They debated how to recruit more women members and increase female participation and identified their priorities for action. Top of the list is a ‘Women Get Women’ recruitment campaign to double UCATT’s female membership by the next National Delegates Conference (NDC). According to the latest figures UCATT currently has 1,339 women members making up less than 1% of total membership (see Figure 1 for a breakdown by region).

Speakers outlined the need for more UCATT women reps to make the construction industry fit for women workers, and the support available from the union.

“I worked in a male environment in transport and highways which was fine until I had children. Then there was no flexibility to allow me to combine work with family commitments,” said Midlands Regional Organiser Sharon Harding as she urged more women members to get active in UCATT. “I became a union rep and then stood for election to my union’s national executive before I became a UCATT organiser.”

UCATT Membership Unit (UMU) Project Manager Melinda Roberts explained how the unit can support women reps with vital resources to help them to campaign and represent their members in the workplace.

And European Parliamentary candidate and communications union CWU rep Linda Woodings urged women trade unionists to take on roles both within and beyond the workplace.

“This meeting is a springboard for action,” said UCATT Midlands Regional Secretary Cheryl Pidgeon. “We intend to ensure that UCATT is better equipped to tackle the issues that matter to women in construction – equal pay, personal protective equipment (PPE) that fits properly, accessible and decent toilet facilities and zero tolerance to bullying and harassment.”

She added: “We intend to make sure we are reaching our women members, and potential members, through our website, the Building Worker magazine, social media, posters and leaflets and by attending labour movement events celebrating women workers. We want to see women present at all levels of our union structures. And we want to build up a network of women ambassadors in every region right across UCATT. Our target is to double the number of women members by the next National Delegate Conference using a ‘Women Get Women’ recruitment campaign.”

It is wonderful news that UCATT is forming its first ever Women’s Network Forum - not just giving women workers and apprentices a real voice in the union, but raising the profile of women in the whole construction industry. Together we can build a new generation of women union activists and campaign to build the high quality, affordable council homes that working people deserve. All power to your elbow!

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady

As part of UCATT’s capacity building activities, General Secretary Steve Murphy also sent a message of support and encouragement, committing himself and the union to resourcing this important area of UCATT’s work.
Harassment and bullying of women workers continues to blight Britain’s male-dominated industries

UCATT sent its largest ever delegation to the 2014 TUC Women’s Conference in March, with seven delegates from across different regions. First-time delegates Karen Burnell (North West) and Julie Phipps (London and the South East) joined Suzanne Kervin (North West), Karen King (London and the South East), Linda Makin (Northern) Marie O’Mara (North West) and Tracey Whittle (Wales & South West) who all attended the 2013 conference.

Suzanne moved UCATT’s motion on the harassment and bullying of women workers. She told Conference that rules to outlaw harassment on the grounds of sex and gender, contained in the Equality Act 2010, are failing to tackle the problem. The law needs to be accompanied by a massive cultural shift, she said, as many managers “may pay lip service to equality and diversity issues but these paper policies are not being translated into action on the shop floor.”

Male-dominated industries like construction, where more than 90% of workers are male, continue to be blighted by bullying, harassment, gender bias and sexist name calling. She told the conference about her experiences as a bricklayer and roofer and the only woman working ‘on the tools’ in her housing association.

“Many women do not report bullying for fear of being labelled as complainers. Those that do are often ignored or ridiculed – accused of not being able to meet the demands of the job or told to develop a sense of humour. Deal with it or leave is the clear message,” she said. “This hostile working environment deters female entrants to the industry and contributes to the poor retention rates of women workers.”

Pointing to the results of UCATT’s snapshot survey of women in construction (see Box 1), she called on the TUC to help unions campaign for zero tolerance of harassment, regardless of whether it comes from managers, co-workers or clients, and for mandatory training for all staff, management and trade union reps.

Tracey Whittle supported women in the Fire Brigades Union currently fighting changes to their pension scheme. “The move is part of a Government agenda to drive down pensions,” said Tracey. “The result is that many workers are condemned to poverty and benefits dependency – too young to retire but too broken to carry on working.”

She told the conference that, as a painter and decorator, she didn’t want to still be climbing ladders and carrying heavy loads in her 60s and she didn’t want firefighters to have to do the same.

“The current one-size-fits-all approach to pensions,” she added “does not take into account the hardships faced by workers in physically demanding and manual jobs.”
The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) was so impressed by UCATT Learning Organiser Karen King’s learning journey it presented her with a Learning Works Award in 2012 and uses her story to promote Adult Learners’ Week (taking place from 14 to 20 June 2014) and inspire others.

As a female carpenter, Karen often found working in a male-orientated environment challenging. Her personal protective equipment (PPE) did not fit, lone working was an issue and she was frequently denied training opportunities.

She joined UCATT to find out more about her rights at work and became a safety rep and later a union learning representative (ULR). After completing Stage 1 and 2 of the TUC Health and Safety course at Lewisham College (now part of LeSoCo) Trade Union Studies Centre, both UCATT and the college encouraged her to complete the TUC Discussion Leader course.

She began giving construction site toolbox talks to workers and then delivered health and safety awareness sessions. She completed A1 Assessor training, gained a Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) qualification, and has a TUC Diploma in Occupational Health and Safety.

Becoming a UCATT Learning Rep and then a Learning Organiser has allowed her to promote learning and support learners on construction sites and has, she says “transformed my life.”

Kirsty Dunlop from LeSoCo describes her as “a pioneer” in getting more women to get into the construction industry.

You can see a short film of Karen talking about her experiences on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=60L4wLGFtWg

Box 1 UCATT Women in Construction Survey

Responding to a UCATT survey, women working in the construction industry said that:

- They are treated worse at work because of their gender – more than half of those who responded to UCATT’s survey agreed with this statement;
- They lack training and promotion opportunities;
- They receive lower pay than their male colleagues;
- Managers and male colleagues bully and harass them;
- Male colleagues isolate them;
- They are turned down for work because of their gender;
- They need flexible working patterns to balance work with family commitments; but this is often not available;
- They are expected to work alone in potentially dangerous situations;
- They often work longer than their male colleagues; and
- They are denied pregnancy and maternity rights.
UCATT is currently developing a Women’s Charter. This will commit the union to supporting and respecting women workers in the construction industry at every level. It includes a commitment to:

- Ensure that women’s voices are heard and acted upon at every level of the union;
- Campaign for equal pay and to reduce the gender pay gap and highlight its causes;
- Root out bullying and harassment;
- Campaign to end women pensioner poverty;
- Tackle occupational gender segregation;
- Campaign for better training opportunities for women in construction;
- Campaign to ensure that women and girls can access free and high quality education (in all subjects) from nursery to university;
- Campaign to ensure that women and girls can access free and high quality education (in all subjects) from nursery to university;
- Raise awareness about the issues facing women in construction among male building workers;
- Campaign for affordable childcare; and
- Fight domestic violence; racism and homophobia.

For further information:

For more information about how to get involved in the UCATT Women’s Network Forum contact:

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Join UCATT

You can join UCATT online (www.ucatt.org.uk/joinus), download an application form or call our membership team to join over the phone on 020 7622 7707 between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.