

Professor Hazel Conley
Professor of Human Resource Management
CESR and University of the West of England



Hazel.Conley@uwe.ac.uk

This issue of CESR Review marks the celebration of International Women's Day (IWD) 2016. The first recorded IWD was celebrated on 28th February 1909 in the United States, some eleven years before women there were given the right to vote. The day was organised to mark the first anniversary of the garment workers' strike in New York, organised and led by working-class women. The annual international 8th March celebration began, like so many contemporary initiatives for women's rights, following the 1975 UN International Women's year that culminated in the Beijing Convention.



1975 also marked a turning point for women's equality in the UK with the first Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act coming into force that year. As is now well documented one of the main catalysts for the Equal Pay Act was the sewing machinists' strike in 1968 at Ford Dagenham. Thinking about that famous strike some forty eight years later it is disconcerting to think that such a ground-breaking strike could almost certainly not take place today. The very tight regulation surrounding strike action would work against women striking in similar circumstances for equal pay in 2016. The 1968 strike was not initially supported by the Ford women's national trade union, something that today is essential for workers to have any legal protection. Even if the strike had been supported by the national union, women's membership was very much in the minority and, under current legislation, they would not have achieved a majority in a strike ballot required for lawful industrial action. The Trade Union Bill currently passing through Parliament will see the ability to call and effectively conduct strike action further eroded for all trade union members.

Even if, despite all of these barriers, a group of women factory workers in 2016 felt so aggrieved about their pay or working conditions that they took strike action, it is impossible to imagine that a government Minister today would take them seriously enough to listen to their concerns and act in the way that Barbara Castle did in 1968. In 2016 it is profoundly saddening and demoralising to think that working-class women probably have less of a voice today than did our sisters forty eight years ago.

Another catalyst for the Equal Pay Act was the decision to join the European Economic Community, as it then was. Membership of the European Union has since been the crucial factor in almost all of our equality and protective employment law since the UK joined in 1973. In 2016 UK membership of the EU hangs in the balance and, worryingly, many of those who are pressing for withdrawal cite the 'burden' of equality and human rights law and the well-worn mantra of migration as a reason for 'Brexit'.



This IWD issue of CESR Review contains articles from academics and practitioners that highlight the continued importance of equality and social justice research. **Jackie Longworth's** article examines the gender pay gap, with a focus on Bristol. Based on secondary analysis of the Office for National Statistics Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings and qualitative data from consultation with local women, Jackie provides useful insights on what remains to be done to close the gap.

Occupational segregation still looms large in the continuance of the gender pay gap and **Vanda Papafilippou** and **Laura Bentley** provide a summary of their longitudinal research on engineering graduates, particularly addressing why women engineers feel less able to pursue a career in their chosen field and find themselves in lower paying jobs. Their research shows that women graduates are less likely to take up a career in engineering even when they have an outstanding degree qualification in the subject, which is yet further evidence of the failure of human capital theory to explain gendered occupational segregation and pay inequality. The difficulty for women graduates to imagine 'possible selves' as engineers is put forward as a way to understand such a loss of talent and skill from the sector.

Mentorship is a key issue for women working in jobs traditionally dominated by men and **Sue Durbin, Ana Lopes, Stella Warren** and **John Neugebauer** update us on the completion of their ESRC funded research on women's mentorship in the aerospace sector and their successful knowledge transfer partnership with industry leaders to encourage and retain women. The alta mentoring scheme, the objective of the project, has been developed under the combined efforts of the research team and industry partners and will improve the working lives and careers of women working in aerospace industries.

We are very pleased to welcome **Helen Mortimore** who joined UWE and CESR from Plymouth University last summer as a senior lecturer. Drawing on her doctoral research, Helen examines the role of HR as 'legal guardian', a practitioner perspective she argues is hidden from view in mainstream academic theories that prioritise 'strategic HRM'. Helen's article identifies how the 'legal guardianship' role is a double-edged sword for HR practitioners. Whilst upholding employment rights for employees still figures in the discourses of HR practitioners, it is often precariously balanced with the requirement to protect employers against litigation.

We also have two new books to celebrate in CESR that resonate with the themes of this IWD issue. **Sonia McKay** provides a synopsis of her new book *Living on the Margins* co-authored with Alice Bloch on the plight of undocumented workers struggling to get by in UK cities. **Sue Durbin's** new book, *Women Who Succeed*, examines the career trajectories of 46 senior women, providing an in-depth analysis of mentors, role models, relationships and networks.

Together these contributions to our IWD issue of CESR Review demonstrate the commitment of CESR to bringing together academic research and employer practice with real positive impact for women in the South West.