers

Since 1999, through the PAN law, working mothers and fathers have been entitled to paid parental leave, which allows them to interrupt their professional activity for a determined period of time to devote themselves temporarily to the education of their child. The introduction of parental leave, which is very well paid compared to other European countries, was a sensation at the time.

Childcare has been better organized since then, there are places for babies, daycare centers are affordable and “maisons-relais” have been introduced. Since 1999, family leave has allowed working mothers and fathers to stay with their sick child. If a partner or other family member falls ill, many employees can take advantage of the social leave provided for in their collective agreement.



The OGBL demands:

- that all-day public schools, canteens, public boarding schools and youth centers be established for older children and young people.
- that in case of hospitalization of a child, the stay of an accompanying person is free of charge,
- that contraceptives be reimbursed by the health insurance,
- that adequate sexual education is provided in all schools and that adults can also find it at family planning centers,
- that everything possible be done to guarantee the safety of children in traffic, for example a safe school path through the creation of pedestrian lanes, safe schoolyards and playgrounds.

Protection of the family



DANIÉLE NIELES
CENTRAL SECRETARY

Many of these demands have been met over the past decades, even if only partially. Nevertheless, I dare to doubt that the women's department then meant by contraceptives only those for women, which are covered by the health fund since summer 2018.

Of course, the memorandum also addressed aspects of self-determination over one's own body - a central notion in feminist politics.

The last part of the memorandum was dedicated to the position of women in the union and was of great help to us when we started to develop the women's promotion program in 1992, which then committed

the OGBL, from 1993 onwards, not only as a union, but also as a company, towards more equal opportunities. The promotion of women in the OGBL has really born fruit and not a few, even if not all male colleagues agree.

A final thought: if I reflect today on my 35 years of professional union work, I see that making the OGBL and its policy more women-friendly, getting colleagues to listen to women and to adopt their justified and often anticipatory demands, was a long and laborious process, and everyone - and there were many dear colleagues - who participated in it, can now look back with a clear conscience. It was worth it.

Voices of Women - Ways for women

Women in the OGBL - today

In the continuity of the history of women in the OGBL and the portraits¹ drawn up of those who accomplished the work of pioneers, it is opportune to give the floor to women who have taken up the torch. Let us now listen to their stories, these singular stories that are part of the more global history of the OGBL and bring it to life.

To make this inside look possible, a focus group² was organized bringing together women from the OGBL. The discussions dealt with several themes, and we report here on the discussions, which focused on the place of women within the union, the importance of the Women's department OGBL Equality and women's allies - both within and outside the OGBL³. Vignettes reproduced in the text that follows introduce the discussions.

1 The first vignette depicts an image with the inscription 'A woman's place is in her union' and introduces a general discussion on the place of women in the OGBL union. To explore this notion of 'place', sub-questions were raised, such as: What does having a place or being in one's place mean? Have women always had a place or their place? Should they stay in their place?

Not surprisingly, all four women felt spontaneously concerned by the image that had been submitted to them. The statement „Women's place is in their union“ was obvious to them. They used their personal experiences to illustrate how this phrase reflected the union commitment of each of them.

Underlying the testimonies and exchanges was the legacy of the first women in the unions in general and in the OGBL in particular, as well as their recognition of the pioneering work done for them.

„in the right place“

The overall observation of persistent gender inequalities in society and in the labour market was raised to point to the indispensable commitment of women activists and trade unionists. Indeed, it is the women who must activate and appropriate more particularly this fight, „we cannot wait for the men to do it in their place“. It is in this sense that the women around the table believe that they are „in the right place“.

„The place is there, but you have to really take it.“

To understand how women got this place and if they got it naturally, a look back is immediately necessary. For women in OGBL today, things are easier because the path is already marked out. For women of previous generations, the fight for gender equality in the workplace was all the more difficult because the workforce was predominantly male.

Today, this context has changed and at first sight, the question of women's place in the OGBL becomes obsolete, because it is an established fact that women have their place.

However, on reflection, there is an awareness that this is not necessarily shared by everyone. Indeed, it emerges from these discussions that if one can feel welcomed as a woman within the OGBL, the reality on the ground is quite different, which is illustrated by two real-life examples:

- During collective negotiations in companies in particular, the attitude of management is revealing, as it seems to change according to the gender of the trade union interlocutor. Thus, as a young woman who engages in collective bargaining, the feeling of first having to acquire a kind of legitimacy to negotiate with company management is very present. „At the beginning, I was always treated like a kid who could be bossed around. And so, at first, I had to pound my fist on the table, it



→ Vignette N°1

was really painful, until they realized that ,yes, she knows what she's doing, we're going to take her seriously!'

- Another field, that of staff delegations within companies, also confirms this reality. While the new male delegate is given tasks from the start, this is not the case for new female delegates. By the time the new female delegates have a thousand questions to answer about their role, the men have already spoken up and are given the important positions in the delegations. „I don't think it's mean or even conscious, but it's a [well-worn] mechanism.“

„This woman does it, so I can do it too!“

The importance of having a role model is mentioned. The reality today is very different from that of the first women trade unionists: being the first, they did not have a role model(s). „For us, it is easier, because we can rely on role models and that makes all the difference with the women before us.“

However, even if the reality seems to be easier to manage today, women face challenges on a daily basis, challenges related to their female condition. The example of public speaking is very evocative. Public speaking can be a challenge for anyone, women or men. But if we add to this the fact that in people's representations, including her own, a man's voice is associated with being „a real unionist“, the challenge of public speaking takes on a whole

new dimension. Being able to rely on role models, women who set an example, is an essential resource, „because, as a woman, we have a different way of making a speech. These models help us to discover how to speak as a woman, how to manage my voice which is not a man's voice. The story with the voice is important for a unionist, what effect our voice has on the audience..., in order to be taken seriously.“

In this context, great importance is given to the fact that some women have succeeded in making their mark in unions, traditionally „malestream“ terrain; this reality is an encouraging factor, even more so if these women make the choice to actively support other women (empowerment).

„We now have a series of new female recruits in the delegations, but they were quickly relegated to doing translations or washing dishes. I encourage them to get involved in committees (...) I understand them, I was the same way at the beginning.“

„I am not the problem. The problem is structural!“

After discussing the place of women in the OGBL in general, the importance of the existence of the Women's department is also mentioned. „There, we talk about these things and when people told their misadventures, I could tell myself that it wasn't just me!“ It is important to have this place where women can exchange, be with each

other and realize that the problem is actually rooted in the ‚system‘, in the education and socialization of everyone.

„It didn't happen by itself“

The unions have a long tradition of men and it is only recently that there are more women in them: activists, but also professionals, the central secretaries. All this is a process, it didn't happen overnight, people fought to make it understood that a woman can do the same work as a man. Indeed, the fact that the OGBL was ready to have a woman as its leader shows that the work of the pioneer women trade unionists was not in vain. Moreover, this change can also be seen in the AKTUELL: where in the past there were only men in the photos, there are now also women, inclusive language is used more and more, recruitment posters feature women etc. Finally, another novelty is that there are administrative assistants who are men, whereas before the administrative assistants were systematically women. But the finish line has not yet been crossed! „It's a long way to go, and we have to keep working at it!“

It is essential to have a Women's Department within OGBL because...

Complete the sentence
(several answers possible, one idea per post-it)

→ Vignette N°2

2 With the place of women in OGBL established, the second vignette turned the discussion to the Women's department. Focus group participants were asked to complete the sentence „It is essential to have a Women's department within OGBL because...“

The ideas collected on the post-its gave rise to exchanges that we grouped by theme:

It is essential to have a Women's department within OGBL because women and men must be represented in a balanced way in society and in a trade union organization.

“The world is also made of women and not only of men and women also have their place in the union.” The representation of women and men in the OGBL, and in all OGBL bodies, is not only important for the principle, but also for the perspectives it allows. Thus, the fact that the OGBL is headed by a female president is bound to have repercussions on the younger generations, because it induces a change in their representations so that women can realize that “the union is a place for me!” They can now more easily identify and project themselves in the union.

It is essential to have a Women's department within the OGBL because it is through this department that equality issues are dealt with in the same way as other issues.

Without this Department, equality issues always take a back seat, always get “second or third prize.” This reality is more than just an observation; it is a lesson from the past. In fact, when the Women's department was created, it was very active, with a strong commitment from some women trade unionists who invested a lot of work. Then, for years, it was considered as “a job to be done in passing” because of the lack of time. It was “run on the side” with the inevitable consequence that it became less efficient. The lesson learned is that gender equality is to be advanced, the department is a necessary step. Indeed, by “taking care” of the Women's department, by “putting it on the map”, a real step forward has been taken and the Department is now on the right track; “We have managed to bring in a new wind”. In this sense, the name change from “Women's department” to “OGBL Equality” is symbolic to show that the issue goes beyond discrimination of women, the issue is the commitment to gender equality: women, men and non-binary people.

It is essential to have a Women's department within the OGBL because it allows the subject of gender equality to remain a topical issue, alongside other “urgent” issues.

Without the department, equality is never considered a priority. The Department allows equality to be put on the agenda, even when it is not a topical issue.

It is essential to have a Women's department within the OGBL because it requires a specific mobilization of women.

Mobilization requires a precise analysis of the groups to be mobilized, the specific interests of these groups. If we want to mobilize women, we must not drown this mobilization in a general mobilization. On the contrary, “this intersection ‘being a woman, being a single parent, working in a specific sector’, all of this must be taken into consideration in order to mobilize”. Women's mobilizations require a different organization than men's. “We cannot reproduce the same things all the time and think that women will be able to be taken on board in one way or another.

It is essential to have a Women's department within OGBL because it needs a place of its own, “a room of one's own”.

It is important to have a meeting place for women activists, a place for discussion only for women, where women's issues as well as specific demands are put on the table, a place where women can express themselves freely on topics, still taboo, around femininity and gender, a place where women can exchange with each other “where they don't have to hide (...) because they are afraid to express themselves.”

The exchanges in this place, within this platform, play moreover an important role in the recruitment of new activists, which it is a question of supporting and encouraging (empowerment): “The achievements, it was not easy to arrive where we are today; there must be models that push women forward, that always integrate new people, and it seems to me that it is easier through the exchange between women.” We have to invest this place, because “who else but us (women) has to talk about it?”

As for the exchange with men, it is not considered of lesser quality, but it is qualified as “different”. And men among themselves, even if they do not have a visible platform within the OGBL, it has been forged over history and integrated in such a way that it no longer requires visibility; “there is a platform for men (...) they have organized themselves through all these years”.

It is essential to have a Women’s department within the OGBL because the union’s efforts for equality must be made visible.

The visibility and image of the OGBL is put forward through its Women’s department; “it gives the OGBL another place in society”. In terms of sustainability, and this is

perhaps also a question of representation, the union must be able to attract the interest of today’s youth and children and respond to their demands. And vice versa, to recruit young people into the labor market, access to young people is facilitated by themes such as equality that are of interest to them, that speak to them more than discussions about the index for example.

It is essential to have a Women’s department within the OGBL because the Department facilitates networking, whether within the OGBL or outside the OGBL, with feminist movements. The importance of networking will be discussed in more detail below.



→ Vignette N°3: Source: www.ogbl.lu/departement-des-femmes

3 The third vignette shows a composition of photos taken during the first Women’s Strike in Luxembourg on March 7, 2020. It introduces the question of allies of OGBL women - inside and outside the OGBL. Is it important, even necessary, for OGBL women to network with other women, other feminist organizations? How do these collaborations work? Are they sufficient? Are they satisfactory?

The analysis of this sequence allowed us to identify the theme of identity: who am I as a unionist? What makes me different from non-unionists? What do we have in common? Under what conditions can we meet?

Once the vignette was introduced, it is interesting to note that the very first reflex of the focus group participants was to put a symbolic distance between unionists and

non-unionists, as if they felt the need, in a first step, to differentiate themselves from the “others,” the non-unionists or non-activists.

“Since childhood, we know what the OGBL is, but we are not representative of society; most people don’t even know what a union is!”

“For most people, the union is an obscure thing in people’s heads.”

The rest of the exchanges will really be devoted to alliances. We can distinguish 4 successive moments.

1st moment: First of all, the importance of networks was mentioned. Networks are a place of exchange and mutual enrichment. On the one hand, the OGBL exports its expertise to the outside world and issues,

such as working conditions in the cleaning sector in Luxembourg, are brought to the attention of other associations and society in order to initiate joint actions. It is an opportunity to get in touch with people, people who are committed, but who previously had no link with a trade union. On the other hand, new themes brought by outside associations are integrated into the reflections and actions of the OGBL.

The Women’s Strike is a good example to illustrate this mutual enrichment, this connection with the outside. Indeed, the women’s movement alone would not have been able to carry out the strike; the know-how on strikes that the union possesses was indispensable. And, in the other direction, while usually 70-80% of the mobilization is made up of OGBL activists, the Women’s Strike was a different story with new “faces” participating. It was important for the union to be able to count on the contacts of the feminist movement to mobilize a large number of people: “we managed to make a gathering of 2000 people! The success of the Women’s Strike also gave great legitimacy to the women of the OGBL within the union.

By digging a little deeper into the connection between the OGBL and the JIF platform⁴, the focus group participants were able to identify other indispensable ingredients for the success of the Women’s Strike: commitment, common ground and learning from each other.

Moment 2: After networking, commitment is discussed. Commitment is the connecting element between the “outside” and the “inside”:

“If you want to change something in the world, you can’t just sit at home and say

‘it’s going to happen’, no, you have to commit! It’s all about commitment, no matter what platform you choose to do it on.”

Once this condition is met, the ‘miracle’ can happen: When trade unions and civil society (associations) come together with the same goal (here: gender equality), “something very big happens”.

The first Women’s Strike in Luxembourg in 2020 represents the creation of a special moment because of the alliance between the two forces involved (OGBL - JIF). Indeed, the JIF platform without the trade union and the trade union without the JIF platform would not have been able to achieve this “master stroke”, this “moment of success”.

This meeting between two worlds (inside and outside) could of course not happen overnight. It is something that grew gradually “and now it is so big that it cannot be ignored anymore”.

There is a third moment that has been identified thanks to the deepening of the discussion around the Women’s Strike. We called it: common ground. Connecting, engaging and acting from and on a common ground.

Using the example of the Women’s Strike, we can also highlight the fact that the action sought seems to be intimately linked to a space that is conducive to it. Thus, the format of the International Women’s Day of the previous years was unsuitable to give place to this meeting between trade unions and feminist associations, but this format has probably allowed a maturation and, in this sense, it can nevertheless be considered as a necessary transition.

There is something fundamental that differentiates the two formats of the International Women’s Day in Luxembourg. The

former format was held in a specific place, the cultural center in Neumünster Abbey, and the OGBL, together with the feminist associations, had a stand there. It is the immobility that characterizes its role, especially when we put it in perspective with the role occupied in the new format (since 2020), which is movement: demonstrating, mobilizing, marching in the street.

There is a common ground that welds the alliance between the OGBL and the feminist movement, a thematic ground certainly (the commitment to gender equality), but also a physical and symbolic ground at the same time: the street.

Finally, a 4th moment can be identified, the learning of the other. It is through the communication culture of men and women that this openness to the other and learning about others can be illustrated.

The culture of discussion within the union, which in the past was composed mostly of men, is very different (or was very different), from that practiced within the women’s movement.

“I used to be in the union with 90% men (...). And when I became the president of the Women’s Department, it was the first time I was in contact with the JIF platform. It was a culture shock. All the people were so friendly to each other, we didn’t interrupt when someone was talking. A whole new world opened up for me!”

After noting the different communication cultures within the labor movement and the women’s movement, one must recognize the advantages and disadvantages of each. The ideal would be a good mix between the two through mutual learning. Moreover, from the point of view of communication, having a man and a woman at the head of a team is a real advantage for carrying out actions.

Finally, we would like to highlight the commitment of all the women of the OGBL, those who have laid the first stones and those who continue to build an egalitarian society (the women’s way). The Women’s department OGBL Equality is both the place that makes women’s specific demands audible and visible (the women’s voice) and the channel to convey them and to mobilize other women.



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1 See the article „A long march“ by Frédéric Krier.

2 Among the qualitative methodologies, there are several methods based on groups, including focus groups. The participants, as well as their number, are chosen strategically according to the objective pursued, which consists either of an in-depth exploration, requiring a limited number of people, or of a more global discussion involving 8 to 12 people. The focus group technique is a confirmatory technique and group interaction is used for data collection. The group dynamic allows for the exploration of emerging themes, the confrontation of different points of view and experiences, and the questioning of apparent consensus and social norms.

3 We met in November 2021 at the OGBL offices. The group discussion was recorded, transcribed, analyzed and the quotes translated from Luxembourgish into French by us. We would like to thank Nora, Michelle, Tina, Milena and, in the background, Danièle, for their rich contributions!

4 The JIF (International Women’s Day) Platform was created in 2011 on the 100th anniversary of Women’s Rights Day. (www.fraestreich.lu)