MADE IN DAGENHAM
(Cert 15)

Overview: Set in the Dagenham Ford factory in 1968, the film traces the story of a small minority of Ford’s employees, the women workers, who were part of the social change that resulted in equal pay for women.

Reel Issues author: Sally Bedborough
Director: Nigel Cole (2010)
Studio: Paramount Pictures/BBC Films
Running time: 108 minutes
Caution: Contains occasional strong language

SUMMARY OF PLOT

The year is 1968, and the film opens with a scene set in the Ford car factory. The work conditions are poor; it’s noisy, hot and uncomfortable. In the upholstery section staffed by women, Rita (Sally Hawkins) – supported by Connie (Geraldine James) and the other women – takes a grievance about their job regrading to the management, through shop steward, Albert (Bob Hoskins).

The managers are complacent about dealing with this, but as Rita refuses to be ‘palmed off’, the women’s protest escalates to a work and overtime stoppage, and eventually an all-out strike. The stakes are raised: the demands grow from a bid to be re-graded and classed as ‘skilled’ rather than ‘unskilled’ workers, to a demand for equal pay for women.

The Ford company sends executive Peter Hopkins (Rupert Graves) to subdue the women’s demands. But the protest has caught the imagination of the nation’s women. The emboldened Ford workers travel to see Barbara Castle (Miranda Richardson), Secretary of State in the Labour government, in order to win her support.

Woven into the story are two sub-plots that revolve around the roles of housewives. One focuses on the character of Lisa (Rosamund Pike), who is the wife of the Ford executive; the other on Rita’s colleague, Connie, whose husband suffers from post-traumatic stress.

Made in Dagenham reflects a campaign by working women that effectively changed the face of British culture and society and resulted in a major blow for companies who maintained a separate and lower pay scale for women. It handles serious themes but, for the most part, against a humorous backdrop.

FIRST REACTIONS

• Do you have any recollection of these events from 1968?
• Do the characters seem convincing to you?
• Are their situations all that removed from our times? Ie. In your opinion, have the roles of women changed radically from the roles portrayed in the film?
• Do you think the humour works in the film? Or could the film have been improved if the story was told in a more serious tone?

SOME KEY ISSUES

Women’s roles — The film highlights the place of women in 1960s. This period in our history saw an increased freedom in many areas of our society, including the questioning of traditional women’s roles.

Social divisions — The three main female characters in the film are each from very different social classes. The film has a light touch with each character, but clearly dramatises the issues facing women in the male-dominated Britain of the 60s.
Justice and fairness – Set in a pivotal time in our social history, Made in Dagenham identifies issues of justice and fairness and separates them from a purely feminist agenda.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1 – DVD scene 5 Starts at 0.00 minutes to 7.27 minutes.

Rita has been invited to attend the meeting between Union representatives and Ford management. Monty, the Union official is shown to be a chauvinist and a schemer. Rita will have none of it and, against clear instructions from Monty, tells it ‘like it is’ to the Ford bosses. She sticks to her guns and carries out the threat of a one-day work stoppage and a ban on overtime.

There are a number of incidences in this clip where a male acts in a patronising way towards women in general and towards Rita and Connie in particular.

In the whole group:
Discuss your feelings and reactions to these incidents.

Individually

As you watch the clip, note down each of the examples of patronising that you notice.

In small groups of mixed gender where possible

• Discuss your examples.
• Consider the following definitions:

Patronise – 1. to behave or treat in a condescending way. 2. to act as a patron by sponsoring or bringing trade in.

Patron – a person who sponsors or aids artists, charities, etc.; a protector or benefactor.

• In your small groups, make a case for the defence of the men’s behaviour.
• In your opinion, when do the qualities of caring and protecting become unwelcome?
• Can you give examples of other groups that may feel disempowered by attitudes and behaviour that is intended to be supportive?

In this clip and our third clip, we see the different approaches to change taken, first by Monty, who wants to adopt a more laidback and softly, softly style. And then by Rita, for whom nothing but a radical and immediate change will do.

• Do you agree that radical measures need to be taken to effect real change?
• In what situations might a ‘softly, softly’ approach be a better measure?
• What possible emotions and qualities of character lie behind each of these approaches? (eg. cowardice, frustration?)
• Can you identify any of these in yourself with regard to controversial issues in your own life?

Clip 2 – DVD scene 12 starts at 0.00 minutes to 4.30 minutes. And scene 16 starts at 0.00 to 3.10 minutes. Approx 7.40 minutes in all.

Robert Tooley (Richard Schiff), an American Ford boss, is tasked with flying over to the UK to sort out the women’s dispute. We see Barbara Castle meeting
in informally with Harold Wilson (John Sessions), the Prime Minister of the time. Then the scene changes to the home of the English Ford boss, Peter Hopkins, as he and his wife, Lisa, entertain the American.

In scene 16, Rita has just been to the funeral of her best friend’s husband. Lisa comes to visit Rita to tell her the news that the teacher who was physically abusing their children, and whom they had both complained about, had been sacked. Lisa reveals her identity – she is the Ford boss’s wife. Rita assumes Lisa disapproves of the strike by the women, but Lisa gives Rita encouragement in her battle.

**In the whole group:**

Divide a large sheet of paper into three columns. Discuss the likenesses and differences in Rita and Lisa’s social situation and write these up in the first two columns.

Now add a column for Barbara Castle and discuss how her social situation is similar or different to those of Rita and Lisa.

**In small groups:**

- Discuss the different social backgrounds of each of these female characters.

- Draw a simple flow chart that identifies the part that each woman played in the process that eventually achieved equal pay for women.

- Lisa speaks of her admiration of those who ‘make history’. Is there a sense in which each of these women ‘made history’? Or does the achievement belong more to one of them?

- Who are the ‘history makers’ that you admire? What are their achievements and the qualities that inspire you?

**Clip 3 – DVD scene 16 Starts at 3.10 minutes to end of scene, approx 3 minutes; then scene 17 starts 0.00 minutes to 4.15 minutes. Approx. 7 minutes in all.**

The tension of past weeks’ strike comes to a head and the conclusion of scene 16 shows Rita and Eddie arguing. Eddie maintains that Rita does not have such a bad life as he treats her well – referring to his lack of boozing, sleeping around and his lack of violence towards Rita and their children. Rita fires back at him that ‘that is as it should be’ and then she comes out with the line of the film: that the women’s battle is about ‘rights, not privileges’. Scene 17 follows her speech to the Union Conference. In contrast to Monty’s plea to ‘take things slowly’, Rita inspires the Union members’ support by calling them to action in the name of justice for men and women.

**Dividing into two groups:**

- Make a list of the rights and the privileges of women. One group to focus on the year 1968 and the other on the present year.

- Make similar lists for the British population in general, and also for the global population (so far as you know).

**Feedback and discuss these in the whole group.**

- What differences and issues can you identify for these lists?

- In terms of justice for all people, how far have we come? How far do we need to go?

**Group session**

Rita appeals to the Union Members’ Conference on the basis of the need to ‘do something’. Is action always right? What about the place of talks and
negotiation? Do you have any particular issues of justice that are close to your heart? Are you involved in one or both of these methods to achieve the goals that are linked to fairness?

**GOD’S STORY**

Women’s roles – Read 1 Peter 3.1–9

Peter writes here of the Greco-Roman ‘household code’: the unwritten rule book that described the place of each person in a household so that everyone knew their place. In that patriarchal society, slaves and women were understood to be ‘weaker’ on the basis of intellectual and physical differences. In addition, Peter was taking some trouble to encourage new converts to keep within the ‘rules’ as he was aware that the new way of Christianity could be seen as a dangerous cult.

- How do you react to certain groups being named as ‘weaker’?
- How does the term ‘co-heir’ fit with the differences and distinctions made in the passage?
- Peter urges women to adopt a ‘gentle and quiet spirit’. How do you interpret this? Does it mean that a woman must always remain gentle and quiet in words and actions, or can a person with a ‘quiet spirit’ act in ways that are feisty, dynamic and forthright?

In the whole group:

Think of examples of women mentioned in the Old Testament. (If you need some inspiration, look up Exodus 1.15–21; 2.1–10; 15.19–21; Judges 4)

- How many come to mind?
- How does this number compare with the number of men mentioned in the Old Testament?

- What do you make of the apparent infrequency with which women are mentioned in the Bible?
- Are there qualities and insights that seem to be highlighted by those women who are mentioned?

Jesus’ treatment of women in the New Testament:

- Women accompanied Jesus in his ministry. They were included in the group who followed Jesus and they were the first at the tomb (Mark 15.47–16.4) and the first to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection (Mark 16.9–11; John 20.14–18).
- In your opinion, were these rights or privileges that were granted to women by Jesus?

Consider the place of the three strong women portrayed in the film: Rita, Lisa, and Barbara Castle.

**Women of the group:**

With which character do you most identify? In what way(s)?

**Men of the group:**

Which character most closely resembles the women in your family? In what way(s)?

Another strong character in the film is Connie. She is torn between crusading for equal pay with her colleagues, and devoting herself to the care of her husband, George, who suffers from post-traumatic stress.

- Consider Connie’s dilemma in the film
- Discuss the dilemmas that arise as a result of the growing equality of status and opportunity between men and women today.

(Health warning: some issues that arise in this discussion might be ‘less pc’. Please listen without judgement.)
Social divisions – Read James 1.9–11; Matt 20.20–28

James describes the great equalising effect that being a follower of Christ brings. For the poor believer, inclusion into the family of Christ brings a sense of worth and inner value; for the rich believer, there is a sense of humility. Perhaps the ‘gentle and quiet spirit’ mentioned in the previous discussion on 1 Peter, should be the recognisable hallmark of the Christian regardless of social position.

Individual reflection/pairs discussion

- Think about the hierarchies in your family, church or work settings. Is there unspoken ranking where one group is considered or treated as more important than another?
- Are there measures you should take to create a greater equality between people in the groups to which you belong?

In the Gospel reading, the mother of James and John urges Jesus to give her sons equal place in heaven.

Imagine

- Instead of interpreting this request as one that desires first place for her sons, can you imagine that she wants an equal place for each son—therefore sidestepping any sibling rivalry? Or in a more global understanding, that a mother figure may desire equality for all people?
- Using your ‘redeemed imagination’ can you push this thought to a mother requesting equality between her son and daughter?
- How does Jesus’ response address the issue of equality among his followers?

Justice and fairness – Read: Micah 6.1–8; Luke 18.1–8

The Micah passage has been described as 'prophetic teaching on true religion'. The requirements of the covenant between God and his people are not actions requiring sacrifice; they are at their heart, justice, kindness and humility.

Group discussion

- One of the criticisms aimed at people of faith by those with none, is that their lives don’t measure up to their words. How can believers, individually and as communities, show justice, kindness and humility?
- How does the second passage from the Gospel of Luke give an example?
- Do the female characters in the film display justice, kindness and humility? If so, how?
- How can the ‘gentle and quiet spirit’ to which Peter refers (see discussion one from God’s Story) be used to bring justice, kindness and humility to a world full of inequality?

Final reflection:

Download the song ‘Quiet My Mind, Lord’ by Tracey Orrison. Follow this link to hear this song on youtube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvqXYJ-3en0

- Play this and reflect on the themes of stillness and peace it invites.
- If it’s appropriate for your group, read Psalm 34 together. Pray to maintain stillness of heart while you remain strong and assertive on issues of justice and peace.

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