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Researching Around Our Subjects: Working Towards a Women's Labour History of Trade Unions in the British Film and Television Industries

Frances C. Galt

Abstract: *This article explores the opportunities and obstacles of researching women's trade union activism in the British film and television industries between 1933 and 2017. The surviving material on women's union participation is incomplete and fragmented, and so my research has combined an examination of archival material—the union's journal and the meeting minutes, correspondence and ephemera of three iterations of its equality committee—with new and existing oral history interviews. Sherry J. Katz has termed this methodological approach "researching around our subjects", which involves "working outward in concentric circles of related sources" to reconstruct women's experiences (90). While "researching around my subjects" was a challenging and time-consuming process, it was also a rewarding one, producing important insights into union activism as it relates to gender and breaking new ground in both women's labour and women's film and television history. This article concludes with a case study on the appointment of Sarah Benton as researcher for the ACTT's* Patterns *report in 1973, revealing the benefits of this methodological approach in reconstructing events which have been effectively erased from the official record.*

In 1975, the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) published a seminal report on gender discrimination in the workplace—the *Patterns of Discrimination Against Women in the Film and Television Industries* (hereafter *Patterns*) report. It was the product of a two-year investigation into gender discrimination in the British film and television industries conducted by the ACTT's Committee on Equality, established in 1973. The report quantified women's experiences of discrimination in the industries and union, analysed the structures and attitudes which facilitated gender inequality, and outlined an extensive list of recommendations for collective bargaining. The report became "a classic reference point for feminists and trade unionists, as well as a valuable bargaining counter for women in the ACTT" (Coote and Campbell 145). However, the relationship between women and the ACTT was characterised by inertia in the years following the report's publication. The union's rank-and-file membership (of which 85.2% were men per *Patterns*) responded apathetically, offering limited engagement with the report's conclusions, while male union officials reacted to the report with hostility, as they sought to maintain the status quo which operated in their favour. By the time of the ACTT's first Women's Conference six years later, in 1981, the union had "achieved very little when measured against the brief laid down by the [1975] Annual Conference" ("Shape"). The *Patterns* report remained "regrettably up-to-date" (Skirrow 94).

A gendered structure had been institutionalised within the union from its establishment in 1933, which informed the union's relationship with women workers throughout its history. In its formative years, the union concentrated on organising male-dominated sections of the British film industry, prioritised men's interests in its agreements, and mobilised a gendered

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definition of skill to demarcate the grades it represented. The gendered union structure was subsequently maintained through a belief system that women's issues were not trade union issues (Galt). This is particularly significant as the union acted as a pre-entry closed shop from the Second World War to the 1990 Employment Act. The pre-entry closed shop regulated employment in the British film and television industries, whereby union membership was essential for the attainment of the production skills necessary for entrance to and career progression within the film and television industries (Reid 50, 153). Sylvia Walby argues that closed shops operate to exclude women workers through "grading and segregation" (244). In the British film and television industries, a "rigid division of labour" confined women workers to primarily secretarial and administrative roles with limited opportunities for career progression (*Patterns* 1). Therefore, the union's attitude towards women workers significantly informed women's experiences of work in film and television production.

My research analyses the relationship between women and trade unions in the British film and television industries within three iterations of the technicians' union: the Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT, 1933–1956), ACTT (1956–1991), and the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU, 1991–2017). It contributes to women's labour history through an examination of, first, the role of trade unions in both reinforcing and challenging workplace gender discrimination and, second, women's lived experiences of union participation and the factors which both enabled and inhibited their participation. This research emerged from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project *A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries, 1933-89* (2014–2017; hereafter *History of Women in Film and Television*), led by Melanie Bell and Vicky Ball.[1] Through an analysis of trade union records (including ACTT membership forms from 1933–1989), archival documents and twenty-five new oral history interviews, the *History of Women in Film and Television* project considers the roles performed by women workers, their gendered career trajectories and women's experiences of work in the film and television industries.

The surviving material on women's participation in trade unions in the British film and television industries is incomplete and fragmented, and so my research combined an examination of archival material with new and existing oral history interviews. Sherry J. Katz has termed this methodological approach "researching around our subjects", which involves "working outward in concentric circles of related sources" to reconstruct women's experiences (90). For Katz, the starting point of her research on radical women in progressive-era California was a "small number of manuscript collections and oral histories of [her] subjects", from which she expanded her search to include socialist movement newspapers, ephemera from feminist, labour and social campaigns, government documents, and local, state and national press (90). In her analysis of women's work in Hollywood, Erin Hill similarly observed that surviving material was often preserved as adjunct documents related to "an important actor, writer, director, producer, or film text", and so sought out her "subjects in peripheral ephemera and in the footnotes and margins of other people's history" (10–11). Hill approached existing material, such as studio maps, memoirs, biographical accounts, studio newsletters, oral histories, and anecdotes in letters, with new questions to uncover the contributions of women workers.

My research started with the union journal—*The Cine-Technician* (1935–1956), *Film and Television Technician* (1957–1991), *FTT & BETA News* (1991–1992) and *Stage Screen and Radio* (1992–present)—which is the only source available from the union's establishment to the present day. I then worked inward, analysing the surviving meeting minutes,

correspondence and general ephemera of the ACTT's Committee on Equality (1973–1977) and Women Members' Committee (1986–1990), as well as the reports of BECTU's General Equality Committee (1998–2009). I conducted four new interviews with ACTT/BECTU activists (in 2016 and 2019) and consulted new interviews conducted by the *History of Women in Film and Television* project and pre-existing interviews conducted by the *British Entertainment History Project* (1986–present).[2] This article approaches each source in turn to consider the opportunities and challenges of researching the relationship between women and trade unions in the British film and television industries and to suggest the insights they offer. It concludes with a case study on the appointment of Sarah Benton as researcher for the ACTT's *Patterns* report in 1973 to reveal how this methodological approach works to reconstruct events which have been effectively erased from the official record.

Union Journals

The journal (accessed via the British Film Institute and National Library of Scotland) is available in its entirety from the first issue in May 1935 to the present day, and so provided a logical starting point for my research. The journal was the official mouthpiece of the union and its main method of communication with its membership, indicating the union's central priorities. While the earliest issues of the journal primarily dispensed technical advice on the filmmaking process, for most of its history the journal addressed: the activity of the union's branches and officials; reports on annual conferences and General Council meetings; developments in the film and television industries; and wider activity within the British labour movement. Through the journals, I established a timeline of the relationship between women and the ACT/ACTT/BECTU, which illustrated the development of union policy and practice towards women workers and recorded the emergence of women's activism on gender inequality within the union. Constructing the timeline was labour intensive, as the journal was released monthly for most of its history.

Women's (in)visibility within the journal's pages was central to my analysis. Women's visibility, and the nature of this visibility, acted as a key indicator of the extent to which women and their gender-specific concerns were prioritised by the union. The fluctuation in women's visibility revealed the extent to which the operation of the union's gendered structure was successful in marginalising women's issues, as well as the extent to which women activists were successful in challenging this structure. I searched for the spaces in which women were visible, focusing on articles which were written by women, addressed women's issues, and reported on official union proceedings. This was particularly challenging between 1935 and 1972 as such articles were scarce. Instead, I read against the grain, searching for women's experiences through their absence. For instance, "The Other Man's Job" was a regular feature in the late 1940s and early 1950s which provided "personal accounts of the work of various technicians engaged in film production" (Huntley 194). These articles depicted the work of male technicians as skilled and desirable. On the other hand, the limited career path available to women is evident in their absence from such features. The only article to discuss women's work, "Script Girl", described the role of the continuity supervisor as "the only one open to women on the actual floor, or production staff of a film unit" (Roe 49). In instances where women were visible within the journal, this visibility was rendered through a distinctly gendered, and sometimes sexualised, lens in advertisements which depicted fictitious female film stars reliant on the skills of male technicians to convincingly perform their roles (Kodak, "He"; "How"; "She"); images of pin-up girls (Williams 166–8; "Very Pert" 236; Carstairs 510–

11); and articles on organising social events for children (Gordon 22; Wheeler 114). Women's invisibility in the journal reflected their wider marginalisation within the union.

However, there were three rare instances in which women's voices, and their gender-specific grievances, were visible within the journal between 1935 and 1972. In the 1930s, Alison Selby-Lowndes' article "Women and the A.C.T." critiqued gender segregation in the ACT and called for the establishment of a women's section "to concentrate on specific women's problems and the recruiting of women to the Union" (58). In the 1950s, Theresa Bolland denounced wage differentials between continuity supervisors and first assistants in a profile of her career as a production secretary and activity as shop steward for Pinewood. Paraphrasing Bolland, the anonymously written article states that, "although A.C.T. had got equal pay for all grades in all agreements, the pay of Continuity girls should be higher—the work is just as responsible as a 1st Assistant's, and pay should be on a level with his" (Recorder 97). Here, Bolland also challenges the union's repeated assertion that equality had been achieved with equal pay agreements in the 1930s. Finally, in the article "The Female Technician: Why Women Make Good Directors and Producers", documentary director Winifred Crum Ewing highlights the disparity in training opportunities available to men and women in the film industry and calls for women activists to challenge this inequality. These articles each condemn gender segregation, and the associated pay disparity, in the film industry and the union's role in maintaining it. As such, they provide evidence of a protofeminist consciousness in the absence of external feminist allies between the first- and second-wave feminist movements.

The space dedicated to women's issues from the November 1972 issue of *Film and Television Technician* marked a significant departure from women's prior invisibility within the journal. In the context of global protest movements, an upsurge of industrial militancy in Britain and the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement during the 1970s, women were emboldened to critically assess the ACTT's role in maintaining gender discrimination in the film and television industries and recognise their potential to challenge it. Women from commercial television were particularly prominent in the union campaign for gender equality, as the increased availability of women's jobs from the late 1960s resulted in an influx of a young generation of women into broadcasting with the anticipation of pursuing careers beyond "dead-end secretarial work" and combining these careers with family life (*Women*). The emergence of feminist organisations outside of the ACTT and labour movement, such as Women in Media and the London Women's Film Group (LWFG), provided women activists with an external impetus to challenge the ACTT's gendered union structure. The influence of these organisations on the establishment of the Committee on Equality in 1973 can be traced through the journal.

The front cover of the November 1972 issue featured a female camera operator holding a camera in one hand and a small child in the other, with the caption "Would you work with a female camera operator?" (Figure 1). The image confronted gender discrimination in the film and television industries by singling out a particularly male-dominated section of the industry. The camera operator was part of a gendered employment pathway in which men entered the industry as "post boys" and progressed into editing, camera and sound roles (*Patterns* 7). The exclusion of women was justified on the grounds that women lacked technical knowledge and the physical strength to carry a camera (*Patterns* 9), which was directly challenged by the image. The front cover was mentioned by Sarah Boston in her oral history interview, indicating the continued resonance of the image in her recollections of women's activism in the ACTT.



Figure 1: Front cover of *Film and Television Technician* (November 1972) featuring a female camera operator holding a camera in one hand and a small child in the other, with the caption "Would you work with a female camera operator?" Courtesy of BECTU – Sector of Prospect.

The issue featured three articles on gender discrimination in the film and television industries, including an article by Women in Media—a campaign group established in 1970 by women in

broadcasting and journalism—which was the first to discuss gender inequality within the union journal and to challenge the ACTT's inactivity (Women in Media, "Women" 8). The article posed a series of questions, including:

> WHY have you never worked with a woman camera operator? A woman sound recordist? A woman dubbing mixer? A woman boom operator? A woman floor manager? …
> WHY doesn't ACTT insist that these grades be opened to women and that programme companies should hire a quota of women as trainee camera assistants, sound assistants, etc.? … (Women in Media, "Women" 8)

The tone of both this article and the issue's front cover is accusatory, addressing a male audience which is seen to be complicit in women's exclusion from the industries. The article prompted letters of support in subsequent issues of the journal, sparking a discussion on gender inequality which had previously been absent. However, Women in Media quickly distanced themselves from the article with an editorial correction in January 1973 which stated that the article "represent[ed] the views of several individual members of the group and not necessarily the group as a whole" ("Editorial Correction" 21). This retreat was the result of Women in Media's tenuous relationship with trade unions in the television industry, with Women in Media's Union Sub Group splitting from the wider organisation in July 1974 because "WIM had a special meaning amongst trade unionists… [which] was not going to help them in putting their case, particularly as some had already been ridiculed" (Minutes). This "special meaning" may refer to the divergent political interests of the two groups, as Women in Media focused on legislation and programmes to advance women into management positions while women union activists campaigned for change on the shop floor.

The LWFG—a collective of women filmmakers established in 1972—proved to be a more reliable ally and played a significant role in the establishment and activity of the ACTT's Committee on Equality between 1973 and 1975. In January 1973, a letter signed by members of the LWFG called for "a serious enquiry into the position of women in the film industry and into blatant discrimination against them" ("Letters" 16). This letter appeared in the journal a month before the official establishment of the Committee on Equality in February 1973 and demanded an enquiry which became the Committee's central focus between 1973 and 1975. The influence of the LWFG is corroborated by oral history testimonies (Boston), written personal recollections of the Group's activity (Evans), and the Group's 1976 statement, which confirmed: "Several of us, already in the union, began raising the issue of discrimination against women in the film industry… Eventually the union formed a so-called Anti-Discrimination Committee, later called the Committee on Equality" ("Extract" 121). This provides a clear picture of the influence exerted by the LWFG.

Following the establishment of the Committee on Equality, women became increasingly visible within the union journal. Women's issues were addressed regularly in sections titled "Equal Rights" and "Women", which covered: women's campaigns both within and outside the union; the development of union policy on gender equality; the introduction and operation of government legislation; and reports on women-only events. Women's issues were also more visible in reports on conference proceedings, as women increasingly presented motions on gender equality at the ACTT's annual conferences. Furthermore, women activists recognised the importance of visibility within the journal to challenging gender discrimination. At the ACTT's first women's conference in 1981, women activists demanded the formalisation of women's representation within the union structure, including a regular section in the union

journal. This section, titled "Equal Opportunities", was introduced in March 1981. As a result, there was considerably more material available for analysis of the 1970s and 1980s.

However, women's visibility declined from the mid-1980s, coinciding with growing hostility towards women's activism. Women's campaigns within the ACTT were derailed by an internal shift to economistic policies in the context of Margaret Thatcher's anti-union legislation and the deregulation of the film and television industries. Hostility towards the "Equal Opportunities" section itself was expressed in two surveys, which described the page as "middle-class bunkum" ("What" 8) and complained of "women's libbers and political harangue", "politics and women's lib ranting", and "endless whinging about feminist rights" (Avis 7). From 1986, a regular newsletter compiled by the Equality Officer, *Equality News*, was circulated to equality representatives and other interested parties. The newsletters covered: equality campaigns, discrimination cases, health and safety, union conferences and procedures. It was harder to trace women's activity through *Equality News* because it was not systematically archived—I accessed surviving copies through the collection of the Women's Film, Television and Video Network (WFTVN, 1982–1990) in Feminist Archive North. The separation of women's issues from the union's main publication demonstrates women's increased marginalisation from the mid-1980s. Women's issues have appeared in the journal on an ad hoc basis from the mid-1980s to the present-day, responding to specific campaigns or legislative changes, and so have not continued to receive the coverage provided by the "Equal Opportunities" section in the early 1980s.

Two factors need to be considered when analysing the journals from the 1970s and 1980s. Firstly, Sarah Boston described the journal and its editor Roy Lockett as "one of our supporters on the whole", suggesting that Lockett facilitated coverage on women's issues which was unrepresentative of the climate within the ACTT. To gain a sense of wider attitudes, I researched around my subjects by examining the letters section and conference reports which often recorded hostility from rank-and-file members. Secondly, the journals favoured "official" activity, such as office holding, committee membership and conference participation, overlooking alternative sites of activism beyond the male-dominated union structure. In fact, women's informal activity was largely inaccessible through both the available archival material and oral histories, resulting in an emphasis on "official" activity within my research.

Meeting Minutes, Correspondence and Ephemera

To flesh out the timeline provided by the union journals, I analysed the meeting minutes, correspondence and general ephemera of the ACTT's Committee on Equality (1973–1986) and Women Members' Committee (1986–1991) to examine the operation and activity of these committees. These documents have not been systematically archived and are instead held across two sites: BECTU's Head Office and Feminist Archive North. This presented a challenge, as the material was incomplete and fragmented, addressing the committees' activity from 1973 to 1977 and 1986 to 1990, and locating this material was time-consuming. However, this also provided an opportunity to examine a substantial body of material which had not been accessed or analysed by other academics and facilitated discussion on topics which would have remained invisible through an examination of the union journals alone.

The material held by BECTU's Head Office is stored in a self-storage unit in Clapham in over a hundred boxes containing paperwork from the day-to-day administration of the ACTT. This includes membership forms, branch and committee meeting minutes,

correspondence and ephemera from industrial disputes. Access was facilitated by BECTU's Administrative Officer, Tracey Hunt. Apart from the membership forms, which were digitised for the *History of Women in Film and Television* project, this material has not been accessed by other academics. While the boxes were numbered, there was no guide as to what was held in each and there appeared to be no clear order to the material. On my first visit I dedicated a day to locating the Committee on Equality documents, which I found in three files in boxes 81 and 82. This was exciting—I entered the self-storage unit uncertain if there would be any relevant documents and found a wealth of material on the activity of the Committee on Equality between 1973 and 1977, including: meeting minutes and correspondence; documents from the union's investigation into gender discrimination; drafts of a maternity leave report (1974); reports to annual conferences; a Code on Sexism in the Media; and publications from external organisations. The most exciting discovery was correspondence detailing an intra-union conflict over the appointment of a researcher, explored in the case study below.

The material held by BECTU provides an insight into the production of the *Patterns* report, including the logistics of the investigation, the process of compiling and distributing the report, and the challenges of implementing its recommendations. For instance, the material reveals that a questionnaire was adopted as the primary research method; it was frequently discussed in the meeting minutes and well documented in the files, including drafts of the questionnaire as well as the final version. In her oral history interview, Benton described the questionnaire as "the basis of the whole thing". The questionnaire surveyed employment demographics; training schemes and promotion opportunities; participation within the ACTT; the impact of domestic responsibilities; and maternity leave provision. This guided the structure of the report and reflected women's campaigning priorities in the 1970s. Drafts of the questionnaire and *Patterns* report further demonstrate the Committee's cooperative working practices, as they contain hand-written feedback and annotations.

While the material held by BECTU illuminated the activity of the Committee on Equality in its formative years, the documents held by Feminist Archive North covered 1986 to 1990, when women's representation was formalised within the union structure. By 1986, the Committee on Equality no longer existed in its original form. At the ACTT's 1986 Annual Women's Conference, the Committee's four subgroups were restructured as four General Council committees: Women Members' Committee, Black Members' Committee, Committee on Disability and Sexuality Committee (Horne). Material on the Women Members' Committee was held in two collections: the personal collection of Al Garthwaite (chair of the ACTT's Women Members' Committee 1989–1991) and the WFTVN collection, donated by Hilary Readman. Among the documents were: *Equality News*; reports from annual women's conferences; meeting minutes; the ACTT's 1986 sexual harassment report; and publications by the ACTT, trade unions and campaign groups. Files regarding the ACTT in Al Garthwaite's collection were newly catalogued ahead of my visit in January 2017.

Both collections were informed by the activity and interests of the women who donated the material. Garthwaite was chair of the Women Members' Committee from April 1989, and so her collection contains material pertaining to this role, including meeting minutes (1988–1990) and correspondence with committee members. Garthwaite was also chair of the ACTT's Sexuality Committee during the 1980s and her collection holds its meeting minutes, as well as material relating to the ACTT's position on pornography. During the 1980s, women activists called on the union to "campaign against the production and distribution of pornographic films and videos portraying gratuitous violence against women" ("Annual Conference" 10), arguing that "porn is just one example where it is up to ACTT members to take a stand on the *content*

of material we work on" (Broadbent 5). Handwritten minutes from the Women Members' Committee provide an interesting insight into the union's hostility to incorporating sexual politics into the union agenda. Minutes concerning a scheduled pornography debate on the General Council record that Equality Officer Sadie Robarts (1987–1989) was "shocked at GC reactions + personal hostility levelled at Sadie afterwards. Taking on *everything* when take on this issue. So much hassle" (Handwritten Notes). Sexual politics, including anti-pornography campaigns, presented a significant challenge to the gendered union structure as they forced the male-dominated institution to reconsider its traditional remit.

Readman's collection contains material on the activity of the WFTVN within the ACTT, including requests for a member of the WFTVN to be co-opted on to the Women Members' Committee. Readman was also an ACTT Equality Representative in the North East of England, and her collection includes material on this role, such as the ACTT's Equality Representative information pack (1987), minutes of regional meetings and correspondence. This material highlights the extent to which activity relied on the initiatives of local representatives. For instance, correspondence from October 1987 mentions an informal meeting of Equality Representatives from the Northern, Yorks and Humberside Regions which agreed to hold regular meetings of representatives focusing on a wide range of equality issues, establish a network to provide resources and support locally, and offer training to Equality Representatives (Readman). Margaret Henderson argues that the movement of documents "from the private realm to the public sphere" was essential to the establishment and expansion of feminist archives (91). However, this movement is often informed by notions of historical value which exclude documents on women's work, activism and personal lives. A historical analysis of the two committees is subsequently shaped by attitudes towards which documents were important to maintain for the historical record, and the absence of a wider commitment to archiving documents relating to the Committee on Equality and Women Members' Committee.

I also consulted General Equality Committee reports to BECTU's National Executive Committee between 1998 and 2009, which were available online via BECTU's archived website. These annual reports do not offer the same detail as meeting minutes, correspondence and general ephemera, but do indicate the central priorities of both the General Equality and National Executive Committees. One key insight provided by the reports was of a recruitment and retention campaign targeted at women members, which included the reintroduction of annual women's conferences in 2003. While the women's conference had been abandoned in 1991 due to an ongoing financial crisis within the union, women were increasingly important to recruitment and retention campaigns in BECTU and the wider labour movement in the 2000s as women's share of union membership increased. For instance, women made up forty-two per cent of union membership in 2004 compared to thirty-six per cent in 1994 (Kirton 495) and by 2003, a third of BECTU's members were women (Elliott 15). The recruitment and retention campaign was first evidenced in a report from a one-day conference, "Equality + Diversity", in November 1999, which concluded that "the areas represented through the Equality committees are areas of potential growth for the union and [BECTU] commits sufficient resources to developing that potential" (BECTU, "2000" para. 130). Following this conference, union events and policies targeted women's participation and representation. In 2001 the General Equality Committee produced *Equality and Diversity—A Programme of Work for 2001 and Beyond*, which outlined strategies to improve women's representation, and in January 2002 BECTU held a two-day training course on the pilot programme "Women Organising for Growth", targeting new and emerging activists to increase women's participation (BECTU, "2002" para. 247–53). Similarly, the demand for a women's conference, presented at BECTU's

2003 annual conference, called for "a women's conference to encourage women members to become activists" (BECTU, "2003" Proposition 27/03). The General Equality Committee reports provide evidence to argue that the renewed women's conferences lacked the militancy of the 1980s women's conferences because they emerged from a recruitment and retention campaign orchestrated by the union leadership rather than women's rank-and-file activism.

As with the union journals, the meeting minutes, correspondence and general ephemera of the Committee on Equality and Women Members' Committee and reports from the General Equality Committee primarily provide a picture of women's official activism within the union structure, specifically the operation and activity of these committees. Women's lived experiences of activism within the ACT/ACTT/BECTU remained largely obscured in the archival material, and so I conducted new interviews with women activists and consulted existing interviews from the *History of Women in Film and Television* project and *British Entertainment History Project*.

Oral History

Feminist scholars have regarded oral history as an "invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds", with the interview process providing women with an "opportunity to tell her own stories in her own terms" (Anderson and Jack 11). Women's labour historians have used oral history to "reassert […] women's position as social actors and historical agents" (Stevenson 144). In doing so, these historians have foregrounded women's experiences of union activity and provided counternarratives to official union discourses. Oral history is also a useful methodology for media production historians because it "provides a method to comprehend the scope and meaning behind […] industrial and professional shifts" (Banks 546). I used oral history to examine women's lived experiences of activity within the ACT/ACTT/BECTU. These interviews were invaluable because they captured the atmosphere within the union, such as the hostility of male union officials and energy of women's activism.

I conducted three new interviews with ACTT activists in July 2016: Sarah Benton, *Patterns* researcher; Sarah Boston, documentary filmmaker and Committee on Equality member; and Adele Winston, ACTT-ABS Joint Shops Committee member. These women were selected because of their roles in the ACTT, which offered insight into the operation of the Committee on Equality, the process of the ACTT's gender discrimination investigation and the response to the *Patterns* report. I conducted a fourth interview in November 2019 with Christine Bond, chair of BECTU's General Equality Committee and the union's first woman president (2010–2014). Bond was selected for her prominent position in BECTU and her reflections on the changing relationship between women and the union following amalgamation. Contact was established through union and academic connections and the *History of Women in Film and Television* project.

As with the archival material, the mid-1970s are disproportionately represented by the July 2016 interviews. This is, in part, a result of the participants' length of employment—Winston worked at the BBC from 1963–1978 and Benton worked for the ACTT from 1973–1977. However, the narrative structure of Boston's interview emphasised the events of the mid-1970s, despite her involvement in the union from the 1960s–1980s. Alessandro Portelli termed this narrative tendency "velocity", whereby:

> some narratives contain substantial shifts […] in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of narration. An informant may recount in a few words experiences which lasted a long time, or dwell at length on brief episodes. (49)

Portelli argues that these shifts function to stress the importance of an event or distract from other points. In Boston's testimony, she recalled the establishment of the Committee on Equality and publication of the *Patterns* report in significant detail and at length, while campaigns of the late 1970s and 1980s were briefly discussed and key developments were conflated with the mid-1970s.

Boston's narrative focus on the mid-1970s functions to emphasise the importance of the Committee on Equality's establishment and *Patterns* report to both the campaign for gender equality in the ACTT and Boston's own activist trajectory. Firstly, Boston situates the Committee's activity on the *Patterns* report within the wider political climate of the early 1970s, in which there was a sense of impending revolutionary change within activist circles fostered by the intensification of global protest movements and the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement and New Left. In this context, women activists saw trade unions as "a place to fight for women" (Boston). The establishment of the Committee on Equality was a significant achievement for ACTT women activists, as the ACTT was "one of the first unions to have an equality committee", and the *Patterns* report was a "landmark analysis of an industry and its women and its employment" (Boston). Secondly, Boston was a member of the LWFG, which played a leading role in the establishment and activity of the Committee on Equality between 1973 and 1975, discussed above. In relation to the Committee's establishment, Boston recalled: "some of the people in the London Women's Film Group were […] union members, and through that we sort of met […] unofficially in a way, to just moan really". Boston was also a member of the Committee on Equality, and this experience had continued emotional resonance: "it was good, we laughed a lot". Boston's testimony reveals that the Committee on Equality was central to her activism at the height of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Benton and Boston's testimonies also illuminate the atmosphere of hostility towards women activists and their demands following the publication of the *Patterns* report. While the journals offer occasional insight into the hostility women faced through the letters section, conference proceedings and isolated articles, oral history provides a unique opportunity to capture hostility which was implicitly communicated through the behaviour of male union officials and rank-and-file members. Benton recalled that union officials were unwilling to disrupt their productive relationship with management to negotiate around the recommendations of the *Patterns* report:

> they negotiated in a perfectly amicable way to get more money for the workforce and they didn't take up other issues, they weren't going to go in and say why don't you give us the crèche as well, they thought this was silly stuff they didn't take it seriously at all.

Throughout her testimony, Benton described the ACTT's union officials as a "brotherhood", which acted collectively to protect organising practices which operated in their interests. These "brotherhoods" were founded upon the male workforces' shared desire to defend their position within the industry; men "didn't have to know each other but they shared a concern of maintaining status". Benton was self-reflexive about her use of the term "brotherhood", which she applied retrospectively after reading Germaine Tillion's *The Republic of Cousins*. Benton's use of the term "brotherhood" illuminates the tacit understanding among male union officials

and the wider membership of the need to defend the structures which maintained their status within the union and industry by excluding women's demands.

Boston observed that while the political climate of the mid-1970s and the ACTT's expressed commitment to the "principles of equality" ensured that officials "couldn't publicly stand up and oppose a motion", their reluctance to discuss women's demands was palpable:

> It's that sort of thing that you go to the pub […] you're having drinks, and you just know that they aren't going to talk to you about women's rights, that they don't want to know… [there's a] way of them indicating their lack of commitment.

While the union was committed to challenging gender inequality in principle, union officials proved that they would not advance women's demands in practice. Christine Bond recalled a similar atmosphere of unspoken hostility in BECTU in response to women's conferences in the 2000s:

> There would be some snide comments. There was no, that I can remember, there was no concerted nasty going on […] but for the most part it was benign neglect or ignoring, but you know the funding was there.

This demonstrates considerable continuity in women's experiences of union participation from the 1970s to the 2000s. Bond's testimony reveals that women's demands were still perceived as a threat to the "brotherhoods" operating in the union, and so continued to encounter hostility which translated into inactivity among male union officials and rank-and-file members.

I analysed new interviews with women workers in the British film and television industries conducted by Sue Bradley between 2014 and 2015 for the *History of Women in Film and Television* project. The recordings and transcripts of twenty-five new interviews are hosted on Learning on Screen's *Women's Work* project website alongside digitised ACTT membership forms. For this project, Melanie Bell and Vicky Ball "prioritised women in roles where there were few existing archival resources or which had yet to be written into media history", particularly "below-the-line" roles, such as production assistants, which had "left little to no archival trace" (Bell). My research engaged with the project's interview with the ACTT's first Equality Officer, Sandra Horne (1982–1987).

Horne's testimony recounts pervasive hostility towards the existence of an Equality Officer, which was directly communicated to her by the male-dominated membership: "[They] didn't agree with it or didn't see the point, because, as I'm sure you've been told, there was [allegedly] absolutely no discrimination against women in either film or television and therefore there wasn't really any need for this job." As with the *Patterns* report and women's conferences discussed in Benton, Boston and Bond's testimonies, the Equality Officer challenged the structures which traditionally benefitted men at the expense of women, and so men responded with hostility. However, Horne's testimony also emphasised the sense of purpose provided by the role. She depicts it as both challenging and rewarding, describing the role as "really hard going" but also stating: "what makes it a good job is you actually believe in what you're doing". Such insights into women's activism are often absent in the archival material, pointing to the value of oral history in illuminating women's personal investment in their activism.

Finally, I accessed the testimonies of women activists involved in the earlier period of the union's history (1930s–1960s) —including documentary filmmaker Kay Mander, ACT/ACTT Organiser Bessie Bond (1945–1961), and Committee on Equality Chairperson Daphne Ancell—through the *British Entertainment History Project*. The project was established in 1986 by ACTT members who "fear[ed] that the story of early British film-making would disappear forever with the passing of industry pioneers" (Dawson and Holmes 435). The limitations of the project are discussed at length by Andrew Dawson and Sean P. Holmes, and include: the project's desire to remain "voluntary, independent and self-financing"; their "less-than-systematic approach to selecting interviewees" which produced a "less-than-representative selection of interviews"; and the lack of formal training, which meant that the interviews were shaped by the interviewer's "own motives and agendas" (438; 442–3). The latter is evident in Alf Cooper's interview with Daphne Ancell, in which Cooper speaks disparagingly of his own experiences with women on the Committee on Equality:

> Can you imagine being a man on that committee? [...] I'll tell you then. I sat on that committee for years and they used to make me vomit […] They never gave an ounce of credit to ACTT as a union right from the word go. [ACTT] Had demanded a rate for a job whether they put a woman on it or a school kid, if he did the job he got the rate for the job […] That was all ignored and then they said that they wouldn't have a, they were going to have an annual conference or something or a conference of all women and they didn't even want a male photographer there representing "The Journal" […] And I turned round and "for Christ's sake if you can't stand a man there how do you expect to work in a bloody man's world?" (Cooper in Ancell).

Cooper was keen to express his frustration with the politics of the Committee on Equality, which resulted in a conflicted narrative from Ancell. In the interview, Ancell both distances herself from the committee, stating "I could never get involved and enthusiastic", and expresses sympathy for the campaign against discrimination, commenting "And it [equal pay] needed pushing and equal opportunities". In fact, Benton claimed that Ancell was integral to communicating the recommendations of the *Patterns* report to working-class women in the laboratories, contradicting the ambivalent figure presented by her own testimony:

> Daphne was absolutely key to getting the agreement. A lot of the working-class women thought, oh, that was just middle-class women being silly, but she thought it was important that they did it [engaged with the *Patterns* report] and they didn't sort of turn their noses up at it.

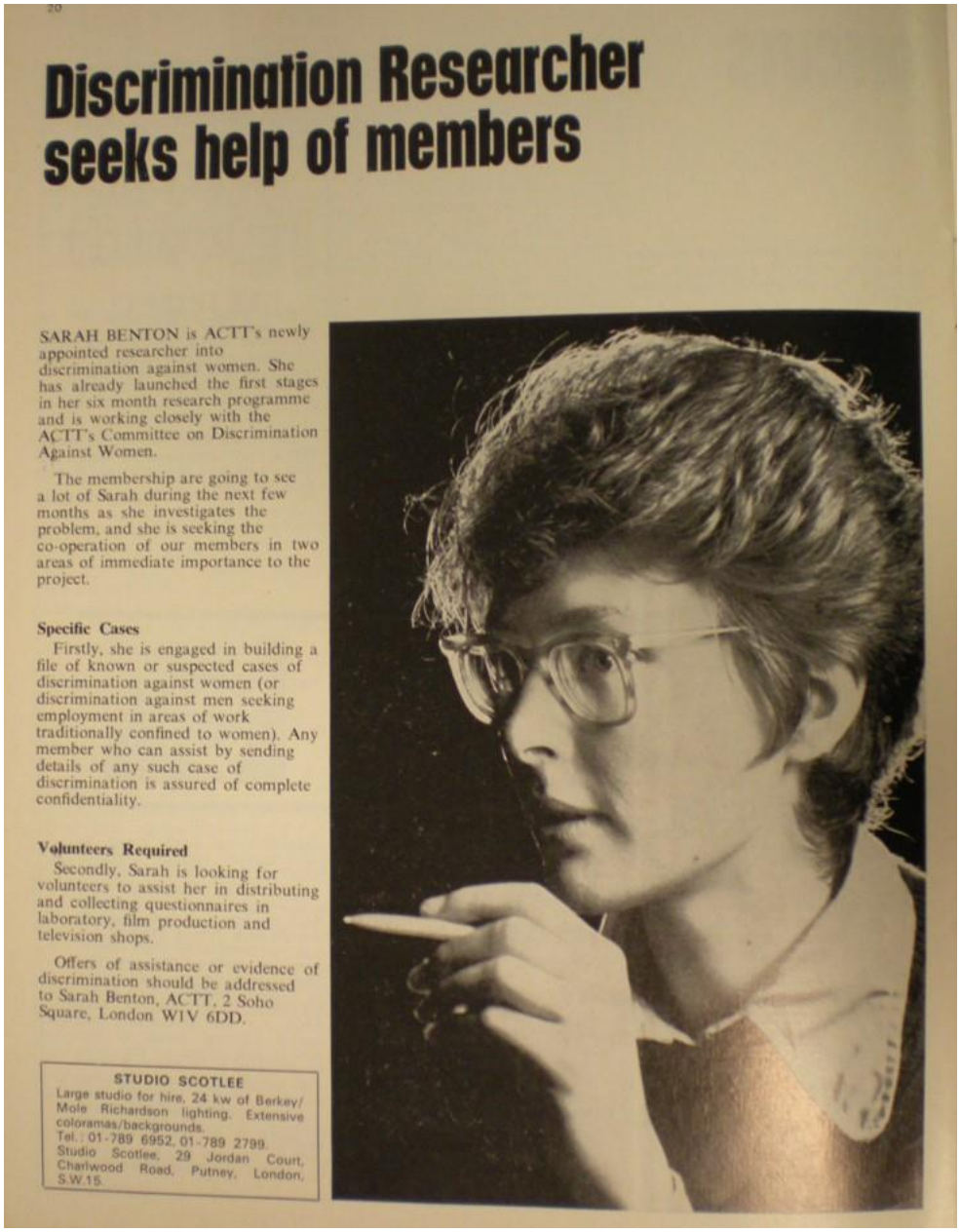
Despite the limitations of the *British Entertainment History Project* interviews, they provide an insight into the experiences of women activists in the early period of the union's history which would otherwise be inaccessible. Oral history was invaluable to researching women's lived experience of union participation and played an important role in uncovering a controversy around the appointment of a *Patterns* researcher, as the following case study demonstrates.

Case Study: Appointing a Researcher

A controversy around the appointment of a *Patterns* researcher—invisible within the union journal but evidenced by correspondence in the Committee on Equality files and Sarah

Benton's oral history testimony—demonstrates the strengths of "researching around our subjects" in reconstructing events effectively erased from the official record.

Within the union journal, the appointment of a researcher features in two articles published seven months apart. The first article, a report from the ACTT's Annual Conference in May 1973, records three motions demanding an investigation into gender discrimination in the British film and television industries and the appointment of a researcher to conduct this investigation, with the third motion explicitly calling for a "paid woman officer" ("Women" 12). All three motions passed unanimously, officially mandating the union to conduct the investigation. The second article (Figure 2) announced Sarah Benton's appointment in December 1973 ("Discrimination" 20).



Discrimination Researcher seeks help of members

SARAH BENTON is ACTT's newly appointed researcher into discrimination against women. She has already launched the first stages in her six month research programme and is working closely with the ACTT's Committee on Discrimination Against Women.

The membership are going to see a lot of Sarah during the next few months as she investigates the problem, and she is seeking the co-operation of our members in two areas of immediate importance to the project.

Specific Cases

Firstly, she is engaged in building a file of known or suspected cases of discrimination against women (or discrimination against men seeking employment in areas of work traditionally confined to women). Any member who can assist by sending details of any such case of discrimination is assured of complete confidentiality.

Volunteers Required

Secondly, Sarah is looking for volunteers to assist her in distributing and collecting questionnaires in laboratory, film production and television shops.

Offers of assistance or evidence of discrimination should be addressed to Sarah Benton, ACTT, 2 Soho Square, London W1V 6DD.

STUDIO SCOTLEE
Large studio for hire. 24 kw of Berkey/Mole Richardson lighting. Extensive coloramas/backgrounds.
Tel.: 01-789 6952, 01-789 2799.
Studio Scotlee, 29 Jordan Court, Charlwood Road, Putney, London, S.W.15.

Figure 2: Sarah Benton's appointment was announced in *Film and Television Technician* in December 1973 (20). Courtesy of BECTU – Sector of Prospect.

In the intervening months, the ACTT conducted two rounds of applications and interviews, readvertising the role "in a wider political and sociological field" in September 1973 following the first round of unsuccessful interviews (Sapper, Correspondence). Reflecting on her appointment, Benton emphasised the significance of the ACTT advertising the role, as such appointments were often made internally: "my friend saw this job advertised, which was the first sign, though I didn't know it then, that they were breaking with the old tradition, because usually these jobs weren't advertised." However, correspondence between women union members and the union leadership, held in the Committee on Equality files at BECTU's Head Office, detail an intraunion conflict over the recruitment process in November and December 1973, as the ACTT's Finance and General Purposes Committee recommended a male candidate, Andrew McNeil, over the Committee's recommendation, Sarah Benton. In response, women union members circulated a round robin which garnered eighty signatures. As with the establishment of the Committee on Equality, discussed earlier, ACTT members involved in the LWFG played a leading role in instigating the protest, claiming responsibility in a 1976 statement: "we heard the union might appoint a male researcher. We picketed the union offices" ("Extract" 122). Members of the LWFG featured prominently among the signatories and women union members from television and freelance branches were also at the forefront of the campaign, comprising seventy-eight of the eighty signatories.

The round robin protested the reduction of the timescale of the appointment (from nine to six months) and the recommendation of a male candidate, both of which "[perpetuated] the situation this project was designed to combat" (Round Robin Signatories). It argued: "It is crucial that the person appointed should be not only a trained sociologist but should also have actual experience in dealing with the specific problems of women in trade unions". As such, Benton was the Committee on Equality's preferred candidate; she was a "trained sociologist", was actively involved in the Women's Liberation Movement, and had previous research experience on Sheffield's labour movement in the 1920s. The round robin, addressed to ACTT General Secretary Alan Sapper, adopted an amelioratory tone, calling on the support "kindly offered" by Sapper and the "unanimous vote of the union rank-and-file membership at Annual Conference" to legitimise their criticisms (Round Robin Signatories).

In a letter to Sapper, McNeil (Vice-Chairman of the Television Branch) objected to remarks on his suitability for the role contained in the round robin: "The letter contains a number of statements which are both inaccurate and likely to damage my standing within the Union and the industry". The round robin noted three "irregularities" in the Finance and General Purposes Committee's recommendation of McNeil: firstly, that McNeil was a "late applicant"; secondly, that members of the Finance and General Purposes Committee had not been adequately involved in the interview process to recommend a candidate; and thirdly, that "McNeil's name was added to the short list because of his position in the union and not because of his qualifications" (Round Robin Signatories). Indeed, McNeil was a late applicant, contacting Sapper with an expression of interest on 1 October 1973, three days after the closing date on 28 September, despite the advertisement stating that "applications received after that date will not be considered" (ACTT, *Carbon Copy*). McNeil was particularly offended by the third statement, which he believed would impede his chances of future employment (Alan Sapper). The required qualifications included "relevant research experience, [the ability] to prepare and present reports and … commitment to the Trade Union Movement" (ACTT, *Carbon Copy*), which McNeil addressed in his application with reference to a study on discrimination at Thames Euston (Application). Notably, McNeil's letter of application is very informal and non-committal; he debates the merits of applying for the researcher position and concludes:

> This letter, therefore, is not an application *per se*, but it would be less than honest of me not to make it clear that, if the Union is in any difficulty in finding a suitable candidate, and I have no work in television, I would be interested in discussing the matter with you, the Committee [on Equality] and the F&GP.

While McNeil does not explicitly leverage his position within the union in this letter, it is clear that his familiarity with Sapper facilitated his application and subsequent shortlisting. Here, we can again see the function of the "brotherhood" identified by Benton and discussed earlier.

While the round robin emphasised procedural failings in the recruitment process of the researcher, the subsequent response of the union leadership focused on its remarks on McNeil's suitability and thus side-lined the central criticism of the petition—that the appointment of a male candidate would act to perpetuate gender discrimination. In a memo to the signatories of the round robin, Sapper condemned their remarks on McNeil: "your action of circulating a letter so damaging to a person's career was both unnecessary and totally unfair" (Letter). Sapper's memo also reprimanded the signatories for bypassing the established routes of activity within the ACTT— "We pride ourselves as a Union on our democratic processes and underline the need for these processes to be observed in the letter and spirit"—and called for an apology: "I would appreciate you commenting to me personally on this letter so that the professional standing of the failed applicant can be restored". In presenting the round robin as undemocratic, Sapper dismisses the signatories' criticisms and relegates women's activity to "democratic" forms permitted within the union's gendered structure.

The extent of Sapper's hostility to the round robin is revealed in an earlier draft of this memo in which handwritten edits adjust the tone. For instance, the words "and a little disgust" are removed from the end of the sentence: "The Finance and General Purposes Committee considered your round-robin letter with some alarm" (Sapper, Draft). Furthermore, the word "admonishment" is changed to "letter" in the final sentence calling for an apology (quoted above). In his initial choice of the word "admonishment" it is clear that the letter is designed to chastise the women for their activity. These edits were possibly made by Sapper's secretary, Pam, who writes at the top of the draft: "Alan, are you really sure you want to send the letter in this form?"

Letters to Sapper from the Research Officer, Roy Lockett, and Committee on Equality Chairperson, Daphne Ancell, also condemned the signatories and distanced the Committee from the round robin. Lockett firstly confirmed that "no member of the Committee either signed, formulated, encouraged or assisted the circulation of the round robin". This is called into question by Benton's oral history testimony, in which she recalls that she was informed of the dispute by "one of the women on the women's equality committee, Sarah Boston" and was "immediately plunged into plots"; however, Boston was not among the signatories of the round robin. Lockett's letter concluded that "the committee has worked too hard and too long to see this project brought to a successful conclusion to wish to see its work impugned by the kind of scurrilous nonsense contained in the letter". Similarly, Ancell stated that she was "appalled" by the round robin and sought "to completely dis-associate myself and my committee from any involvement". As with Sapper's memo, Lockett and Ancell use emotive language—"impugned", "scurrilous nonsense", "appalled"—to communicate their hostility to the round robin.

Some round robin signatories responded to Sapper's letter with an apology for the personal offence caused to McNeil; however, many signatories continued to defend the round

robin and its central demand for a woman researcher. For instance, Katherine Price, a member from Tyne Tees, justified her signature on the round robin with an argument for "positive discrimination":

> I think the difficulties facing women are such that they can only be resisted by a process of positive discrimination in favour of women. This strategy has been demonstrated in the field of education, and I am astonished that the Union did not take the opportunity of using it when considering this particular appointment.

Furthermore, the signatories emphasised their right to protest the activity of the union leadership beyond the confines of the official "democratic processes", as exemplified by Thames Euston and LWFG member Lyn Gambles' letter:

> It is our union and you represent us, and we therefore claim the right to keep ourselves informed of union business and to speak up if we think fit. Any union which prides itself on democratic processes need never feel threatened by the participation of its own members.

The Committee on Equality files provide an insight into women's activism beyond the formal union structure which is invisible in the official union discourse provided by the journals.

Benton attributes hostility towards her candidacy to the fact that she "knew nothing about television", speculating that this opposition was rooted in a desire to maintain the status quo: "I think that the thing about, that you didn't know anything about television, really confirms that they wanted it to be an inside job, and it would have been a little nudge-nudge, you know, sort of piece of work". Sapper, Ancell and Lockett's response to the round robin reveals considerable hostility from the union leadership towards women's grassroots activism, founded on a perceived threat to the internal operation of the ACTT posed by the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement and LWFG. With the appointment of Sarah Benton, a "young feminist who didn't know anything about television or film", over Andrew McNeil, "the person the chaps wanted", the Committee on Equality had won the argument for a feminist report (Benton). This victory significantly influenced the ACTT's response to the *Patterns* report in 1975, as there was no organised opposition.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the benefits and challenges of each source in reconstructing women's experiences of trade union activism in the British film and television industries. The union journals provided an invaluable timeline of the key developments in the relationship between women and the ACT/ACTT/BECTU, which acted as the starting point for my research. The fluctuating visibility of women, their work and their trade union activism illustrate the operation of the union's gendered structure to exclude women's issues and the extent to which women activists were successful in challenging this structure. Women's visibility in the 1970s and 1980s reflects their wider successes within the union following the establishment of the Committee on Equality and publication of the *Patterns* report. This success was bolstered by the support of external feminist allies, such as the LWFG, and the climate created by the Women's Liberation Movement and industrial militancy within the British labour movement. However, the journals favoured "official" activism, such as office

holding, committee membership and conference participation, overlooking alternative sites of activism beyond the male-dominated union structure.

To flesh out the timeline established by the union journals I analysed the meeting minutes, correspondence and general ephemera of the ACTT's Committee on Equality and Women Members' Committee. This material illuminated the internal operation and activity of these committees, for instance, by demonstrating the centrality of the questionnaire to the Committee's investigation into gender discrimination. It also pointed to wider limitations in archiving practices, as the material is incomplete and fragmented, and its survival has largely been reliant on individuals preserving their personal records. The annual reports of BECTU's General Equality Committee demonstrated the changing function of both the committee and women's conference, revealing that, while women's conferences in the 1980s had developed from grassroots activism on the shop floor, women's conferences in the 2000s emerged from a recruitment and retention campaign orchestrated by the union leadership.

To explore women's lived experiences of trade union activism in the British film and television industries I conducted four new oral history interviews with women union activists and analysed new and existing interviews conducted by the *History of Women in Film and Television* project and *British Entertainment History Project*. These interviews provided an invaluable insight into the emotional resonance of women's activism, for instance, Equality Officer Sandra Horne's interview illuminated her personal investment in the role, while Sarah Boston situated her participation within her wider activist trajectory. The interviews also detail experiences of hostility which are difficult to find in the archive because it was communicated through the behaviour of male union officials. Testimonies discussing the 1970s through to the 2000s share a similar language—"[there's a] way of them indicating their lack of commitment" (Boston), "but for the most part it was benign neglect or ignoring" (Bond)—depicting an atmosphere of hostility which oral history is uniquely able to capture.

Finally, the case study on Sarah Benton's appointment as *Patterns* researcher demonstrates the strengths of "researching around our subjects". Based on the union journal alone, there was nothing of note about Benton's appointment; however, an examination of correspondence in the Committee on Equality files held by BECTU Head Office revealed a controversy over the appointment which addresses the key themes of my research. The round robin reveals both the influence of external organisations such as the LWFG on women's union activism and the internal struggles to advance women's demands, while the union leadership's hostile response points to the strategies used to derail women's activism and maintain the status quo.

When I presented a paper on my research methods for an oral history seminar series in 2018, an audience member commented that I was "constituting a feminist archive through research", which encapsulates the strengths of "researching around our subjects". With this methodological approach, I was able to produce a coherent narrative on the relationship between women and trade unions in the British film and television industries from 1933 to the present day and reconstruct events which have been effectively erased from the official record. While "researching around my subjects" was a challenging and time-consuming process, it was also a rewarding one, producing important insights into union activism as it relates to gender and breaking new ground in both women's labour and women's film and television history.

Notes

[1] Three monographs have arisen from this project: Melanie Bell's *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema* (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming 2021); Vicky Ball's forthcoming monograph on women workers in the British television industry (University of California Press); and Frances C. Galt's *Women's Activism Behind the Screens: Trade Unions and Gender Inequality in the British Film and Television Industries* (Bristol University Press, 2020)—as well as two edited collections—Vicky Ball and Laraine Porter's Special Issue of *Feminist Media Histories* "Gendered Patterns of Discrimination in the Creative Industries" (2018), and Vicky Ball, Laraine Porter and Pat Kirkham's Special Issue of *Women's History Review* "Structures of Feeling: Contemporary Research in Women's Film and Broadcasting History" (2020). Other outputs of this project include a database of digitised ACTT membership forms and oral history interviews hosted by Learning on Screen.

[2] Formerly the *BECTU History Project* and established as the *ACTT History Project* in 1986.

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