

How did the women's rights movement shape modern Britain?

How did women seek legal equality in 1970s Britain?

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

By the end of the lesson students will:

- Use a wide range written and visual primary source evidence to examine the Dagenham Ford Machinists Strike and its impact on UK society
- Compose and defend a response to an enquiry question by citing historical evidence
- Understand the key tenants of the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 as well as their shortcomings

Introduction

When 187 women sewing machinists walked out the Dagenham Ford factory in June 1968, they did so because they felt their work was undervalued as 'unskilled' labour. Their strike would come to represent a major protest in the battle for equal pay in the United Kingdom and is credited with precipitating the 1970 Equal Pay Act. The events at Dagenham have since become the subject of a blockbuster film and stage musical.

This lesson puts students directly in contact with the voices, writing, and perspectives of the Dagenham strikers. Students will critically examine multiple pieces of primary source evidence from the strike. They will produce a 1-2 paragraph reflection on the question: To what extent was the Dagenham strike a success for women's rights? In responding, they will demonstrate their knowledge of the event and their ability to use historical evidence in context. The lesson concludes by reviewing the key tenants of the 1970 Equal Pay act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, as well as their shortcomings.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested based on a one-hour lesson and may need adapting based on circumstances.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

Resources:

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Dagenham Strike handout – additional resource

Lesson Plan

Starter (6 minutes)

Display a series of gender-specific job advertisements from the 1960s (Slide 1). Ask students: What stands out to you about these advertisements? In a class discussion, prompt students to reflect on what is unusual or different about these advertisements compared to ones they have seen before.

Explain that until the 1970s, it was very common for companies to specify whether a man or a woman could apply for a job. Today's lesson is about two major laws passed in the UK in the 1970s which made these types of advertisements illegal: the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act. This legislation dramatically changed British society by enshrining gender equality into law.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Remind students of the unit enquiry question (Slide 2): How did the women's rights movement shape twentieth century Britain? Introduce students to this lesson's enquiry question: How did women seek legal equality in 1970s Britain?

Dagenham strike of 1968 (35 minutes)

Provide students with basic background information on the Dagenham Ford Strike of 1968 (Slide 3). 187 women went on strike from their jobs as sewing machinists making seat covers for

Ford car seats. They were primarily frustrated that their labour was not recognised as ‘skilled’ according to Ford’s pay grading. Yet the strike would come to represent broader frustration with how men and women were paid differently.

Next, introduce students to the primary activity of the lesson (Slide 4). Students will examine several pieces of historical evidence related to the Dagenham strike to answer the historical enquiry question: To what extent was the Dagenham strike a success for women’s rights?

Distribute one copy of the Dagenham strike handout to every student (see additional resource).

Provide a brief overview of the instructions for the activity (Slide 5). Students will go through each piece of historical evidence, discussing the handout questions and creating notes based on their discussion. The first piece of evidence will be discussed as a full class while pieces 2-4 will be examined in small groups. After examining all of the evidence, students will independently answer the enquiry question: To what extent was the Dagenham strike a success for women’s rights?

Walk students through the first piece of evidence together as a whole classroom. Play students the [BBC interview with the striking women](#) (Slide 6). The interview is 75 seconds long; replay it once or twice if needed. Initiate a class-wide discussion on the handout questions, asking students to share their thoughts aloud, citing evidence from the video:

- What do the women say they are striking about?
- Why do the women believe that their labour is skilled?

Give students 3-4 minutes to complete their notes based on the class discussion, providing a rationale for their responses to each question.

Now split the students into small groups of two or three. The rest of the activity will run in small groups.

Students should move on to the second piece of evidence: a [letter from the striking women to the Prime Minister](#) Harold Wilson (Slide 7). A transcript of the letter is also included in the Dagenham strike handout. Ask students to examine the transcript in their small groups for 4-5 minutes, completing their notes based on the handout:

- Why do the women say they can continue striking indefinitely?
- Initially, the women were striking over being classed as unskilled workers. How has their motivation changed, according to the letter?

Once students have concluded their small group discussion, ask them to share out their group’s answers to the class, again utilizing evidence.

Next move students on to the third piece of evidence: the [fax to Prime Minister Harold Wilson](#) confirming that the strike had ended on 28 June (Slide 8). Give students 3-4 minutes to review the document and complete their notes on the following questions:

- Why did the women decide to end their strike?
- How did their wage change?
- Did the women achieve their goal of equal pay?

Once small group discussion has concluded, ask students to share their group's reflections while citing evidence.

Now, ask students to begin working through the fourth and final piece of evidence: the 2018 [Stylist Magazine video of two Dagenham strikers reflecting on their experience of striking](#) (Slide 9). Play the video for students as a whole classroom and give them a further 3-4 minutes to complete their notes as a small group based on the questions:

- How do the women explain their motivations for striking?
- How much longer did the Dagenham women have to wait for their work to be classified as skilled labour?

Encourage students to share their group's answers with the class while utilizing evidence.

Finally, ask students to work independently to craft a 1-2 paragraph response to the historical enquiry question (Slide 10): to what extent was the Dagenham strike a success for women's rights? Encourage them to cite their reasoning using examples from the evidence and their handout notes.

Students can turn in their responses to this question as a formative assessment and an opportunity for feedback. Alternative, time permitting, students can volunteer to share a summary of their response and their evidence with the rest of the class in order to elucidate further discussion.

The impact of legislation (10 minutes)

Review the major tenants of the Equal Pay Act 1970 with students (Slide 11). This bill was introduced by Labour Employment Minister Barbara Castle. It legally enshrined the idea that men and women should be paid equally for the same work. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 made it illegal to discriminate based on gender. These Acts together allowed people to file complaints if they felt like they were being discriminated at work or were not being paid equally because of their gender.

Explain to students that the fight for equal pay is still ongoing (Slide 12). In 2024, [women were still being paid 91p for every £1 a man earned](#). Furthermore, although these laws set a legal standard for how people should be treated in their workplace, they did not change the culture of the UK overnight. Women still faced discrimination and harassment because of their gender. This would be the focus of future feminist campaigns.

Summary (5 minutes)

Ask students to reflect: How did the Equal Pay Act 1970 and Sex Discrimination Act 1975 make the workplace more equal? What kinds of inequalities remained? Lead a brief group discussion based on their responses. (Slide 13)