

Selma James talked about the 1972 Family Allowance Campaign at the launch of the Eleanor Rathbone Oral History Project publication, 18 November 2021.

“We heard that the Government was taking family allowance, it was going to be put it in the men's pay packet. We knew first of all that women were going to lose the money. But secondly that the men were not going to get it because if they were on strike they didn't get a pay packet. And if they were unemployed they didn't get a pay packet so the men were also going to lose. Whatever was the generosity or not of the men, the whole family was going to lose the money.

I called together some women, they were in the Women's Liberation Movement, and they really came quickly. There were about 30 or 40 of us in the first meeting and it was only in London because we didn't have Zoom or anything to be in touch with women in other cities and many of us didn't have, weren't able to afford a telephone. One woman took two weeks to do a study of all the implications of women having the family allowance or not and brought it back to a meeting of about 20 or 30 women. One thing she said: the husband will lose it, every time there is a strike the woman will not have the money for the house. In every way the family will be poorer.

We organised meetings and spreading the word through Spare Rib and anywhere we could. Then we had a campaign. The family allowance day was Tuesday and whenever we were in the country, we went to the Post Office with our petition. Our demands were two: one, we mothers keep family allowance; two, that family allowance must be paid for the first child. And women did sign. I remember in particular some women in Kilburn London where I was petitioning with other women at the Post Office on the High Road. I said: “Madam, would you sign our petition and she said I don't sign any petition that my husband hasn't read first. And I said they want to take your family allowance. She said but this is the only money I can call my own, where do I sign?”

That was the attitude. It confirmed our view that the question of money for women was absolutely crucial to women. That is what they wanted. That is what they needed and that is what they were ready to fight men for. It was a very big education for a lot of us because the Wages for Housework Campaign had just begun¹ and the debate was on. I remember another woman from Spare Rib who came to me and said, ‘look Selma, I'm not for family allowance because it is wages for housework and I'm against wages for housework, but I don't think we should allow women to have that money taken from them, so give me an article and I'll put it in Spare Rib.’ And indeed she did.

We really clarified our minds and made contact with grassroots women on the Tuesday or another day somewhere in the country where it was not Tuesday. They knew that we as feminists as women's libbers, however they considered us, were for money for them and they were entirely for that. They believed that that is what we should be fighting for and they were ready to fight. I still meet women from that

campaign. One woman on a demonstration in Liverpool to save the women's hospital there came and said to me 'you don't know me but the last time we saw each other you were sleeping on my floor.' It was a great movement!

Marie Fulham, mother and grandmother from Liverpool, also recalls that time:

"I do remember them trying to bring it out in Parliament, to have it paid to the men, put on their wages. Well, there was uproar then! It was 1972-3. I'd gone to a meeting in town, and it was spoken about there. I brought forms home, petition forms, got everyone to fill them in, and I remember us sending them to our local MP. It quickly got dropped, didn't it!"

¹ Selma had launched the demand for wages for housework on 27 March 1972 at a Women's Liberation Conference. The FA campaign was its first initiative.