

Mind the gap! An entangled history of the struggle for equal pay 1945-2000

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The demand for equal pay has existed probably as long as waged work. After the Second World War international bodies such as the ILO and the UN, as well as international trade unions and trade union confederations turned the issue into a truly global demand and created international standards which defined wage equality and included a number of suggested methods to implement wage equality between men and women. At the same time wage negotiations can take place in a number of different ways: In some regions labour markets consist of a large formal sector and are characterised by a long experience of collective agreements, in other regions a large informal sector made legislation ineffective, more recently wage negotiations have also become individualized.

The aim of our presentation is to shed light on how global/ universal concepts such as equal remuneration were transferred and reshaped through trade union organisations to influence the situation of individual workers and how local wage setting practices did influence the work of unions and affect global/universal concepts. We will present some preliminary results of our ongoing project.

Our main questions are: Which methods and strategies were used to further the demand for equal remuneration? Which methods and strategies were used to keep up the demand for equal remuneration? How did the concept of equal remuneration matter in practice? We have investigated these questions in a number of different historical contexts and political levels such as internationally, regionally, nationally and locally. We have studied trade unions and their women's committees on all of these levels and international bodies such as the ILO and the UN Commission on the Status of Women. On a regional level we have studied the co-operation during the 1940s until the late 1960s between the women's committees of the national trade union federations in the Scandinavian countries. At a local level we have investigated specific work places such as the municipal workers in Sweden and textile workers in South Africa. We have also used court cases from India to see how the concept of equal remuneration has affected different groups of workers such as state employees, employees in private firms and workers in the informal sector.

Our preliminary results show that women's committees in trade union organisations were partly created to handle the demand for equal remuneration on all levels. As a first step gendered wage categories - as in women's wages as percentage of male wages - were abolished and created what at a first glimpse looked like gender-neutral wage categories but many times had an implicit gender bias. Labour feminists started to advocate a more technocratic and academic approach, job evaluations and job descriptions were since the beginning of the 1960s seen as a solution to the problem and were amongst other strategies such as increasing women's union membership, improved vocational training for women, and a larger share of women in male dominated occupations, prescribed as a remedy both by trade unionists and international organisations. As a consequence, wage statistics became in some of the cases for the first time available for others than employers and contributed to a more transparent wage structure and wage setting practice.

The concept of equal remuneration was modelled on the working conditions of the formal

labour marked in the Global North. The strategies developed to implement equal remuneration were adapted to these conditions and despite critique by labour feminists the conditions of the large informal sectors in the Global South did for a long time not important for the choice of strategies.

In addition, our results show that international concepts do matter in practice but in a number of different ways: They could be used to introduce equal remuneration as a concept and could further equal pay legislation, put in the first place it helped to put the question on the agenda of trade unions and governments. However, this did not always mean that equal pay had become part of wage setting practices, power relations in unions – between men and women and between different groups of workers, amongst unions and employers had to be challenged.

One of the major problems with the implementation of equal remuneration was the ignorance of trade unions towards the issue of wage equality between men and women, such as in the Scandinavian countries. For this reason, labour feminists fought to put the issue on the agenda with less focus on definitions and concepts. Here the ILO convention was instrumental to put equal remuneration on the agenda. The convention also politicized the discussion and equal remuneration became more important on both social and political agendas of the time. Although we could expect that the women's committees of the Scandinavian trade unions, who had been demanding equal remuneration since their foundation in the 1940s would use the ILO convention to put pressure on their trade union federations, but they did not. The negative attitude towards the convention among the Scandinavian trade union federations, with the exception of the Norwegian, was mirrored in the women's committees which followed their organisations wage setting policies. In Norway the women's committee and the trade union federation joined forces in the struggle for ratification.

Labour feminists had to choose subtle and less outspoken tactics. One way was re-framing the entire issue: The problem of women's lower wages in comparison with men's wages was most often referred to as the problem of women's wages. In order to make this question a matter that concerned the entire trade union movement, the labour feminists recognized the problem of defining equal remuneration as an exclusively female matter. Instead they used the term equal pay. In this perspective the ILO convention in itself helped to convert the demand to a universal political and societal matter.

Another obstacle on the bumpy road towards equal pay was a question of comparison. Job evaluations gave prove of the difficult and sensitive task comparing wages and assignments of women workers with those of male workers. Here comparisons were also made men's wages in other sectors, first and foremost the civil servants and the salaried employees. If the male workers were forced to held back their wage demands in order to support an increase in women's wages, which was seen to give rise to another and worse, class-based, injustice.

The demand for equal pay was never given the importance so it could challenge and change the established wage setting policy of the trade union federations. In other words, gender based interests were not allowed to exceed what was defined as basic class based interest.

Both women's committees at the international and regional levels were depicted as passive and powerless actors. Our results show that they were driving forces for the demand for wage equality between men and women.

Finally, on a theoretical level our results show that we need to focus on the division of labour and the division of workers in specific historical contexts if we want to analyse the impacts of global concepts on working and living conditions as well as vice versa.