Introduction

Industrial relations (IR), as both a field of scholarship and an area of policy and practice, has the potential to improve working lives. Yet despite the fact that gender, equality and diversity touch the lives of all working people globally, these issues tend to be marginal within IR research, policy and practice. This chapter supports the call for IR to integrate these issues into the agenda, but also argues for them to be seen as a core and necessary area. To achieve this, is a ‘new’ IR paradigm needed? What might an IR paradigm that takes full account of gender, equality and diversity both in research and in policy and practice look like? What might count as IR? What specific issues need to be central, rather than marginal to the research, policy and bargaining agenda? Within a more inclusive IR paradigm, what do we understand about contemporary employer and trade union action on gender, equality and diversity?

Gender, equality, diversity and the dominant industrial relations paradigm

What place do gender, equality and diversity have in the dominant IR paradigm? It goes without saying that women’s employment participation has increased exponentially in the post-war period, especially in the past three decades or so with the growth of the service sector. Women now comprise nearly half of the workforces of industrialized countries and so too has their importance as a source of trade union members grown. In a historical turnaround, women’s trade union membership in many countries is now at least in equal proportion to that of men. In the
UK women comprise 52 per cent of trade union members, in the USA the female share is 48 per cent and in Australia the figure is 44%. These changes dislodge the stereotype of the male ‘breadwinner’ dominating the workforce and of the male, blue-collar worker dominating the trade unions. In another significant shift in the IR landscape, women are now also playing key roles in the institutions of industrial relations; that is, in employers’ organizations, government and trade unions. With regard to employers’ organizations, for example, the Confederation of British Industry had its first female president (Helen Alexander) from 2009 to 2011 (current president is male); the Business Council of Australia currently has a female chief executive (Jennifer Westacott). In the union movement, Australia currently has a female president (Ged Kearney) of its peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU); the UK has a female Deputy General Secretary (Frances O’Grady) of its peak union body, the Trades Union Congress (TUC); the USA has a female Secretary-Treasurer (Liz Schuler) and an African-American female Executive Vice President (Arlene Holt Baker) of its major peak union body, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Arguably, these changes place women (alongside men) at the centre of IR globally.

However, as a field of scholarship, IR is often seen as old fashioned, and the label IR is still generally associated with male-dominated heavy industry, blue-collar trade unions and male leaders in industry, government and unions. In an era of decline in manufacturing and depressed union membership (especially in traditional areas) in most industrialized countries, this image has implications for the perceived centrality and relevance of IR to the social sciences, and, theoretically speaking, it might even miss the point about contemporary employment relationships. For example, the traditional systems approach to IR is criticized for failing to see the links that have always existed for all workers between community, family and work (Jones, 2002). But for this chapter’s discussion, a narrow definition and focus also have specific consequences for women and gender within IR. For at least 15 years feminist authors around the globe have been bemoaning the invisibility and marginality of women and gender issues within the IR literature. In the early 1990s IR as a field of study was characterized as a ‘malestream’ and accused of being, if not oblivious to the presence of women, unaware that their presence makes much difference (Forrest, 1993). Part of the problem seems to lie in the fairly rigid and narrow way many scholars understand what counts as IR. Definitions of IR sometimes reflect masculine issues, priorities and privilege (Wajcman, 2000; Hansen, 2002; Danieli, 2006). There have