

1975 a global turning point for equal pay struggles? A microspatial approach

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On 24th October 1975, the United Nations Day, nine out of ten Icelandic women famously walked out of their homes and workplaces to demonstrate the value of their work. The United Nations International Women's Year (IWY) had brought together various factions of the women's movement — from the most radical to the more conservative — in deliberations about the status of women. The Women's Day Off, as the event was called, was planned by a women's committee formed by a wide range of Icelandic women's organizations to prepare events during IWY.

The walk out was momentous and came to have direct and lasting impact well beyond Iceland. The solidarity of the Icelandic women immediately caught the attention of international media. The following day, readers of the *New York Times* learned that in Iceland almost all women had decided to go on strike. Claiming that many Icelandic men had at first treated the idea as a joke, the paper reported that the women's action had created severe problems not only because there was no one to attend to the women's jobs, but also that the closing of nursery schools had meant that many businessmen were forced to take their children to work with them.¹

The IWY is regarded as a watershed in the history of women around the world,² and the Icelandic Women's Day Off is an example of its immediate and lasting impact, both locally and internationally. Since 1975, the walkout has been repeated at regular intervals in Iceland, and it has been frequently referred to internationally as an exemplary women's protest.³ In this article we argue that the preparations and the outcome of IWY was of major importance to globalize women's struggles in general and the struggles for equal remuneration in particular.

Historians of global labour history have questioned the nationalism and eurocentrism of earlier labour history, but at the same time as Christian G. de Vito and Anne Gerritsen have shown there is a tendency to “conflate” the global with the planet and to marginalize the local to the rank of a case study. In an attempt to generalise, global history has looked at structural patterns in pre-defined spatial units, thus neglecting the diversity of the phenomena and development under study.⁴ Social movement theory offers concepts that connect the local and the global. It can explain why social mobilization processes take place and the mechanisms behind their success or failure. According to Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow, mobilization processes depend on the creation and use of political opportunities, the

¹ “Iceland: Women Strike,” *The New York Times*, 25 October, 1975, 34.

² Devaki Jain, *Women, Development and the UN. A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 67; Hilikka Pietilä, *Engendering the Global Agenda: The Story of Women and the United Nations*. Geneva (Geneva: UN Non-Governmental Liaison Services, 2002), 30-32; Hilikka Pietilä & Jeanne Vickers, *Making Women Matter: The Role of the United Nations* (London: Zed Books, 1990), 75-76.

³ See e.g. “Icelandic Women Strike for Economic and Social Equality,” Global Non-Violent Action Database, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/icelandic-women-strike-economic-and-social-equality-1975> (accessed March 11, 2020); Kirstie Brewer, “The Day Iceland's Women Went on Strike,” BBC News Magazine, 23 October, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34602822> (accessed March 11, 2020).

⁴ Christian G. de Vito & Anne Gerritsen “Micro-Spatial Histories of labour: Towards a new Global History,” in *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour*, ed. Christian G. de Vito & Anne Gerritsen, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-28, here 13.

use of specific repertoires of protest, and the process of interpreting and framing grievances to convince the opponent. To understand the emergence of mobilization for equal remuneration in a specific historical setting it is thus helpful to look at the creation and use of political opportunity structures. They can materialise at different levels of scale, and we argue that in order to explain the outcome we need to study the connections between them.⁵

Sidney Tarrow's concept of transnational activism is useful to focus on the mechanisms taking place in the triangular relationship of transnational activists, such as trade unions and women's movements, the state, and international institutions such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the United Nations (UN) or the European Community (EC). It explains why and how political opportunities emerging either nationally or internationally can be used in the mobilization process. The use of the term transnational to highlight border-crossing activities is the result of debates about "methodological nationalism" and aims at going beyond the nation state.⁶

In what follows we analyse local and national developments of equal pay struggles in Iceland, India, and South Africa. Each of these societies represent different political and economic situations, and different types of labour relations. All three countries entered the United Nations as independent states in the aftermath of the Second World War, and all were members of the ILO. By the 1970s, however, South Africa was internationally isolated. The country left the ILO in 1964 and ten years later it was suspended from the United Nations because of its apartheid politics. Moreover, social division differed between the countries. Iceland was a relatively equal society, but because of intersections of caste, race, and gender South Africa and India had a large population living below the subsistence level. The important differences between the three countries mean that the similarities we find in the struggle for equal remuneration during and around International Women's Year enable us to state that we have found robust global processes. It is our hope that these findings can then be tested in cases elsewhere.

We start with an outline of the periodization of international political opportunity structures. Thereafter we turn to the different local and national contexts to analyse how the preparations for IWY were used as a mobilization structure in different places in the world. Then we move on to show how the decisions of the 1975 international conference on women in Mexico City were used to change national legal frameworks for wage equality. Finally, we demonstrate how legislation and international agreements could be used by individuals, women's organisations, and trade unions to force employers to end wage discrimination against women.

To be sure, there has always been a gap between the ambition and outcome of international labour activism and the case of equal remuneration is no exception. Despite narrowed

⁵ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Doug McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements, Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23.

⁶ Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labour History* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008), 7; Marcel van der Linden, "Transnationalizing American labor history," *Journal of American History* 86:2 (1999), 1078–1092; Michael Werner & Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: der Ansatz der histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28:4 (2002), 607–636, here 6; Silke Neunsinger, "Cross-over! Om komparationer, transferanalyser, histoire croisée och den metodologiska nationalismens problem," *Historisk Tidskrift* (Sweden) 130:1 (2010), 3–24.

gendered wage gaps in most Western countries, women in the twenty first century earn on a global average between 40 to 90 per cent of men's wages.⁷ Yet, the examples we have presented above illustrate that during the UN Women's Decade international concepts were used systematically by those women who had knowledge about and access to them and proved to be effective tools in the struggle for wage equality on the national and local level. Joan Sangster has shown that women did have a voice at the local level, and these local voices were now more connected to international demands.⁸

From the late 1960s onwards, ending discrimination against women was an important part of international declarations, conventions and programmes of supra- and international organisations, and equal remuneration for men and women formed a substantial part of these. With the initiative of women from the Global South and the Eastern Block the demand for equal pay had received renewed interest within the UN. International Women's Year with its preparations, its celebration with the 1975 Mexico conference, and the implementation of the decisions made there changed the struggles for equal remuneration. The standardisation of the definition of equal remuneration for the same work and work of equal value and the demand to implement this definition in new or revised laws made the struggles truly global.

The UN's Women's Decade and previous work by the ILO impacted diverse repertoires of protest and created new political opportunity structures. Despite its weak standing at the ILO, Icelandic women used ILO Convention 100 and the mobilization for IWY to rally for wage equality and created repertoires of struggles which later had influence well beyond the local level. Moreover, legal improvements directly related to IWY provided them with new means of calling for the implementation of the principle of equal pay for jobs of equal value. Similarly, after the report on the status of women in India, submitted to the Indian government in 1974 and after the Indian Equal Remuneration Act was adopted in 1976, trade unions used the ILO as an official arena to put pressure on the Indian government to implement equal pay legislation and helped women workers who had lost their jobs when equal pay was introduced by protesting at the ILO with the result that they got their jobs back. And finally, South African women workers were able to refer to international labour standards to introduce equal pay in the textile factories before equal pay legislation was introduced in South Africa. This shows that global concepts were important in personal, local and national struggles for gender equality on the labour market. Countries with a general goal for equality such as India after Independence and Iceland during the latter half of the twentieth century have provided a good starting point for equal wage struggles. In South Africa, the struggles for equality were still ongoing during the fight against Apartheid and equality was at that point of time not a general social goal.⁹ However, our research also shows that the struggles for equal remuneration did reinforce general social equality, the strategies used for the implementation of equal pay created more transparent

⁷ See also Mättä, *The ILO Principle of Equal Pay*, 18, Richard Anker, *Gender and jobs: sex segregation of occupations in the world* (Geneva: ILO, 1998), 30. See also Lars Magnusson, Lija Mósesdóttir and Amparo Serano Pascual, *Equal pay and gender mainstreaming in the European employment strategy* (Brussels: ETUI, 2003).

⁸ Sangster, *Transforming Labour*, p. 246, Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality. Women on the Canadian Left 1920-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), see also Linda Kealey, *Enlisting women for the cause. Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) and Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left 1900-1918* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

⁹ Alvin Finkel, "The impact of Communism and Socialism on Women's Struggles and Social Entitlements in the Twentieth Century: A Global Overview".

wage structures. As the case of the textile industry in South Africa and the court cases in India show, all workers gained from the struggles for equal remuneration.