

Interview with Brenda Prince – May 2023

Born in Hackney, London, Brenda Prince got into photography through her political views. In 1983 she joined Format Photographers Agency, the first all-woman photographic agency and library. The following year she began to document the miners' strike focusing on the role played by women, such as their presence on the picket line, organising of community kitchens and food supplies, and rallying for fundraising.

... on getting into photography through politics:

My interest in photography really came alive when I moved to London as a 21yr old. I worked at the BFI (British Film Institute) for 7 years as I originally wanted to work in film. Then I applied to do a BA(Hons) degree in Film & Photographic Arts at the University of Westminster. It was a very left-leaning college. Jo Spence was there at the same time. She was a great support to me.

I used to be quite angry as a young feminist, about how women were portrayed in the media. I still am angry as not much has changed, you still see advertisers using women's bodies to sell cars for example. After completing my degree one of the projects I started was an exhibition, '*Women and Manual Trades*'. I worked with Philip Wolmuth at the North Paddington community darkroom. The pictures were quite specifically of

women doing non-traditional jobs and work, for example, (and I am going back 40 years) women bus drivers, carpenters, plumbers, engineers, firefighters, bricklayers etc, the kind of jobs that were traditionally done by men. I was very interested in showing an alternative image of what women could do.

... on Format Photographers Agency:

Format Photographers was started by Maggie Murray and Val Wilmer in 1983. It came into being because there were very few women in agencies at the time and Maggie and Val thought well why don't we just set up our own agency for women. So they invited photographers they knew such as Jenny Matthews, Anita Corbin, Pam Isherwood along with others to a meeting. I joined them a year later.

We were all documentary photographers who had our own projects and interests. We would work on our own stories and my miners' strike images came out of that. As a working class woman, I became aware of the inequalities in society; not just between men and women but also relating to race, class, people with disabilities and sexuality. The miners' strike gave me the opportunity to document working class people who were really struggling to keep their jobs and keep their communities alive.

...on starting to document the miners' strike

My brother lived in Calverton, a small pit village so I was able to stay with him. I got in touch with Women's action groups in the area (Hucknall & Linby, Ollerton) and they put me in touch with others (Clipstone, Blidworth). I began by photographing the striking miners' communal kitchens or soup kitchens and they gradually got to know me. I was accepted by the men because they knew I was on their side and perhaps because I was a woman, they didn't take me seriously as a 'Press' photographer. The more I went up there the more I got to know people. They'd say, 'oh you should come with us to so and so'. I think that's how I heard about the night pickets at Blidworth.

...on covering the role played by women in the miners' strike:

There was so much the women were doing. What I found important about the miners' strike and women getting involved, is that up till then many hadn't taken so much interest in what was happening in this country politically, but the strike politicised them – they began to take note and watch the news and realise that a lot of politicians are hypocrites, and you can't trust them and you still can't.

Women became more confident as a result of the strike, which I thought was great. It was good for other women and young girls

to see their Mums and daughters speaking out at the meetings, doing things they wouldn't have done before, eg. picketing. Most of them would have been typical mothers and wives, cleaning, cooking, shopping, looking after their children instead of going on the picket line, visiting and supporting other collieries, getting together with other women and planning days of action, e.g., Women Against Pit Closures.

After the strike, as told to me and recorded in interviews about the strike, they saw things differently, so it was a positive experience for some women despite the hardship but hard for the men who lost their jobs.