

Britain's Sex Discrimination Act is turning 50

2024-2025 SOCIAL CHANGE
oral sessions with C. Hamard

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| by Yvonne Roberts, *The Observer*, Dec 29, 2024

5 So how much longer until women have equal pay? BBC News reported confidently on the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) 1975 under the headline "New laws to end battle of the sexes". Half a century later, as the 50th anniversary approaches, has it been proved right or wrong?

The Sex Discrimination Act protected women and men from direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of sex or marital status. The new law covered employment, education, training, harassment and the provision of goods and services.

10 In 1980, Kim Turley, backed by the EOC¹, went to a tribunal claiming she had been sacked from a department store, because she was pregnant. Her case was dismissed, bizarrely, because a man couldn't become pregnant. Several decades later, in 2016, the EHRC estimated that 54,000 women a year were still illegally sacked as a result of becoming pregnant.

15 At this point, perhaps, time travel to the 70s is required to add a bit of cheer. Then, a woman couldn't take out a bank loan without a male guarantor. Women earned 50p for every £1 in the male wage packet. The gender pay gap addressed by the weak Equal Pay Act (1975) was blamed on women's lack of negotiating skills, testosterone, confidence, competitiveness and a tendency to go home and put the children to bed rather than socialise and network. Anything was preferable to putting the spotlight on sexism.

20 The good news is that the 70s legislation offered a toehold, then a foothold in previously male-dominated spaces in, for example, the trade unions. They needed the boost of female membership. Women found new allies in other women.

25 The 70s saw the birth of the National Abortion Campaign in favour of a woman's right to choose; 1979 saw the first Black Women's Conference fighting discrimination on colour, class and gender. At the same time, some employers realised that there was money to be made in hiring women. They adapted the workplace, exercising positive discrimination, boosting profits as their workforce belatedly began to reflect the markets they were trying to reach. So, where are we now?

30 The gender pay gap has narrowed on average to 7% for full-time work but stands at 13% when part-time workers (predominantly female) are factored in. However, in some industries such as finance, shockingly, the GPG ranges from 17% to 32%. At the current rate of progress, a 21-year-old woman entering the workplace now will have to wait 45 years before she sees pay parity.

35 According to the financial journalist Annabelle Williams, if childcare were affordable (free?), good quality and available, 1.4 million mothers would move into paid work. Meanwhile, women still put hours of unpaid labour into domesticity and caring. Care in all its manifestations deserves to be valued. On the 50th anniversary of the SDA², one can rage that progress has been plodding at the same time as praising the power of collective action. (485 words)

¹ EOC = Equal Opportunities Commission

² Sex Discrimination Act (UK)