

Early Experience of work, domestic and Social life of Asian women in Britain – A reference to Derby

1. Paid factory work:

- a. Textile and hosiery
- b. Sewing, cutting, ironing and packing

2. Experience in various factories:

a. Meridian

Christmas Party was celebrated separately

Asian women were given an hour first

White, African Caribbeans were given an hour

While African Caribbeans and white women celebrated together,

Asian did not mix although they worked side by side there was hardly

Any communication between them other than business.

This tradition continued for many years

- b. If an Asian was seen to be making good earning, their job was given to

A white woman and she was moved to another one

- c. Managers expected a present at Christmas and at their birthday

- d. The work was done at piece rate, women often missed their tea breaks and

Worked during their lunch break too.

They did not trust the company would protect them if there was an accident even

If they followed all the rules. Their arguments were not far wrong.

Companies made

Excuses to avoid compensating if a worker was injured at work.

- e. Due to lack of language skills, women often did not know their rights.

- f. Fearing to loose their job they did not complaint plus they lacked English language skills to make a complain.

- g. Majority of the workers were Asian but their supervisors and managers were English.

There were no opportunity for promotion even though there were young women who

Attended schools and had good command of English language skills.

I remember only one young woman was promoted but she soon left because she was made to work harder and she said she was loosing money as well.

- h. Once workers were expected to continue to work in extreme cold weather and heating was not working.

i. UNION

- Most Asian women at Meridian joined union and a few shop stewards were Asian but they were not given any training to how to conduct union duties. The Managers used
- Them as a token for consultation.
- Union were and to some extent still are racist and colluded with the company to keep workers in dark of their
- Same was the case where men worked in majority. Union kept Asians down to shop steward, no promotion in the union, no training given about conducts of their role as shop stewards. Only IWA shop stewards were better informed and were better at their duties.

This was not unique to Meridian but most factories traditionally functioned in similar manner with some exception. Rules in some factories were racist done in the name of Health and safety.

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- a. Women were not allowed to work in their baggy trousers. The choice was either to remove the trousers, wear stockings or find job elsewhere.
- b. They were not given an alternative dress code.
- c. This was direct attack on Asian cultural, the dress and way of life.
- d. It is unimaginable how women must have felt
- e. Our tops have a long split up to underwear.
- f. They must have felt insulted and humiliated
- g. This was done in the name of health and safety
- h. This practice continued until early 1980s.

In one factory where post bags were sewn, workers were offered a good rate of pay but when managers found this out, - non-deserving Asians making such a good earning- the piece rate was reduced and women struggled to make a decent earning. They were not unionised. The union they approached refused to intervene stating the rule changed before women became members. The factory was

soon closed either was taken abroad or may have been contracted to Asian entrepreneur.

English employers v Asian Employers

Most of the English entrepreneurs either closed factories/ contracted to Asians or were taken to the developing countries. Both extremely exploited the workers. In Britain, in 1980s most Asian men lost their jobs due to industries moved to the developing countries and there were no alternative employment for them. The state benefits were so low that they could not meet the family needs, food and bills. Women also lost jobs with English employers and found themselves in sweatshops run by Asian employers where they were extremely exploited.

- Here they did long hours
- They had some flexibility but it only ended with child care
- There was no health and safety in place without fire regulations.
 - We won't be surprised if inspectors were not bribed
 - In some Area, Birmingham for example, women lost lives and was severely injured trying to escape fire.
- Many women worked long hours but were registered for 16 hours allowed to work, husbands were on benefits, or benefit would have either removed or reduced. The work was so poorly paid that they could not survive on.
- Many did not pay tax or national insurance, Hence they became invisible workers.
- Some paid their taxes and national insurance but their employers did not pass it over and many discovered this when they reached retirement age.
- Asian Employers only employed Asian workers, majority were women and a few men.
- They did not complaint because they considered the employers their own
- Secondly, they too were breaking the law even though they were doing so out of no choice and were stuck in the rut.

Social, economic and domestic life

Unlike their sisters in India – from agricultural community – Asian women in employment, earning their own living, felt liberated and were not dependent on others for money though in extended families all earnings were put in one pot controlled by family elder.

At the end of the week women either bought an outfit or jewellery, Asian women love gold and love to dress up.

However, their life was hard, laborious and hours were long. While Asian men also worked long hours in heavy industry in poorly paid dead end jobs, their work ended at the factory gate, women's work did not end from early morning to late night.

There were no time for leisure other than visiting cinema once in a while. Showing Asian films were also initially organised by Indo-Pak friendship society.

Because most came to Britain with three pound and some personal belongings, they had many responsibilities, to survive in a new country, culture and had responsibility to support their family back home, impoverished by the British Empire and partition.

In brief

- Textile and hosiery firms
- Piece work
- Divided workers
- Seen not deserving to earn better earning
- Managers expectation
- Lack of English language
- No promotion
- Lack of knowledge about labour rights
- Did not complain
- Job change
- Attack on Asian culture and way of life
- Factories moved to other countries
- High male unemployment v females exploitation
- Replaced English employers with Asians
- Female life v male life