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Women and the Preston Lock-Out: Not Just ‘ten per cent’

Janet Greenlees

Abstract

Women and girls comprised the majority of the striking cotton operatives during the Preston lock-out of 1853–1854. While history has acknowledged women’s participation, their story has been neglected in favour of the strike’s importance to the labour movement, both locally and nationally. This article highlights how working-class women’s strike participation formed part of broader women’s activism and was motivated by labour and domestic considerations. Utilising newspapers, strike papers and contemporary accounts, this article argues that women operatives were respected co-workers with men and received equal strike pay to men – something that was reflected in later Lancashire strikes. Married women’s sustained support was influenced by a decrease in domestic violence, increased educational opportunities for children and adults, and more family time. More broadly, if we are to fully understand women’s complex decision-making related to their dual role as workers and household managers, a gendered approach to labour activism is needed.

Introduction

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, much labour unrest in the English and Scottish cotton manufacturing industries centred around industrial or economic decline when operatives struggled to meet their daily necessities.¹ During the Preston lock-out of 1853–1854 the disparity between wages and the cost of living motivated Lancashire operatives to further strike action, with the rising household poverty fuelling women’s activism and which was reflected in Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1855 novel *North and South*:

Food is high, – and they mun have food for their childer ... women, kept plaining, plaining (wi’ the tears running down their cheeks, and never wiped away, nor heeded), of the price o’ meat, and how their childer could na sleep at nights for th’ hunger.²

¹ Some key strikes involving women operatives are outlined in J. Greenlees, *Female labour power: Women workers’ influence on business practices in the British and American cotton industries, 1780–1860* (Aldershot, 2007), 148–56; see also E. Gordon, *Women and the labour movement in Scotland, 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991), chapter 3.

² E. Gaskell, *North and south* (London, 1855), 201, 202.

Women and girls comprised approximately 66 per cent of the Preston strikers,³ yet historians have largely overlooked their strike participation and associated motivations. Indeed, the index in Dutton and King's seminal book about the strike lists only three pages that discuss women's strike involvement and has been rightly criticised for ignoring women's history.⁴ The authors justified their omission, stating that 'in general women played a very subordinate role in the entire ten per cent campaign' because women's 'fundamental ambition was to secure the right *not* to work'. Yet their only evidence comprised an 1846 article in the *Ten Hours Advocate* which outlined male strikers' aims:

Married females would be much better occupied in performing the domestic duties of the household, than following the never-tiring motion of machinery. We therefore hope the day is not distant, when the husband will be able to provide for his wife and family, without sending the former to endure the drudgery of a cotton mill.⁵

This assessment of the strike reflects the authors' reliance on male sources, namely the scrapbooks about the strike compiled by a Bolton master and two strike leaders.⁶ This article helps to recover the hidden history of women's continued support for the Preston strike.

Viewing women's socio-economic role through the lens of domesticity problematises and marginalises them within the workplace.⁷ If women internalised the definitions imposed on them this would have inevitable implications for women's power and status as wage-earners and therefore, their participation in trade unions. Joanna Bornat has argued that at the end of the nineteenth century, men in the Grand Union of Textile Workers believed their union participation provided a defence of men's right to work and to improve their conditions of labour, while women's work experiences were shaped by more conflicting pressures from work and home.⁸ This article suggests that while female cotton operatives' engagement with trade unions was influenced by the conflicting pressures of work and family, this did not necessarily negate their participation or diminish their status as wage earners. By focusing on one of the longest strikes in cotton manufacturing, the seven-month Preston strike and lock-out, this article broadens current understandings about women's motivations for joining and sustaining strike support in Britain. Rather than viewing women's labour activism through the lens of the male operative or mill

³ *Preston Chronicle*, 7 October 1854.

⁴ H.I. Dutton and J.E. King, *'Ten per cent and no surrender': The Preston Strike 1853–1854* (Cambridge, 1981), 274; E. Taplin, 'Review: "Ten per cent and no surrender": The Preston strike 1853–1854', North West Labour History Society, 1981, <https://www.nwlh.org.uk/?q=node/138>, accessed 5 Feb. 2024.

⁵ *Ten Hours Advocate*, 24 October 1846, cited in Dutton and King, *'Ten per cent'*, 52.

⁶ Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA), DDP138 87b.

⁷ J. Bornat, 'Lost leaders: Women, trade unionism and the case of the General Union of Textile Workers, 1875–1814', in A. John (ed.), *Unequal opportunities: Women's employment in England, 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1986), 227.

⁸ Bornat, 'Lost Leaders', 227.

owner, as did Patrick Joyce's study of patriarchy amongst cotton workers or William Lazonick's claim that 'adult male operatives determined the character of the relations between ... other workers and the capitalists',⁹ this article centres women's priorities to afford their experiences independent legitimacy. It argues that male trade union leaders recognised women's labour, strike commitment and dual responsibilities as workers and household managers. The duality within women's working lives meant that their rationale for sustained strike action diverged from men's. Both sexes sought higher wages, but women needed to ensure household economic survival and domestic calm during a strike. During the Preston strike women recognised the multiple familial benefits afforded by the ongoing action, which posed a stark contrast to the 1836 Preston spinners' strike where the majority of strikers were men, but where women and families bore the brunt of the suffering.¹⁰

The historiography of the Preston strike has largely emphasised either how the male weavers' delegates, particularly George Cowell and Mortimer Grimshaw, became overnight celebrities, or the strikers' successes at organizing support from labour across Britain, raising £100,000 from other workers.¹¹ Dutton and King's book is largely a political history, with social elements providing background for the male leadership focus. Women are discussed through how Mrs Cooper and her sisters-in-law, Ann and Margaret Fletcher, travelled across Lancashire raising support for the locked-out workers, with their actions recounted as exceptional. 'The appearance of a woman on the platform [workers' meeting] was evidently a rare event ...'¹² Appealing to middle-class Victorian values, the Fletchers supported the male breadwinner ideal considering it a 'disgrace to an Englishman to allow his wife to go out to work'.¹³ This marginalisation of women worker's rationale for labour activism extends to broader trade union histories. Both Soldon and Lewenhak's chronological accounts of women and trade unions neglect the importance of social influences.¹⁴ Sidney and Beatrice Webb include less than 20 page references to women, and none concerning the Preston lock-out, in their 716-page classic *History of trades unionism*.¹⁵ Henry Pelling's *History of British trades unionism* contains only seven page references to women in a 260-page book.¹⁶ Historians of individual

⁹ P. Joyce, *Work, society and politics: The culture of the factory in later Victorian England* (New Brunswick, 1980), 56, 80; W. Lazonick, 'Conflict and control in the industrial revolution: Social relations in the British cotton factory', in R. Weible, O. Ford and P. Marion (eds), *Essays from the Lowell conference on industrial history, 1980 and 1981* (Lowell, 1981), 21.

¹⁰ J.S. Leigh, *Preston cotton martyrs: The millworkers who shocked a nation* (Lancaster, 2008), 34–5; C. Hardwick, *History of the borough of Preston and its environs, in the county of Lancaster* (Preston, 1857), 416–17.

¹¹ Dutton and King, 'Ten per cent'.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³ *Preston Guardian*, 12 November 1853, cited in Dutton and King, 'Ten per cent', 52.

¹⁴ N. Soldon, *Women in British trade unions, 1874–1976* (Dublin, 1978) and S. Lewenhak, *Women and trade unions* (London, 1977).

¹⁵ S. and B. Webb, *The history of trades unionism* (London, 1920), Gutenberg e-version <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/66887/66887-h/66887-h.htm>; The Preston strike is acknowledged on 206.

¹⁶ H. Pelling, *History of British trades unionism* (London, 1963).

unions also have rarely recognised women's contributions, with the notable exceptions of J. Ramsay Macdonald, G.D.H. Cole and Barbara Drake.¹⁷ Drake's seminal work *Women in Trade Unions* highlights how not only were women cotton operatives core members of the different textile trade unions, they sometimes gained opportunities for trade union leadership, but follows that claim with '[w]omen *mostly* prefer, however, to leave the management to men'.¹⁸ While this makes unsurprising the neglect of women's involvement in the Preston lock-out, related aspects of Lancashire women's labour and social history have received historical attention.

Drake hints at elements of gender equality, identifying how the earliest piece-work list for cotton weavers from 1853 did not distinguish age or gender.¹⁹ Hence, women and girls could receive the same piece rate as men and boys for the same task, enabling them to earn as much or more than men. More recently, I traced gendered rates of pay in cotton manufacturing and found that a rate for the job, not gender, was standard in most mills through at least 1860.²⁰ Considering women's few employment choices, Lancashire textile operatives were relatively highly paid and experienced greater equality in the workplace than other employed women because male operatives were effectively paid a woman's wage. Gender wage parity also provided women operatives with greater domestic authority than most British women, something found in Lancashire weaving towns through at least the 1930s.²¹ This is not to suggest gender equity or that simply by undertaking paid employment married women were guaranteed greater authority in the home. Rather, as Elizabeth Roberts and Miriam Glucksmann have demonstrated, Lancashire women undertaking paid employment were more likely to have greater authority and equity in the home than women elsewhere, but influenced by place-specific factors.²² This position fed into women's decision-making concerning the impact of strike action on the household economy.

Economics was at the heart of the 1853 strike, with Preston's uniqueness within Lancashire influencing events. Preston had a fairly stable and secure female labour force in the town's expanding weaving sector and a largely casualised male labour force. This labour divide corresponds with Preston's lower wage rates for unskilled cotton operatives than those in comparable Lancashire towns and the fact that Preston had a much higher proportion of general labourers than other Lancashire towns, with twice as many as nearby

¹⁷ J. Ramsay Macdonald, *Women in the printing trades: A sociological study* (London, 1904); G.D.H. Cole, *Trades unionism and munitions* (Oxford, 1923); B. Drake, *Women in trade unions* (London, 1920/1984).

¹⁸ My emphasis. Drake, *Women in trade unions*, 124.

¹⁹ Drake, *Women in trade unions*, 121.

²⁰ *Ibid*; J. Greenlees, 'Equal pay for equal work?: A new look at gender and wages in the Lancashire cotton industry, 1790–1855', in M. Walsh (ed.), *Working out gender: Perspectives from labour history* (Aldershot, 1999), 167–90.

²¹ J. Schwarzkopf, 'Gender and technology: Inverted established patterns. The Lancashire cotton weaving industry at the start of the twentieth century', in Walsh (ed.), *Working out gender*, 153; M. Glucksmann, *Cottons and casuals: The gendered organisation of labour in time and space* (York, 2000).

²² E. Roberts, *A woman's place: An oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984); Glucksmann, *Cottons and casuals*.

Burnley.²³ Despite women operatives' ability to earn as much as young men, Thompson has noted that the town's patriarchal nature meant 'the status of the woman was little better than that of a servant'.²⁴ Indeed, aspects of Preston's labour market structure were designed to reinforce male domination. For example, the male overlooker controlled the hiring and firing of weavers, often hiring women and girls through their contacts with male relatives.²⁵ These male trade unionists argued for a 'family wage'. This position came to dominate working-class rhetoric and, as Jane Humphries has argued, became grounded in both collectivity and inequality.²⁶

The lived reality in many Lancashire towns was different. The tradition of mutuality in the struggles for improved wages made women strong supporters of associated structured activism. The power-loom weavers' union first organized during the 1840s and included men and women members from the outset.²⁷ Instead, it was the conflicting pressures of work and home that shaped working-class women's experiences of labour and which prevented them from full participation in union activities. Elizabeth Roberts' oral histories of late-nineteenth-century Lancashire working-class women have demonstrated how low wages, alongside responsibility for the household budget, required women operatives to be ingenious in stretching the family finances, similar to their mothers before them. A woman's skill in managing the household budget determined the survival of the family members as a unit, something which many men recognised.²⁸ Building from these histories of trade unionism and women's labour and social history, this article locates women operatives and the social and economic tensions surrounding the Preston strike within the context of mid-nineteenth-century Lancashire. Gendered priorities split operatives into workers with three aims, those specific to men, those pertaining to women and families, and, the collective goals of all cotton operatives. While such tensions could serve to weaken the broader union movement and the Preston strike, they reflected the lived realities in working-class Lancashire.

This article first outlines how gender equity issues within the Preston strike reflected the goals of the Ten-Hour Movement (THM) and which were also reflected in later strikes. It highlights how strike management equally valued women's and men's labour and which was reflected in strike pay. Sarah Boston has argued that male trade unionists' exclusionary practices towards women workers contradicted the very logic of trade

²³ M. Savage, *The dynamics of working-class politics: The labour movement in Preston 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987), 68–69.

²⁴ D. Thompson, 'Courtship and marriage in Preston between the wars', *Oral History* 3:2 (1975), 39–44.

²⁵ M. Savage, 'Capitalist and patriarchal relations at work: Preston cotton weaving, 1890–1914', in L. Murgatroyd, M. Savage, D. Shapiro, J. Urry, S. Walby, A. Warde, with J. Mark-Lawson (eds), *Localities, class, and gender* (London, 1985), 177–94.

²⁶ J. Humphries, 'Class struggle and the persistence of the working-class family', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1:1 (1977), 241–58.

²⁷ Dutton and King, 'Ten per cent', 15, 17.

²⁸ E. Roberts, 'Women's strategies, 1890–1940', in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour & love: Women's experience of home and family, 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1986), 223–47; Roberts, *Woman's place*, 125–68.

unionism.²⁹ Yet women's acceptance into the Lancashire unions and their strike activism reveals how progress is not always linear and that the Preston strike lacked a unifying strand that appealed to both men and women. Next, this article highlights poverty's centrality in shaping women's lived realities and decision-making. Focusing on the male consumption of alcohol and associated domestic violence in Preston, the article suggests that the impact of decreased alcohol consumption alongside the benefits afforded by extra family time provided additional, private motivations for women's ongoing strike support. It closes by suggesting a more gendered approach to future histories of trade unionism, where gender provides the focus of analysis rather than being a by-product of either contemporary patriarchal society and union leadership, or the outcome. Throughout, this article suggests that the Preston strike was not unusual with regards to women's priorities and associated involvement. Rather, its longevity serves to enhance understandings of how women balanced daily economic realities with work and labour activism in a way that abbreviated industrial action does not.

Women on Strike: The Economic Validation of Female Labour

During 1853, across the Lancashire textile districts, months of labour unrest surrounding wage rates ensued with many short-term disputes and walkouts, including in Ashton, Blackburn and Stockport. On 26 August, 380 women weavers at Birley Brothers, Preston, turned out seeking higher wages.³⁰ In October, two young women at Mr Hawkins's Preston mill, either beamers or warpers, were dismissed for insubordination and for being 'ringleaders' in encouraging disobedience among other workers to demonstrate support for the Stockport turnout.³¹ In solidarity, other operatives followed the women out. As the Preston strike intensified, Lowe's 1860 account describes how women became a familiar sight as delegates who 'travelled about and spoke at the public meetings with all the energy, and perhaps more than the loquacity of their male coadjutors'.³² Support for both the Preston and Stockport strike became so robust that one woman weaver who refused to contribute to strike funds was reportedly 'kicked and bruised so as to be unable to return to work for three weeks, and then she was not permitted to resume work unless she paid two-pence a loom per week to the strike'.³³ Other women defaulted on their union dues for reasons unknown but which may have included economic necessity. Rather than seek to understand women's rationale, male strikers questioned the women's loyalty. Their complaints were manifested in poems and rhymes including the catchy 'Mills in the Hydes'.

²⁹ S. Boston, *Women workers & the trade unions* (London, 1980, 1987; rev. ed. 2015).

³⁰ Dutton and King, 'Ten per cent', 39.

³¹ H. Ashworth, *The Preston strike: An enquiry into its causes and consequences* (Manchester, 1854), 13–14.

³² J. Lowe, 'An account of the strike in the cotton trade at Preston in 1853' in *Trades societies and strikes. report of the committee on trades' societies ... presented at the fourth annual meeting of the association at Glasgow, Sept. 1860*, 219–20.

³³ Ashworth, *Preston strike*, 14.

Within these walls the lasses fair
 Refuse to contribute their share;
 Careless of duty, blind to fame,
 For shame, ye lasses, O, for shame.

Come, pay up, lasses, think what's right,
 Defend your trade with all your might,
 For if you don't the world will blame,
 And cry, ye lasses, O, for shame!

Let's hope in future all will pay
 And Preston folks may heartily say,
 That by your aid they have obtained,
 The greatest victory every gained.³⁴

This rhyme may have been designed to pressure all women operatives to support the strike, while also fuelling public perceptions about women and trade unions. Yet this was not a true reflection of women's position in the labour movement or the Preston strike.

Over roughly 25 years (1831–1855) the THM waged a prolonged but relatively successful struggle to achieve a ten-hour working day for operatives in the cotton, woollen, and worsted textile industries in northern England and parts of Scotland. This struggle contributed to a stronger sense of self amongst working women operatives and increased their activism within the movement.³⁵ Throughout the campaigns the THM highlighted the interdependence of children, young people and all adults in the labour process, which was evidenced in their success through the passing of the Factory Act of 1847. The longevity and inclusiveness of the THM meant women's involvement in the labour movement was key to abolishing the relay system in 1850, whereby women and children had to work two or more short shifts per day without sufficient time to go home in between.³⁶ While women were divided over the true benefits of the THM, with many needing the extra wages earned during a longer working day, these campaigns developed women's collective identity as workers. Women were involved in the power-loom weavers union from its organisation during the 1840s,³⁷ but this was not found in other textile unions. While it is unclear how many women sought to join other cotton trade unions but were unable to, due to male objections and associated

³⁴ 'Mills in the Hydes', cited in Lowe, 'An account', 253.

³⁵ C. Creighton, 'The Ten-Hours Movement and the working-class family in mid-nineteenth century Britain', *International labor and working-class history* 100 (2021), 136–57; C.E. Morgan, 'The domestic image and factory culture: The cotton districts in mid-nineteenth century England', *International labor and working-class history* 49 (1996), 26–46; C.E. Morgan, 'Women, work and consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century Cotton Industry', *Social History* 17 (1992), 23–41.

³⁶ Creighton, 'Ten-Hours Movement'.

³⁷ Dutton and King, 'Ten Per Cent', 15, 17.

restrictions, the THM and other labour campaigns clearly reveal that women were active participants in collective action about issues they supported, including the Preston strike. In so doing, the women presented some challenge to masculine respectability where unions recognised the social significance of a family wage. The Preston strike suggests that men respected women as fellow wage earners and recognised the lived realities of the household economy.

The strike leadership equally regarded the striking operatives, men and women. Strike records from Preston's largest cotton manufacturer, Horrockses and Miller, suggest gender equitable strike pay at the firm and across Lancashire. When working, women power-loom weavers earned the same piece rate as the men and when striking, they received equal strike pay in the towns of Preston, Accrington, Rawtenstall, Church Parish, Clitheroe and Hyde.³⁸ In Preston, both married and single women over the age of 18 were included in the top bracket for union strike pay.³⁹ Such gender equity challenges male unionists' criticisms of women's financial and emotional contributions to the strike and highlights the divide between public rhetoric concerning gender and the labour movement, and operatives' lived realities.

Publicly, Preston largely ignored the women strikers. Propaganda posters appealed to the men and their role as breadwinners. For example, in December 1853, a poster urged:

Men, be wise; return to your work; put an end to the misery, want, and ruin which is now overwhelming so many families in Preston ... If you refuse ..., the responsibility will rest entirely upon yourselves of starving and ruining the many thousands of men, women, and children of Preston, who are dependent upon Factory labour for their subsistence and comfort.⁴⁰

While such rhetoric promoted the middle-class ideal of the male breadwinner family, it ignored working-class Lancashire family dynamics. The THM's objective of shorter hours for all workers did not encourage married women to leave the labour force. Rather, it sought to make it easier for women to carry out their dual role of earning and looking after the home, while promoting the domestic ideal to restore men to family life and strengthen the partnership between spouses.⁴¹ While Preston's patriarchal society made this goal ambitious, it reflected the lived realities of many households. Furthermore, labour's respect for women as both workers and household managers was mirrored in later strikes, suggesting that the Preston strike was not unique.

³⁸ LA, DDHs 75, Horrockses, Crewdson & Co., Strike Papers 1853: *The 16th and 17th week of the strike of the Preston powerloom weavers*, 14 December 1853.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, *Balance sheet of public and trades' moneys: Preston Lock-Out – Weeks ending Dec. 11, 1853 and Feb 19, 1854*.

⁴⁰ LA, DDHS 75/15/6 Horrockses, Crewdson & Co. Preston Lock-Out bill posters, 8 October 1853–19 February 1854.

⁴¹ Creighton, 'Ten hours movement'.

In the north Lancashire weaving strikes near Blackburn between 1858 and 1861, female and male textile operatives were equal partners.⁴² Weavers' representatives in Burnley and Accrington publicly stressed the importance of women's involvement in both the strikes and support activities.⁴³ Women operatives employed at firms not on strike contributed to the strike funds.⁴⁴ Women weavers' activism was also reflective of their union membership. Andrew Bullen has estimated that by 1860 the North-East Lancashire Power-loom Weavers Association had achieved a membership of 24,000 while the Blackburn Association had approximately 9,000 members. Approximately 70 per cent of weavers in north Lancashire were members of one of these two unions.⁴⁵ While records do not detail the proportion of male to female membership, the prevalence of women weavers suggests that they would have comprised a significant number. In contrast, union membership was weaker in South Lancashire. After the Preston strike the regional divide contributed to waning co-operation between the Lancashire unions until an 1860–1861 dispute in Colne where weavers sought the same remuneration as their Blackburn counterparts.⁴⁶ Co-operation between the northern and southern textile towns quickly grew to the levels seen during the Preston lock-out.⁴⁷ The Colne employers even honoured the striking women by including them on a blacklist of the 'most intelligent' operatives engaged in the turnout.⁴⁸ Yet, as in Preston, the Colne women received little public visibility at the time and little historical recognition since. Nevertheless, in February 1861, the *Blackburn Standard* reported how male strikers recognised the limitations of women's potential union activism due to their dual responsibilities of home and work. Childcare and other domestic responsibilities meant that females 'could not' attend strike meetings.⁴⁹

Lancashire women's growing labour activism reflects their developing identity as workers and men's recognition of women's dual commitments. Women were not simply the passive 'pawns' Sonya Rose describes, whereby male workers and manufacturers manipulated women in their struggles for control of the factory floor.⁵⁰ Women questioned masculine respectability by seeking to shape their working world to meet their needs. This included gaining legitimation as waged workers within the local and regional cotton economy and recognition of their dual responsibilities as household managers. While this does not lend itself to a singular women's labour movement, or even a Lancashire women's labour movement, it does suggest that women responded to their local economic and personal

⁴² Women's strike participation was also noted in Chorley, Clitheroe and Great Harwood: *Blackburn Weekly Times*, 15 May 1858; *Preston Guardian*, 16 and 30 March, 1861.

⁴³ *Preston Guardian*, 30 April 1859; *Burnley Advertiser*, 30 April 1859; *Burnley Advertiser*, 6 August 1859.

⁴⁴ Women contributed to strike funds in Blackburn, Colne and Preston: *Preston Chronicle*, 23 February 1861; *Preston Chronicle* 6 April 1861; *Preston Guardian*, 11 May 1861.

⁴⁵ A. Bullen, *The Lancashire weavers' union: A commemorative history* (Manchester, 1984), 6.

⁴⁶ *Blackburn Standard*, 20 June 1860

⁴⁷ Bullen, *Lancashire weavers' union*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Preston Guardian*, 11 May 1861; also cited in Greenlees, *Female labour power*, 158.

⁴⁹ *Blackburn Standard*, 6 February 1861.

⁵⁰ S.O. Rose, 'Gender, antagonism and class conflict: Exclusionary strategies of male trade unions in nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History* 13:2 (1988), 191–207.

circumstances and joined strike action when they deemed it necessary. Furthermore, the Colne strike suggests that the Preston lock-out was not unique in this respect. Nineteenth-century women's labour activism incorporated a fine balance of the needs of labour with the needs of the household. In Preston, women's legitimation as workers deserving of equitable strike pay paralleled the changes to their daily lived realities of poverty in frequently turbulent households, and which influenced their ongoing strike support.

The Domestic Benefits Behind Women's Sustained Strike Support

The long arm of poverty was closely entwined with women's labour decision-making. Mid-nineteenth-century contemporaries widely recognised Preston's enduring battle with poverty. In 1844, the Reverend John Clay surveyed the sanitary state of the town, describing the class-based differences in life expectancies amongst inhabitants and connecting low life-expectancy amongst the working classes with poverty and poor sanitation.⁵¹ Local newspapers also reported the relationship between poverty and ill-health. On December 16 1843, an editorial in the *Preston Chronicle* described

a source of disease and death infinitely more copious than ever a polluted atmosphere, and which cannot be removed by the application of the broom and the bucket ... The source is simply destitution, poverty, a want of the necessaries of life, of proper food and clothing.⁵²

Elizabeth Roberts's oral history evidence confirmed how Lancashire women's battle to maintain a household in poverty continued into the twentieth century.⁵³ Having internalised Victorian social definitions of domesticity, working-class women found the associated mantra of respectability influenced their labour activism.

In working-class Lancashire where women's and sometimes children's paid labour market participation was frequently essential for family economic survival, the lines between home and factory were blurred. Women and children entered and exited the paid labour market, working part-time and full-time as household finances required.⁵⁴ Equally, women crossed picket lines as 'blacklegs' in order to feed their children. In so doing, they became the enemy of working men. Other women who initially chose to strike were later 'hungered back' to work, including in Glasgow in 1847.⁵⁵ This makes impressive women's participation in and support of the eight-month Preston strike which occurred during an economic recession where the town was losing between £12,000 and £13,000 per week. Indeed, male trade unionists recognised women's domestic priorities

⁵¹ J. Clay, 'Borough of Preston: Report on its sanitary condition 1844', Appendix to the *first report of the commissioners for inquiring into the state of large towns and populous districts*, Vol. 1, 165, 188–89.

⁵² *Preston Chronicle*, 16 December 1843.

⁵³ Roberts, 'Women's strategies', 226–7; Roberts, *Woman's place*, 147.

⁵⁴ Greenlees, 'Equal pay'.

⁵⁵ Boston, *Women Workers*, 20.

and sought their sustained strike support, arguing that not doing so would ‘hurt their children’.⁵⁶ While the persuasiveness of this argument is unclear, at a public meeting in October 1853, Preston’s female operatives unanimously voted to continue their support for ‘ten per cent’.⁵⁷ Knowing that their sustained commitment to a fair wage could push households into economic peril suggests that women had additional motivations behind continuing their strike support.

The Preston lock-out’s impact on women’s domestic circumstances provided benefits that historiography has ignored, including the reduction in incidents of domestic violence. Lancashire’s working-class culture incorporated ‘hard masculinity’ which was associated with heavy drinking and could be violent. Indeed, drunkenness was by far the most common cause of ‘dispute and misery in working class homes’.⁵⁸ Preston and Blackburn male operatives were notoriously heavy drinkers and contemporaries linked alcohol to the high rates of violence within the towns.⁵⁹ During the strike, financial privation reduced spending on alcohol in Preston by at least £1,000 a week. The weekly consumption of spirits fell by 300 gallons, while 200 fewer barrels of beer were consumed. Reportedly, this decline in alcohol consumption halved the convictions for drunkenness, assault and similar offences in the town,⁶⁰ not to mention the incidents of violence that would never have been reported. Dutton and King argue that the respectable, non-violent behaviour amongst striking operatives was necessary and helped to secure both moral and financial support from across Lancashire and beyond.⁶¹ Operatives also may have wanted to prevent another violent and deadly outcome similar to that of the 1842 strike where authorities, including soldiers, killed four striking Preston workers and severely injured three more.⁶² Furthermore, if the 1853–1854 strikers gained a poor reputation, the extensive and prolonged support from across Britain may have rapidly dwindled. Indeed, it was no coincidence that during the 1850s many of the cotton operatives’ labour meetings were held in temperance halls.⁶³ Yet the impact of temperance on reducing domestic abuse and the associated impact on women’s behaviour has been ignored.

⁵⁶ LA, DDHs 75 Horrocks, Crewdson & Co. strike papers 1853, Preston Lock-Out: *Balance sheet of public and trades’ moneys received for the week ending Dec 11, 1853.*

⁵⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 October 1853.

⁵⁸ R. Roberts, *The classic slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 121–4, 123; J. Walton, *Lancashire: a social history, 1558–1930* (Manchester, 1987), 319.

⁵⁹ Dutton and King, ‘*Ten per cent*’, 99; D. Beattie, *Blackburn: The development of a Lancashire cotton town* (Halifax, 1992), 115–17.

⁶⁰ LA, DDPr 138/87a. Clay to Henry Ashworth, 21 July 1854, unpaginated section. Dutton and King, ‘*Ten per cent*’, 99, n 50; Beattie, *Blackburn*, 23.

⁶¹ Dutton and King, ‘*Ten per cent*’, 35.

⁶² Hardwick, *History*, 418.

⁶³ For example, in 1852 the Bolton power-loom weavers met at the Bolton Temperance Progression Society: *Bolton Chronicle*, 19 June 1852; in 1853, the Stockport weavers met at the Temperance Hall: *Bolton Chronicle*, 18 June 1853; in 1853, Preston workers had to move from the Temperance Hall to an open-air venue because the hall was too small: Dutton and King, ‘*Ten per cent*’, 35.

English law firmly established the husband's right to beat his wife in cases of marital chastisement.⁶⁴ Alcohol fuelled such behaviour. Yet as Elizabeth Foyster has argued, not all marital violence had a cause to chastise,⁶⁵ particularly when alcohol was involved. Furthermore, public and private behaviours differed. Domestic violence in nineteenth-century working-class Lancashire was a crime hidden in plain sight. Elizabeth Roberts's interviews with working-class Lancashire women born from c. 1890 onwards revealed many memories of fathers with alcohol problems and who assaulted their mothers. Yet outside the gossip of neighbours, the crime of domestic violence held no public currency.⁶⁶ Women were expected to be 'compliant, dutiful, silent, uncomplaining'.⁶⁷ In late nineteenth-century Blackburn and Wigan it was even claimed that 'it is the usual thing for the husband, when he comes home late at night, to give his wife a kicking and beating. The women take it as part of the daily round and don't complain'.⁶⁸ In some Lancashire towns, the 'black eye' was reportedly 'looked upon as a badge of marriage'.⁶⁹ English politeness made marital violence shameful and hence, unspeakable. Foyster documents how difficult it was for neighbours or employers to intervene.⁷⁰ If a woman had no relatives who could take in her and her children, she had limited places to turn for assistance and usually had to remain in the abusive household. Few working women in Preston earned enough to afford their own place.⁷¹ Nevertheless, by the end of the century, increasing numbers of Lancashire women not only took their drunken, abusive husbands to court, they were winning their cases.⁷²

It would be wrong to definitively claim that the potential for a sober and less violent husband motivated any woman to support the initial strike. It also would be impossible to directly correlate women's ongoing support for the Preston strike with the declines in both alcohol consumption and domestic violence. However, the benefits to a household without alcohol, both financially and through less violence, makes it not unreasonable to believe that Preston's new-found temperance fed into at least some women's decisions to continue supporting the strike. In the short term, all household strike pay could be used to purchase necessities without any money siphoned towards drink. With many households having several members working in the mills and who were eligible for strike pay, the potential for such households to 'get by' increased. In addition, some women

⁶⁴ R.E. Dobash and R. Dobash, *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy* (London, 1979), 4.

⁶⁵ E. Foyster, *Marital violence: An English family history, 1660–1857* (Cambridge, 2005), 4.

⁶⁶ Roberts, *Woman's place*, 119–21; E. Roberts, *Women and families: An oral history, 1940–1970* (Oxford, 1995), 105–6.

⁶⁷ Roberts, *Woman's Place*, 120; Beattie, *Blackburn*, 23.

⁶⁸ J. Corin, *Mating, marriage and the status of women* (London, 1910), 128. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/g7bd3sgt/items?canvas=144>.

⁶⁹ *Daily Chronicle*, 23 March 1909, cited in Corin, *Mating*, 128.

⁷⁰ Foyster, *Marital violence*, 169, 168.

⁷¹ Roberts, *Woman's place*, 120.

⁷² There has not yet been a systematic search of court records concerning domestic abuse cases, but newspapers regularly reported cases, for example *Lancaster Guardian*, 22 February 1890; Roberts, *Woman's place*, 121.

earned extra cash by cleaning, taking in washing or hawking.⁷³ Elizabeth Roberts has demonstrated how Preston women were particularly ingenious and entrepreneurial in earning income. They ran small businesses, ranging from taking in laundry, to childcare and opening a shop, on either an occasional or permanent basis, when their husbands were unemployed or under-employed.⁷⁴ In these households where income was enough to 'get by', the women unfortunate enough to live with drunken, abusive husbands may have found a reprieve influenced their short-term decision-making. Domestic decision-making is complex, particularly for those living in poverty who have fewer choices than their wealthier counterparts. While domestic violence is only one factor within this, it cannot be ignored.

Alongside a less violent household, women's ongoing support for the strike may relate to the opportunities that increased leisure time provided their family. During the Preston lock-out many churches opened their schools to the children of the strike. For example, the Reverend Clay's daughter and some of her friends offered a daily class to 35 girls.⁷⁵ Mothers would have welcomed increased educational opportunities for their children and possibly themselves. The many ballads and songs that emerged during and after the strike suggest that strikers, men and women, were engaged in literary and musical activities.⁷⁶ It would also be fair to assume that many mothers enjoyed their newly available time to spend with their children. As with domestic violence, establishing a direct correlation between increased family time and strike support is difficult. Nevertheless, the combination of educational opportunities and the time to avail of them, increased family time, as well as a pause in women's dual burden of paid and domestic work, may well have appealed to women.

Conclusions

There was no single reason behind women's initial support of the Preston strike, nor for their ongoing support throughout its duration. This article has highlighted the dual importance of women's recognition as workers equal to men which was reflected in the pay rates and some positive impacts the strike made to women's domestic circumstances. It has contributed to debates about women not being docile workers and added domestic rationales for married women's support of strike action. While the Preston strike was only a brief episode in the course of women's lives, it remains important because of the equal recognition of women's labour as evident in their strike pay, their commitment to the cause and their later recognitions as workers in other strikes. It also is important

⁷³ Roberts, *Woman's place*, 52.

⁷⁴ Roberts, 'Women's strategies'.

⁷⁵ Letter from Clay to Miss Carpenter, 10 January 1854, in W.L. Clay, *The prison chaplain: A memoir of the Reverend John Clay, B.D.* (Cambridge, 1861), 619.

⁷⁶ For example: 'Bessy Martin', or 'the Steam loom lass', <https://songsfromtheageofsteam.uk/Textiles/120>; 'Uncle Ned'; 'the Preston strike', <https://songsfromtheageofsteam.uk/Textiles/120>. John Harkness (c. 1816–1898) printed broadsheets of ballads to spread news about the strike: Oxford Broadside Ballads Online <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/search/?query=john+harkness>.

because of the notable decline in alcohol consumption and associated domestic violence. The strike provides a brief window into what the English working classes would do with higher wages and more leisure time. Greater research into women's labour activism and particularly trade union action is needed if we are to fully understand the complex balance of decision-making between women's working and domestic lives – married and single. Centring gender within the analysis, rather than viewing women's labour participation as a by-product of contemporary patriarchal society and union leadership, or the outcome, will enrich histories of labour, the domestic economy and household dynamics, and gender.