

EFRA Branch:
Natural England Section



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Dear All



A tribute to women's courage and protest
By Julia

During the week of International Women's Day, it was with horror that we learnt of the awful kidnapping and murder of Sarah Everard; the latest in an incessant string of attacks and harassment of women which happen every day and night in this country. And later that very week, at her vigil on Clapham Common, where women came together in peace to remember her and collectively make a stand that we cannot accept this anymore, we

then learnt of the shocking and utterly thoughtless treatment inflicted on them by the Met Police.

Technically, the gathering was unlawful under the current legislation and a ruling from the High Court, but the failure of clarity on approach was down to poor legislative framing by the government, putting the police in the middle. But have no doubt the scenes showed peaceful women being restrained, grabbed, handcuffed, manhandled into police vans, and some of them arrested and fined; disturbing, faint echoes of the Suffragettes' Black Friday.

The ONS bleakly reports that in the year of 2017¹, the latest year for which data is available, an estimated **3.4m** women had been victims of sexual assault in their lives, including one million who had been raped or faced attempted rape. Conviction rates are woefully low; a disturbing flaw in our criminal justice system. This isn't an issue that affects women only – around 650,000 men also experienced sexual assault.

Even after the recent events, there is rebuke, denial and ignorance of the experiences of women, that somehow there isn't anything wrong. Talking with a local school mum, a long standing friend of mine, even she exclaimed how she never feels unsafe; that her male colleague at work says that he would change his own behaviour walking at night; that it's so rare what happened to Sarah Everard; that the police were doing their job under the coronavirus rules. The point has been grossly missed by some.

We saw exactly the same repression last year with the Black Lives Matter protests, and the subsequent backlash and denial against the movement, the justification for wrongs of the past, people rejecting the valid and real impacts and hurt of black and minority ethnic people which affect them to this day.

As union members, we cannot accept this. It cuts to the core, in our collective effort to fight for equal rights, exclusion of no one, our endeavour for plain decency. Our society is at a turning point now; it has to reckon with its history, its culture, its dark underbelly of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and that change is needed and it is needed *now*.

For those who have been personally affected by violence against women, please see the government's renewed call for evidence where you can share your experience: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/violence-against-women-and-girls-vawg-call-for-evidence> This closes on 26 March.

I had a family Zoom call on that Saturday night, as the news was coming out about the botched policing of Sarah's vigil. We talked as a family about our experiences, how we felt, and we got onto reflecting about women's rights more generally. Just take a moment to reflect what progression women have made, but how awfully recent it all is²...

In 1870, married women were legally allowed to own their own property and money. In 1894, women could vote in local elections. In 1918, women aged over 30 could vote, and stand to become MPs in Parliament. In 1928, it became legal for women over 21 to vote.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-56365412>

²The Suffrage movement for women to have the vote: <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/womens-suffrage-timeline#>

Meanwhile there was the battle for women to access the workforce. In the civil service³, it took the First World War to see women recruited temporarily, driven by the need to fill jobs the men left behind as they joined the forces. But following this, women continued to be relegated by far to administrative roles, and astonishingly they continued to be affected by the Marriage Bar, a rule which prevented recruitment of married women, and required the resignation of women upon becoming married. The use of marriage bars was commonplace in Western countries through much of the 1900s. The marriage bar was only abolished in the Home Civil Service in 1946; and 1973 for the Foreign Service. Quite unthinkable.

Then take a look at statutory maternity pay. Only from 1987⁴ did women receive the right to statutory maternity pay in the UK – for six weeks’ pay at 90% of average weekly earnings. Subsequent legislative changes have improved the provision, and for men too, with shared parental leave being provided from 2014, much of this down to action of the unions.

But we mustn’t forget women also had to overcome exactly the same challenges in the trade unions themselves – being able to represent and be represented⁵; pioneered in the 1870s by the Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL). It took decades for women membership levels to rise, as their employment levels rose. It was one of the trade union movement’s key achievements to bring about the first equal pay legislation, the Equal Pay Act, in 1970, and to take up the issue of maternity rights. This was also the time when racism also became a key issue for the unions, as the diversity of membership reflected the growing diversity of the country’s workforce, with intake of immigrant workers including from the West Indies and South Asia, brought in to prop up the UK’s labour market and save the economy.

But as we know all too well, we are not there yet. Nowhere near. We do not have parity. The UK gender pay gap remains huge, with concerns for ethnicity and other protected groups too. The gender pensions gap is even worse, and unequal pay for women doing the same work as men is still rife across organisations, despite it being a legal requirement. This remains a huge challenge that the unions continue to fight for. Even right here, right now, in Natural England – Prospect is actively pursuing a collective grievance on behalf of women members on equal pay.

The pandemic too, has disproportionately affected women, where coronavirus has *‘effectively pressed rewind on the steady progress we’ve made towards equality and shunted many of us back into the roles of 1950s housewives, juggling childcare with running a home, all while attempting to clock in for a virtual day in the office’*⁶.

Sometimes, there are days like those we have just been through, where everything seems bleak and turned for the worse, and it seems hopeless. But the plight of Sarah Everard, and that of George Floyd, triggered what may be pivotal moments in our modern history.

³ <https://civilservant.org.uk/women-history.html#:~:text=The%20marriage%20bar%20prohibited%20married%20women%20from%20joining,Civil%20Service%20and%201973%20for%20the%20Foreign%20Service.>

⁴

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01429/SN01429.pdf#:~:text=%3A%20Statutory%20maternity%20pay%20was%20introduced%20in%201987.,for%20the%20remainder%20of%20her%20maternity%20pay%20period.>

⁵ <https://www.striking-women.org/module/rights-and-responsibilities/claiming-rights-role-trade-unions-uk>

⁶ [Women Forced Back Into The Roles of Traditional 1950s Housewives \(allbrightcollective.com\)](https://www.allbrightcollective.com/women-forced-back-into-the-roles-of-traditional-1950s-housewives/)

A time when people joined together, and said *no more*. We have to remember there is no room for complacency. Democracy, equality, inclusion and decency, they are not things we can take for granted. We have to fight for them every day. And collectively, we can do this.

We look with concern to proposed legislation soon to be brought in, which will make protesting even harder. But where there is a will, there is a way.

With regard to women's safety, Defra's women's network has set out some useful actions and principles that we can all do, while we wait for the inertia of societal culture and law to change. And these don't apply just to women, but also the BAME community, the LGBT+ community, and any other groups of people who need change to feel safe and valued.

- **Listen to and believe** women when they say they feel unsafe, even if their experiences aren't something you directly relate to;
- **Don't engage in victim blaming**, or judge women for their actions. Victims of gender violence are never to blame;
- **Challenge gender stereotypes and call out gender bias and inequality** wherever you see it;
- **Celebrate women's achievements** publicly and commit to developing an inclusive workplace culture where everyone can thrive.

Men's behaviour is in the spotlight, but only because of individuals' unacceptable actions. We need to acknowledge and learn too about men's challenges in being able to open up, being able to challenge their peers without being ostracised, and explain what they need for support in helping make things better. The conversation has opened up, and is something we need to unite together on.

If you would like to find out more, or perhaps explore how you would like to actively engage in the union's work, please do contact us.


Stay safe.








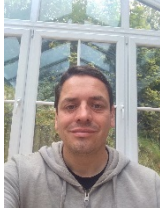
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