

Britain's Sex Discrimination Act is turning 50, so how much longer until women have equal pay?

Yvonne Roberts, The Guardian, Sun 29 Dec 2024

The 1975 legislation paved the way for important change but progress has been slow and poverty is still informed by gender

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". Ronald Bell QC, Conservative MP for Beaconsfield, predicted catastrophe. "The good it will do will be microscopic and the harm will be immense," he thundered in the House of Commons. Half a century later, as the 50th anniversary approaches, has the honourable gentleman 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. Almost overnight, "firemen" became "firefighters".

The act also created the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), later absorbed into the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), whose task it was to work towards the elimination of discrimination and promote equality of opportunity. Based in Manchester (or Personchester as parts of the media joked), it had a budget of £1m and a staff of civil servants and commissioners. The commission should have been a milestone in civil rights but it became a bump in the road, lacking muscle, teeth and political drive.

In 1980, for instance, Kim Turley, backed by the EOC, went to a tribunal claiming she had been sacked from Alders, a department store, because she was pregnant. Her case was dismissed, bizarrely, because a man couldn't become pregnant nor was pregnancy akin to a man taking time off work on account of sickness. A rum kind of "equality".

Several decades later, in 2016, the EHRC estimated that 54,000 women a year were still illegally sacked as a result of becoming pregnant. And it hasn't improved much since.

At this point, perhaps, time travel to the 70s is required to add a bit of cheer because, depending where you choose to focus, improvements in some women's rights has been far from "microscopic". Then, a woman couldn't take out a bank loan without a male guarantor. In some jobs, if you became a wife you waved goodbye to your career. The lack of a female toilet was a favourite reason why women were kept out of traditionally male industries and, while 40% of the workforce was female, 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, injustice and economic irrationality.

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 because male membership had drastically declined as Margaret Thatcher hacked away at heavy industries.

"[The legislation] expanded the organisational spaces for legitimate occupation by women," write academics Sarah Gilmore, Nancy Harding and Jackie Ford in their paper *Fifty years of fighting sex discrimination*. Women found new allies in other women, and decided "We will survive and thrive".

And they did. The 70s saw the birth of the National Abortion Campaign in favour of a woman's right to choose; refuges were opened; 1979 saw the first Black Women's Conference fighting discrimination on colour, class and gender. Women's liberation conferences were held and demands made that included equal pay and educational opportunities, free 24-hour nurseries and a woman's right to define her own sexuality.

[...] 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?

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%. [...] Women still put hours of unpaid labour into domesticity and caring. So why doesn't gross domestic product include the work people do for free? Care in all its manifestations deserves to be valued. [...]