

SWEEPING THE BOARD

Belfast cleaners win equal pay victory

In 1984, five women cleaners at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast lodged a claim for Equal Value with male groundsmen and porters.

They had the support of their union, NUPE, and the Equal Opportunities Commission of Northern Ireland.

Their employer resisted the claim.

PERSON 1 (Rosaleen Davidson, former NUPE shop steward)

... and I became part of the union and you were listening to discussions on pay rises. So obviously when there's a pay rise offered and we accepted it and we had to go through what the grade was and what you were entitled to and I used to think you know there's men here sitting here on their ass all day and my women are cleaning theatres, and cleaning the kitchens and we had to scrub big machines and they are sitting there saying how much back pay they were getting. We were getting pennies, I mean literally getting pennies and they want that much better pay than us. It was so unfair.

PERSON 2 (Mary Clark-Glass, Chair and CEO, EOC – 1984-1992)

It was just clear to us that it was quite simple that women doing a certain job were being treated differently from men doing a job of the same sort of standing value and usefulness to society and the reason the women were being paid less is because they were women.

PERSON 1

It was only when we started to raise awareness that they thought you know, how come cleaning is going to be a new born baby and be having breathing problems put into it and happen don't - no disrespect to the men – but I mean they were like saying their job's important too but I mean they were brushing the roads, you know, and prettying up the place like for visitors (laughs) whatever but what were the women doing really, really important jobs. Everybody's job's important and I didn't see why women shouldn't be paid, you know, equal pay for work of equal value and that was one of the biggest stumbling blocks at the beginning. Having to make men understand that we weren't trying to put their jobs down or belittle their jobs but we just needed people to understand, you know, equality.

PERSON 3 (Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary, UNISON)

The difficulty with the law at that stage was unless women domestics for example could find a man who was doing the same work as them and earning a higher rate of pay then they couldn't sue for it and they couldn't find a man in that position. So we anticipated the equal value amendment, we agitated for it and it became law in GB a year before it became law in Northern Ireland, that was 1984. We had already planned the cases before law change. We had already been in discussions with the Equal Opportunities Commission here and we were waiting for the date.

PERSON 2

Our biggest problem was that we don't have collective cases, we don't have class actions, so you have to ask an individual to come forward to be a test case.

PERSON 4 (Rita Spotswood)

People were nervous about it at the beginning, like, in case they lost their job. (laughs)

PERSON 5 (Sally Devlin)

That's was just like that and people were afraid and Rosaleen talked it over with me and you started saying that equality what happens with management staying on and you're sort of putting your notice out and that's was just the whole point you were all afraid of losing your jobs. You're afraid of getting in too deep, you're afraid of the court; you're not really used to all these things and at the end of the day I suppose somebody had to make a stand, that's just what happened.

PERSON 1

There were supervisors who would have said, you know, "The Royal can't afford, the Royal really couldn't afford this, why would you be paid more than me, I'm a supervisor?" I said to her, "But look, I'm not trying to earn more money than you", you know and you had to sit them down and explain to them. It took an awful long while to get through. I mean, "Look, why should cleaners, I mean, earn any more money?" I said for God's sake, sit down and think the whole thing through we're talking about equality here and if it starts at the bottom of the heap it's bound to have an upward effect.

SPOKEMAN (Vincent Donaldson, Branch Secretary, UNISON)

Everything that you could name was against them. The system was against them. The management was against them and even their colleagues was against them. They may not have said it to their faces but it was being said behind their backs. The males were sort of their noses put out of joint and said 'who do these women think they are - fighting for more pay'. We're the people who do the work and women can't work as well as we can. So you had this whole mixed bag of stuff. So there was a big learning curve and I have to say there was hundreds and hundreds of meetings trying to make people understand; all this was was saying here's women doing the same job as men but getting paid less.

By the time the case started, Northern Ireland had been engulfed in the civil strife of 'the Troubles' for fifteen years.

SPOKEMAN

We didn't allow politics to come into anything that we've ever done but back secretly and behind backs you had people with mistrust. Are we being led down the path here that we don't really want to go? What is this about? Is this just another stunt by republicanishm whatever the case may be and you had all those thoughts going on and where maybe you hold a meeting on a Monday or a Tuesday night and you signed up all those women who say 'yes, we're going forward with it'; by Thursday you had two thirds of those people coming back and saying 'I've talked to my husband and I'm not going to bother'.

PERSON 3

The case itself was the first test in the Northern Ireland Courts of the new law and I don't think if we had known at the beginning what a legal obstacle race it was to become we would have embraced it quite as readily as we did.

PERSON 1

None of us had ever sat in a court, you know, and so we had, we'd go in and the clerk would make sure we'd sit beside each other and if anybody asked any questions who was to answer the questions (laughter), you know, it was, you've got to be that blasé about it too and sit and give, you know, comments and who does he think he is? And you got to know the figures on the other side, their faces and you would not hello (laughter) but we were not actually suing them, we were suing the Eastern Health Service, we were suing everybody at the end of the day, like, but not an individual, we weren't suing any individuals. So did you find it difficult especially going into court.

PERSON 6 (Mary McAuley)

What went on in court, you were thinking - management you'd think they were staring at you and studying you and at you (laughter) but they found you at first but as I said all the years you got used to looking at all these faces, you just go back and you just say, you've done that before.

PERSON 1

You see, nobody understood really what was happening. It was a whole new world for them too. Trying to get through, you know, the idea of equality on all levels. But Sally, I remember the first time we went to court you were sick. Sally you were weren't you?

PERSON 5

I was. I was indeed.

PERSON 1

You were sick every morning before she left the house, just nerves.

PERSON 5

You just psyche yourself up so much about going, you know, as Mary said, like you know, management just thought, you shouldn't be doing this you shouldn't be here. We found that when they passed that they were sort of, but then as time went on I think they got used to us going to court, we got used to going to court and I think we all wanted everyone to be an end to it. It was like yesterday's news for a while, you know.

PERSON 4

The thing that frustrated us most was the amount of time that everybody had to spend in court and how much the job they did was dissected in a bad way as opposed to a good way.

PERSON 1

Very humiliating, mind, Patricia.

PERSON 4

All of the attempts to demean the very valuable work that the women were doing.

PERSON 6

They said that the women cleaned their own homes, so coming in to clean the hospitals is no problem, you know, because that what's we've done all the time.

*After six years of industrial tribunal hearings, the case went to the High Court.
The five women came under pressure to accept individual settlements.*

PERSON 6

Well, the offer would have been good for me but the point is it wasn't just done for me, it was done for – we took the case for everybody so in that sense we didn't want to be paid off.

PERSON 1

I was very proud of the rest of the women because you didn't even have to ask them. They just like tried and everybody said, "No". That was it, unanimous decision, "No". That wasn't the idea behind it. It was not just to get money for five women. It was to get it for everybody. It was to get justice for everybody.