**Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Conference 2012**

**Mentoring as a strategy to promote gender proportionality:**

**A case study of a public sector union mentoring programme**

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**Developmental paper, extended abstract – 300-500 words**

Gender inequality and a lack of fair representation of women in work have a long history in the UK. Women still remain underrepresented within certain occupations, most notably within management and decision making posts. One area of concentration of female employment in the UK is the public sector where women constitute 65% of workers (LFS, 2010). The extent to which women in the public sector face a ‘glass ceiling’ in terms of career development varies by sectors; for example 75% of local government employees are female, but women made up just 21% of chief executives and just 30% of senior managers (2010).

It is clear that more needs to be done to reduce the gender pay gap, encourage equality and promote the fair representation of women at senior positions throughout the public sector. With public sector density at 56.3% (BIS, 2010), and female union membership overall being greater than male membership for the last nine years, it is apparent that unions can play a seminal role in readdressing gender inequalities. It cannot be denied that unions are now at the forefront of campaigning for women’s rights politically and in the workplace. However, trade unions have also been criticised for the lack of fair representation of women in senior positions and on decision making committees. A two yearly survey compiled by the Labour Research Department shows that unions are some way off achieving proportionality of women in their structures (LRD, 2008). They claim that ‘progress has clearly been made’ but describe it as ‘patchy’; for example they highlight that there are only two female general secretaries in the ten largest unions, they also highlight a lack of female representation on the national executive, TUC delegation, and in full time national and regional officers. What is also apparent for many is the lack of female representation in lower level voluntary positions. If unions are to best represent their female (majority) membership and encourage fairness in the workplace it is essential that they themselves achieve proportionality.

Unions are pursuing a variety of strategies to enable women to rise above the internal ‘glass ceiling’, bypassing potential male ‘gate keepers’ such as branch secretaries. One method, and the focus of this paper, is through mentoring. Current UK literature on mentoring relates predominantly to mentoring female managers in terms of their career development. Much of this literature is of relevance as some of the barriers faced by women in organisations may be much the same as within unions. However, the mentoring of voluntary union representatives is more complicated as these protégés are engaged in ‘inter-organisation careers’ (Hall, 1996, Khapova *et al*, 2007). Success in one career could be to the detriment of the other. The presentation comments on preliminary findings from an empirical case study of a mentoring programme developed by a public sector union in the UK. It outlines the experiences of the mentors and protégés and comments on its successes and failures and the potential for success if rolled out as a national strategy.