

Recording women's voices: An introduction

Winning Equal Pay

Women in the UK have worked for wages as long as men have. They've rarely earned as much.

Sarah Boston, 'Women Workers and the Trade Unions'

Despite the fact that there have always been women who have had to support themselves, have had to support families, there was this absolute attitude that women's work was never that of the breadwinner. It was pin money, it was for makeup, the wages.

But in 1968 a pay strike by Ford sewing machinists brought car production to a halt.

Ford sewing machinists, TGWU

Person 1

We fight them, we really did, really fight them.

Person 2

That's right.

Person 3

Well we didn't think we were that strong.

Person 1

We didn't think that we would bring Ford's to a standstill.

Secretary of State Barbara Castle MP invited the strikers to her office to discuss their grievances.

Sue Hastings, Equal pay expert

It was what provoked Barbara Castle in to recognising that it really was necessary for the Government to introduce equal pay legislation.

But the 1970 Equal Pay Act didn't cover women like these Belfast hospital cleaners because they were in women-only jobs.

Terry Marsland, Tobacco Workers' Union

The Equal Pay Act meant that if you were a woman and you were doing the same job as a man then you could claim equal pay but we know that the vast army of women that we were concerned about weren't doing the same jobs as a man so the big issue had not been addressed.

The 'big issue' was the value of women's work. The 1984 Equal Value Amendment gave these women a chance.

Rosaleen Davidson, NUPE shop steward

We really started to fight when I became part of the union. You know you were listening to discussions on pay raises and I used to think, you know, these men here sitting on their ass all day and my women are cleaning theatres, cleaning kitchens, we had to scrub big machines and

they were sitting there saying how much back pay they were getting. We were getting pennies, I mean literally getting pennies and they weren't that much better paid than us but it was so unfair.

The TUC has made a series of DVDs with trade unionists who've fought for equal pay for work of equal value like these Yorkshire 'dinner ladies' represented by UNISON.

Person 4

You changed legislation. You stopped employers from cutting pay to win contracts. They did that.

Person 5

With your help.

Person 6

With your help.

... and the speech therapists whose case took nearly 15 years to resolve.

Prof Pam Enderby, MSE-Amicus

The union weren't the biggest union in the world. The speech therapists weren't a large union group within that and my husband kept on sort of saying 'Are we going to lose the house over this?'

With the support of her union, the GMB the value of Julie Hayward's work as a cook in a shipyard was recognised by the House of Lords.

I don't think I would have even took one step forward. I haven't got the knowledge, I haven't got the understanding of all that to actually do that and that's what you pay your union dues for, for those people to fight your cases for you, to do things and that's where the collective power of the people being together can make things happen.