

Don't take women's rights for granted

By Alison Maitland

This is an edited version of an article published by IWE (International Women of Excellence) in March 2018

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if you could not vote. You would have no say in who ran the country or in who determined policies for your town or city. You might hold political views, but they would count for nothing. You would be shut out, disenfranchised.

This was the situation in Britain just over 100 years ago, before the historic Representation of the People Act of 1918 began a slow accumulation of rights for women. A century may seem like an age, and the street battles to win the first votes for women may look distant. But recent events have underlined how much is still at stake. We cannot take hard-won rights for granted.

And hard-won they were. The campaigners collaborated across social class and party politics, using their collective voices to force change. They went on long marches across Britain and suffered abuse, manhandling, imprisonment, force-feeding and, in the case of Emily Davison, death for their cause.

When change came, it was only partial. The 1918 Act gave the vote only to women aged over 30 with property. It took another decade for all women to have the vote on the same terms as men under the Equal Franchise Act 1928.

Many women's rights that we now regard as commonplace were won much more recently. The 1970s was a particularly important decade for equality. Switzerland, the last European country to give women the vote, finally did so in 1971. In the UK, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 was followed in 1975 by legislation making it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of sex and marital status.

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It seems astonishing today that women diplomats had to quit their jobs if they got married until as recently as 1973, when the ‘marriage bar’ in the Foreign Office was finally abolished.

We don’t now give a second thought to women reading the news on television. But it was not until the arrival of Angela Rippon on the Nine O’Clock News in 1975 that the idea of female newsreaders became widely acceptable. There had been two earlier pioneers: Barbara Mandell on ITN in the mid-50s, and Nan Winton on the BBC in 1960. But BBC research ‘revealed a dislike for a woman reading the news’ and Winton’s tenure was short-lived.

Such attitudes may seem buried in the past. But they are not. Female newsreaders, for all their strength in numbers, still face a range of challenges, from expectations about what they should look like to online abuse and threats, as experienced recently by the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg and Channel 4’s Cathy Newman when doing their jobs as journalists.

The gender pay gap remains persistently wide, nearly 50 years on. In the UK, it stands at 20.8%, and it is 16% on average across the EU. The British government’s new requirements for employers to publish their pay gaps are throwing up fascinating data. Finally a light is being shone on what goes on behind the scenes. Many employers have a lot to do to address the discrepancies – and they are under more pressure to do so. You can see the results here: <https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/Viewing/search-results>

When women fight these battles individually, it takes enormous courage, determination and resilience. Carrie Gracie has demonstrated this in her campaign to be treated equally to her male peers at the BBC. The former China editor, who stepped down in protest at pay inequality, went before MPs to tell her story and explained how painful the grievance process had been.

Particularly striking was her comment that the process had concluded she was paid less than male counterparts because she was deemed to be ‘in development’ – even though she was China editor.

There is a persistent bias in many organisations that deems women to be less ready for promotion and leadership than their male peers. Having to fight this drains energy that could be put to more positive use creating new products and services, building communities, planning a more sustainable future, or

mentoring people to be better leaders. When women run up against endless barriers, they sometimes give up. That leads to a pointless waste of talent.

One uplifting feature of these struggles and sacrifices is that women have done it not just for themselves but also for all women. That's what the suffragists and suffragettes did, and it's what today's feminist heroines are doing.

There is comfort and courage to be taken from the support of other women. The support of men is crucial too. That means men challenging other men when necessary. The UN's HeForShe campaign is a great example of how men can stand up for women's rights. Many men are doing so.

At the World Economic Forum this year, the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, told how she had been patronised in the past. At a parliamentary finance committee, the CEO of a big bank had started explaining to her in very simple terms how interest rate markets functioned. A male colleague, who led the committee, told the banker that Solberg actually had the highest economic education of anyone on the committee. The banker was embarrassed. The point was made and won. And Solberg did not have to say a word.

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