



Revue internationale  
*International Webjournal*  
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## A different kind of activism: the position of catholic women teachers in their union (Belgium, 1950-1965)

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**Abstract:** In this article we would like to focus on the position of women in the Christian teachers union in Belgium in the years 1950-1965. In spite of their numerical dominance in the teaching occupation and in the union, women teachers never exercised real structural power in teacher unionism during this period. Yet, the union was alive to the fact that women teachers formed an important segment of their members. The marriage bar f.e. became a central issue in the debate concerning the legal statute of the catholic teachers in the years 1961-1963. Based on primary sources, interviews, national and international literature, we will focus on the apparent lack of female militancy by situating it in its social and historical context and by analysing the prevailing ideology concerning labour and the family.

**Résumé:** ("Un activisme différent. Les prises de position des institutrices catholiques au sein de leur syndicat. Belgique, 1950-1965") Dans cet article nous voudrions nous centrer sur la position des femmes appartenant au syndicat des enseignants chrétien en Belgique durant les années 1950-1965. Malgré leur prédominance numérique dans l'enseignement fondamental et dans l'union, les institutrices n'ont jamais exercé une vraie puissance structurelle dans leur syndicat d'enseignants pendant cette période. Cependant, l'union était très active du fait que les institutrices représentaient une section importante de leurs membres. Le bannissement du mariage devint une question cruciale au cours de la discussion portant sur le statut légal des professeurs catholiques dans les années 1961-1963. Nous basant sur des sources primaires, des entrevues et l'historiographie nationale et internationale, nous nous concentrerons sur le manque apparent de militantisme féminin en le replaçant dans son contexte social et historique et en analysant l'idéologie dominante au sujet du travail et de la famille.

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# A different kind of activism: the position of catholic women teachers in their union (Belgium, 1950-1965)

Lies van Rompaey<sup>1</sup>, Marc Depaepe<sup>2</sup>, Frank Simon<sup>3</sup>

## Trade unionism and the COV

The COV (Christian Teachers' Union) was created in 1893 in Belgium as a professional organization for Christian teachers with the object of improving the professional capabilities and promoting the material interests of its members.

The COV targeted primary education teachers, both male and female. From the beginning the union developed robust educational activities.

Particularly in the early years of the COV, the members were very militant in their striving for such objectives as the granting of the "capacity vote" for the teacher but, even before the turn of the century, the organization had to drop much of its radicalism in order to be acceptable to the episcopacy and to be able to recruit more widely. In this way it became a broad-based association of Christian teachers that slowly but surely developed into a true labor union.

It is difficult to compare the COV with a regular trade union. The teachers union originated from local branches that gradually merged and evolved into a national organisation. The leaders were men of letters, often school principals, who lacked experience in the trade union sphere. Until the late sixties, the COV did not organise trade union training for their members or leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Depaepe (1953) est professeur à la Katholieke Universiteit Leuven où il enseigne l'histoire de l'éducation, l'histoire des sciences de l'éducation et l'histoire de la psychologie. Il est président de la faculté de la psychologie et des sciences de l'éducation au campus de Courtrai et coordinateur des Sciences Humaines au même campus. Il a publié plusieurs articles et livres concernant la théorie, la méthodologie et l'historiographie de l'histoire de l'éducation ; l'histoire des sciences de l'éducation et du comportement ; l'histoire de l'éducation fondamentale en Belgique et l'histoire de l'éducation coloniale belge.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Simon (1944) est professeur en histoire de l'éducation à la faculté de psychologie et des sciences de l'éducation de l'Université de Gand (Belgique). Il est président de l'International Standing Conference for the History of Education (2006-2009). Ses publications concernent l'histoire de l'éducation et de l'enseignement en Belgique et l'histoire de la culture scolaire.

The only training they did provide for was a pedagogical one. The union organised, on a local level, group meetings where educational matters were studied. On regular meetings the local branches often devoted a considerable part of their time to didactic problems.

It was the quality of the schooling and the interests of the pupils that stood in the centre of the COV-actions. When in 1954 a Socialist-Liberal coalition took a number of educational measures that did not go down well with the Catholic opposition, it seemed as if a true trade union spirit began to inspire the teachers union. But it is only in the sixties, when a common front in education was formed with the socialist teachers union, that the teacher and his concerns came to be the centre of the union interests. When in early years the right of a child to go to school was more important than the material interests of the teacher with the result that strikes e.g. were out of the question, it seemed as if now the union had changed its mind. The teacher was more and more a "normal" employee who did not have to bear alone the responsibility of the child and the future of the Belgian society.<sup>4</sup>

When we talk in this context about female activism in the COV, it is impossible to make the comparison with the women activists in the labour movement, in Belgium as well as abroad. The young French activists for example, that were studied by Jocelyne Chabot, received even in the interbellum period, a thorough trade union training and were supported by senior unionists during their union commitment. Moreover, they functioned in female federations which cooperated with the national confederation but nevertheless acted independently. The women Chabot saved from oblivion were socially conscious. They had a full belief in the ideology and strategy of the Catholic Action and they were inspired by *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>5</sup> In Belgium the labour union ACV tried since 1947 with varying success, to provide the labour women with a similar training.<sup>6</sup>

The COV-women were unconcerned with trade unionism, even after WWII. They joined the COV because they were interested in everything that had to do with primary education, not because they wanted to fight on the barricades to defend the interests of the teachers. Together with their catholic colleagues, they intended to form a kind of Christian teachers' elite. It was the primary education that deserved their attention, not the material interests of the educator. Only after contacts with male union colleagues or when they were confronted with injustices caused by the national administration or the religious governing bodies, their interest in the trade union action was aroused.

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<sup>4</sup> Van Rompaey, Lies, *Strijd voor waardering. Het COV van 1893 tot 1983*. Antwerpen, Garant, 2003, passim.

<sup>5</sup> Chabot, Jocelyne, « Les syndicats chrétiens et la formation militante de 1913 à 1936: "propagandistes idéales" et "héroïne identitaire" » In *Le Mouvement Social*, nr.165, 1993, 7-21.

<sup>6</sup> Leuven, KADOC, Archives of the ACV/CSC, nr.62: CSC. Comité de la CSC. Rapport de la séance du 22-10-1957.

Neither did they receive any kind of union training, not even when they were asked to join the board of a local or regional branch of the COV. Only for the union delegates who in their schools acted as an intermediary between the teachers union and its members and had to look after the interests of their colleagues, meetings were arranged to discuss the problems they encountered in their union commitment.

The title of this paper ("a different kind of activism") suggests that the women in the COV strived in a different way than did their male colleagues. In the teachers union their radius of action and their way of taking action have indeed been different. The same can be said of the COV itself, when we compare this teacher union with the regular labour movement. Despite their express wish to exert pressure on the government and to form a union power that could not be neglected, the catholic teachers claimed that the COV was not a trade union in the restricted sense. COV was a school, a church and a family.

## COV and its interest in female teachers

Increasing feminisation was characteristic of primary education in Flanders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As of 1898, more women than men worked in primary education in Flanders. At that time, more than half of the female teachers in catholic education were nuns. After the Second World War, the proportion of nuns in primary schools shrank rapidly. Many management positions remained in the hands of nuns, but the teaching corps laicised. The male-female ratio in primary education stayed quite stable for a long time after WWII. Female teachers constituted about 56% of teaching staff.<sup>7</sup>

How many women were ultimately unionised is difficult to make out. In each case we see the proportion of female teachers increase to more than half during the Sixties. Only in 1979 were the members asked to complete an information sheet that not only asked for a description of their job, but also their sex. In Flanders the COV then consisted of 69% women, in Wallonia 66.4%. The vast majority of female teachers were married. Today more than 80% of members are women.

As good as all women that I spoke to during my research, talked about a simple youth where hard work and obedience were central. It was clear that the world of union involvement, of standing up for yourself and for others was not the world of these women.

In this period most management positions in catholic girls schools were reserved for nuns. The marriage ban was still in force at the time of my witnesses going into teaching, which meant that

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<sup>7</sup> Depaepe, Marc; Lauwers, Hilde; Simon, Frank, Hellinckx, Bart and Van Rompaey Lies, « Mapa de la feminización de la enseñanza primaria en Belgica » in *Tempora. Revista de sociología de la educación*, vol.10, 2007, 87-114.

they embarked upon a flat and/or short career. The divide between the male and female world was great in the period under discussion. But the women that I spoke to did not have any real problems with it. None of them spoke about male dominance or oppression. The male world had its own language and conventions. However, this did not prevent women from taking action in their own way. It is important to qualify the narrow picture of the dominant man and oppressed woman. As Martin and Goodman demonstrate in "Women and Education", a number of women were able to escape this oppression, and even take part in this male defined world of leadership in a certain way or in certain respects. It was thus not/never impossible to get involved, to be militant.<sup>8</sup>

After the Second World War we see from certain sources that the COV started to pay more attention to the interests and concerns of female teachers, not only in the educational offering, but also on a union level. If the COV wanted to see its membership grow and become a representative union, it could of course do no other than draw on its female potential. The campaign magazine *Christene School* introduced a section for women, a committee for female teachers and for nursery school teachers was set up, there was extensive debate on the pros and cons of the marriage ban that was finally lifted in 1963, and subjects such as school censorship and the relationship between nuns and lay female teachers were placed on the agenda. Moreover, increasing numbers of local branches made efforts to include a female secretary or treasurer on their committee. It was not easy. Because of the marriage ban, many women opted out of education early before they could get properly involved in the COV. But even after 1963 and up until today, you often have to search for women who have taken on a union commitment on a regional or national level.

The story of women in the COV is thus, with a few exceptions, largely a story of individuals, who within the union and thus within a structure that they had not created themselves, did their best to bring the specific problems of female teachers to the attention of the national administration or even the national government, and positioned themselves towards the outside much less as militant union leaders.

## Oral history

Our research into the history of the COV was firstly based on the archives of the organisation itself and the extensive archives of the first national secretary, Frans Valvekens. As expected, these sources primarily brought (male) teachers to light. Female teachers were marked as present

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, Jane and Goodman, Joyce, *Women and Education, 1800-1980*. Houndsmill/Basingstoke/Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 7-26.

at meetings now and again, but according to the minutes rarely took the floor. And if they did, it was for educational or specifically female issues. In order to better portray female teachers in the COV, we contacted women who were teachers between 1950 and 1965 and who were actively involved in the teachers union.

So far I have interviewed 10 female teachers. The paper I am presenting today is primarily based on these interviews. Of course I can only present impressions and call for further research. The aim is to continue my oral history research and also to interview male trade unionists about their involvement and the relationship between men and women in the COV in this period.

In my interviews I did not so much look for facts. The broad lines of the COV history are well known after all. I rather gauged the way in which women got involved and what motivation they attached to it.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that the decisions that my witnesses made in the course of their careers were the result of a dominant view of society and their reflection of that picture.

I further also endorse Philip Gardner in saying that just as with every one of us, in the lives of these women the focus has constantly been on an uninterrupted process of narrative organisation from their earliest memories.<sup>10</sup> People often look back on their own past and in this way construct their own life story, and thereby make certain choices in their memories, pay more attention to certain incidents, in brief they form their own picture of what happened in their life and why it happened from a certain historical and social context.<sup>11</sup> This came out in the interviews a number of times. Choices that my witnesses made, turns that their lives took, were explained by them on the basis of references to their upbringing or other aspects of the time concerned. Comments such as "that's how things were then", "we didn't know any better", "we always learned it like that", came out many times. The story that they tell has two layers. Firstly they show how women dealt with their desire at that time to do more than just teach, to take on commitments and come out fighting. On the other hand they told me a story that had grown in their memories over the years.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In line with Joan Scott, it would be interesting to not only regard these female teachers as figures or people, but also as sites where important historical forces came together and perhaps also collided on a social and cultural level. Scott, Joan, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man*. Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 1996

<sup>10</sup> Gardner, Philip, « Reconstructing the Classroom Teacher, 1903-1945 » in: Grosvenor, Ian; Lawn, Martin and Rousmaniere, Kate (eds.), *Silences and Images. The Social History of the Classroom*. New York, Peter Lang, 1999, 124-444.

<sup>11</sup> Gardner, Philip « Oral history in education: teacher's memory and teacher's history » in *History of Education*, vol.32, nr.2, 2003, 175-188

<sup>12</sup> That memory is not always a reliable source rather goes without saying. We thus attempted to critically examine the stories told to us, based on the publications already mentioned of Philip Gardner, and also the first and second edition of the book of Perks, Robert and Thomson, Alistair (eds.), *The oral history reader*. London and New York, Routledge, 1998 and 2006

The 10 women I have so far interviewed were born between the wars, between 1926 and 1939. Seven of them married and have children. Two teachers were in Special Education. One of them became a headmistress. Four women became infant school teachers and consequently in this period could not apply for a senior teaching position. The other 4 were in primary education, 2 of them were headmistresses.

In this paper I will only discuss two aspects of the militancy of these female teachers. We will first deal with their membership and involvement in the COV committees, and then with their attitude towards the marriage ban.

### *The membership and their further involvement*

Almost all ten of the women interviewed became members after graduating as a matter of course. Most female teachers largely knew the COV on account of the educational offering. The union aspect was not so well known to them. Only after a few meetings did the union interest and involvement grow. Most of my witnesses then quickly became union delegates in their school.

An important moment in the union activism of these women was their entry into the local branch committee. None of my witnesses considered putting themselves forward as a candidate for a position on the committee. They repeatedly said in the interviews that they were always asked, often reinforced with comments such as :

“Oh no, I would never have pushed myself, they always asked me. I was roped into it as it were.”

“I was not the kind of woman to put myself forward.”

“Apparently “they” saw something in me, they thought that I could be useful to the organisation.”

“I never said to myself I should be there, but it came my way and so.”

It was often a unionised family member or a male colleague who urged them to get more involved.

Martin and Goodman point out that many women often interpreted what they did as something that happened to them, something to which they were called. Perhaps that was so, again according to M and G because they could more easily justify to the outside world doing things that were not suitable for a woman in those days. In every case, from the way in which women talk about themselves, you can infer a lot about the way in which women were culturally and socially regarded in those days.<sup>13</sup>

Once in the COV, their involvement and dedication was very high. Most witnesses did not miss any demonstration. And often they enjoyed them a lot. Banners were painted and entertaining

<sup>13</sup> Martin, Jane and Goodman, Joyce, o.c..



actions were prepared weeks in advance. I was told many anecdotes about the trip to Brussels, about the slogans that were shouted, the confrontations with the police, the smaller incidents. For them it almost seemed to be a liberation to demonstrate and prove their militancy on the streets.

“Yes, it was fun, you’re with a lot of people, you can shout and act, you’re young, you think it’s fun, rather rebellious.”

Every one of them pointed out the importance of solidarity.

At the meetings themselves they were often more unassuming. Although some of my witnesses never shied away from speaking when they considered it necessary, others said that they were thoroughly overwhelmed by the male bastion that the branch was. “The men did the talking and the women listened”, so said one of my witnesses, an unmarried headmistress, very definitely. If there was already a woman on the board, then she was the treasurer or secretary. “To do the work if you like. That was what they were good for”, so said the same headmistress. She was not alone in this conviction. At the same time, some witnesses gave me the impression that they were glad to be given a concrete task to do. They felt uncomfortable if they had to appear in the foreground too much as a speaker or pure union activist, and preferred to interpret their involvement as keeping the finances accurate and drawing up reports. Some women expressly described themselves as the more diplomatic type. They introduced ideas or concerns and left the practical handling of them to the men. On an educational level, the female teachers were indeed enterprising. They were very active in the organisation of educational workshops or lectures.

They said that this almost natural division of labour was something that had grown historically. The COV had been founded by men and built up according to a male model. A female teacher who dared to take the leap to a position on the branch committee needed time and experience to know when and in what way she could exert her influence. They came to a new world with different laws and conventions to their own. Servitude fitted in better with the general role of women in society in those days. Militant female teachers still continued to play the role of housewife, without asking too many questions about it. None of their husbands, how supportive they may have been, took on more household chores to give their wives the opportunity to deepen their social involvement.

The involvement of the women that I spoke to differed on many levels. Some were actively involved as a union delegate or in the local branch committee, or mainly concentrated on the educational pillar of the COV. Others moved on from being a representative of nursery school teachers or female teachers to become a member of one or another national board. Only one woman deliberately stayed outside the educational work and ended up on the union commission. Some turned out to be very subservient in their involvement and could be considered more as an

executive rather than an enterprising trade unionist. Others had less respect for the formal organisation in which it was still difficult for women to get themselves heard. They went to Brussels on their own initiative to put one or another minister through the mill and point out his duties and neglect. One individual succeeded in putting together a wide network of people around her to achieve certain objectives.

### *The marriage ban*

However unassuming women were in the union, there was one subject that they all spoke about with great indignation. We are talking about the marriage ban.

In 1923, the Belgian episcopate confirmed that female teachers in catholic education were deemed to have resigned when they got married. The marriage ban appeared in many countries, but rarely did it take until the Sixties for it to be abolished. Perhaps we have to view the great religious power in catholic girls schools in Flanders as one of the most important causes of this.

Alison Oram wrote in 1996 that feminism arose when women could no longer see themselves in one or another official position regarding "women", and did not blame themselves for it but the social structure.<sup>14</sup> This certainly applies to the marriage ban. My witnesses knew from the start of their studies that the chance was very high that they would be dismissed after getting married. Nevertheless, it is clear that when these women actually experienced that they were no longer considered suitable for teaching because they were married, their social and political awareness was aroused.

Seven of my witnesses were married. All seven have their own story relating to their marriage, most of the times with one constant aspect: they pointed the finger at the religious management or religious power in general. Where there is power, there is also resistance. If there was one power in this period that these women continually wanted to resist, and which stimulated their militancy or assertiveness, then it was the religious power. In many interviews, it was often the vain and difficult struggle against a headmistress nun or mother superior that was brought up.

Three of my witnesses stopped teaching when they got married, each time under pressure from the religious governing body. They had often already signed their resignation when they joined. In those days there were two-sided contracts. The front was used for joining, the back for resignation. Although the back was not yet completed, they were sometimes asked to sign it. In this way, young inexperienced female teachers signed their own resignation without being aware

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<sup>14</sup> Oram, Alison, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-39*. Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press. 1996, 4-8.

of it. Happy as they were with their job, they would not dream of speaking against the headmistress nun.

Despite this obedient attitude, all three of them found it very unjust and even humiliating that they had to stop.

“I always had a bad time of it in Catholic education. Why were we all of a sudden of less value because we were married? Finally, where were the children supposed to come from?”

“Thus again with nuns, and that further made its mark on me I have to say because at that time it seemed perfectly normal that as a woman you stayed in the kitchen.”

All three female teachers returned to work after a few years, when the marriage ban was abolished.

A fourth teacher decided to take the diplomatic route. Just like her husband, she came from a large family. Shortly before their marriage they bought some building land. If her wages disappeared, things would get very tight financially. The headmistress nun advised her to negotiate with the diocese. Twice she quite easily obtained a year's postponement of her dismissal. After these years, the status of female teacher had been approved and the marriage ban abolished.

Three other teachers actively resisted their dismissal. Two of them refused to sign their own resignation. One of them had to deal with a catholic but non-religious governing body.

“The chairman of the governing body said, here you have to sign. I said what do I have to sign. Oh yes, it says here. No, I said, I will never sign my own resignation! What!..., and that's when my union fire started. I wanted to become a trade unionist through and through. I thought it such a disgrace because I slept with my husband ..., and there were others who slept with the priest, but who did not dare say anything ... [...].”

Ultimately the governing body did not further insist, and a year after she was given a permanent appointment. It was clear that at that time the belief in the salvation of the celibacy condition was not as strong in all circles and that a little assertiveness could make the difference.

Ms W. did not have it so easy. She was employed by the Sisters of Charity. Two months after she got married, she received a letter from the deputy dean saying that according to the law of Catholic education, she was no longer wanted as a married woman and could no longer work in education, and that she was thus considered as having resigned. A day later the headmistress nun

came with a blank form that had to be signed. But Ms W., well informed by her brother-in-law refused to sign and demanded a different contract, one of an indefinite duration. For months the headmistress followed her around with the blank contract. In this case it was the headmistress who ultimately had to give up the fight. Ms W. was taken on for an indefinite duration, but the relation between her and the headmistress had forever been cooled.

A third female teacher, finally, had to contend with the power of the Sisters of Vorselaar. This order had a very big influence in Flanders on an educational level. It managed some of the large teacher training colleges and had many primary schools under its management. These nuns were great advocates of the marriage ban. It was a strict order that, in addition to great dedication, also valued submission and obedience among its employees. Married female teachers, unless they were related to the order in some way, were dismissed. When she joined, our witness had signed a two-sided contract, the back of which had not been completed.

“I signed my resignation when I started. Can you believe it? Joining on the front, out you go when married on the back so to speak, you know, it did not say marriage but nonetheless something to that effect.”

For the teacher in question the dismissal came like a bombshell. She said that a colleague teacher in the primary school was also married, but could stay. After all she had a sister in the order. Together with her parish priest, my witness conducted a fight against the nuns. She was supported by the COV and its national secretary. The nuns were accused of forgery because they had got this woman to sign a blank contract that was subsequently filled in as a voluntary resignation. Despite the efforts of the COV and various lawyers, the lay woman could do nothing against the nuns. The marriage ban was a known fact and nobody could compel the nuns to keep her on. Fortunately this witness quickly found work at another school, but this experience with the Sisters of Vorselaar left its mark.

A striking thing is the negative and forceful language used in the discussions on the marriage ban. The female teachers did not speak of “the celibacy condition” or “the custom that married women looked after the family”. No, they spoke about the fact that they “had to go” or “then the woman could not stay on” or “that was still the period when being married meant that you could not continue” or “they all had to go”. However subservient and obedient these young women were, this was a rule that actually aroused opposition and frustration in them.

Another striking fact is that only one of these women, who (save for one) were nevertheless all unionised in this period, called on the COV. The others let matters be as they were, sought the advice of prominent people in education, or embarked on a frontal assault themselves. Neither were there any complaints of a lack of support from the COV. Apparently at that time the COV

was not considered to be a pressure group, and certainly not an organisation strong enough to take a stand on behalf of women against the religious authorities. At later times too we see that women who actually wanted to achieve a certain objective come what may, did not try to do it through the COV. They preferred to build up a network themselves, brought in relatives, negotiated on their own initiative, often on the basis of the knowledge and encounters that they had built up through the COV. That is what I mean by "a different kind of activism". Confidence in the "male bastion" COV was not great enough for most militant female teachers, i.e. those who wanted to do more than demonstrate in a group.

## In conclusion

All of my witnesses look back on their COV days with a lot of satisfaction. The COV taught them to look further than their classroom. They came into contact with different people, different visions. They learned to stand up for their rights, even in their own school. They built up a circle of friends. Many continued their involvement in the senior clubs. There was a clear distinction between the way in which men and women were involved in the union, and that distinction was not denied, but not assessed negatively either. The women that I spoke to were very probably no less involved than the many men in the COV at that time.

Each complained in their own individual way of the injustice that teachers in general and female teachers in particular were subject to in their opinion. They each did it within their own social context. Just like all of us, they were marked by their upbringing, social origins, the encounters that they had had, the opinions aired in their environment. From a parallel conviction, i.e. a fundamental sense of justice, all ten took on commitments. Less than was the case with the male COV'ers, they had a "we feeling". The group of involved women was too small, the culture of the male colleagues too different. Evidence of this is their striking lack of confidence in the COV in their fight against the marriage ban. That is why some female teachers clearly went their own way, without too much consultation with other colleagues in the COV.

The female teachers that I have presented here were not major union or educational figures. They were women who took on an important commitment in their daily lives that lay within their reach and their ability, and which meant one thing or another on a local level and for certain people in their environment. A commitment moreover that in those days was certainly not easy for a woman. We could call them helpful and militant. Conservative in their views on marriage, the family, the division of housework. But militant in their attitude towards injustice, either on a local level in their own school, or in the wider field of education. Despite the restrictions that society

placed on them, and despite the convictions that they had on a domestic level relating to the role of the woman in the family, women looked for a way to do their best for other teachers on a union level.