



THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF BRITAIN?

FEMALE MIGRATION IN
THE 60S AND 70S

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KEYWORDS:

COMMONWEALTH:

Political association of states that were former British territories.

COLONIALISM:

Having political control over another country, occupying and exploiting it economically.

INTEGRATION:

Mutual accommodation between migrants and their host society.

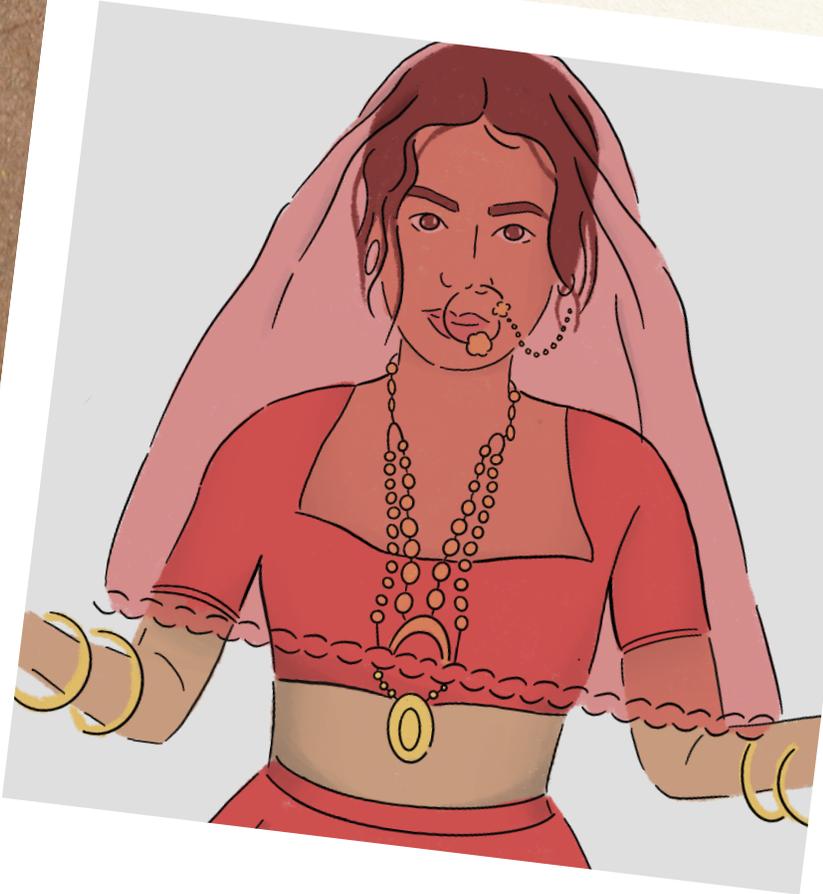
DEPENDANT:

Spouse, parent, grand-parent, child or sibling.

HERE COME THE GIRLS

After the Second World War, Britain experienced an influx of migration from the Commonwealth nations. This migration was primarily male and driven by labour demands, that was until the introduction of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, The Commonwealth Immigration Act put a break on primary migration. Britain now saw the arrival of women and children under the label of 'dependants'. Women from the Commonwealth held a unique position within British society. Unlike their male counterparts who travelled for economic reasons, female migration was driven by social reasons. There was a great deal of anxiety over the presence of single Asian men in Britain and their ability to form interracial relationships, The introduction of female dependants was seen as a way to solve this issue without compromising Britain's image on the world stage. Immigration policy in the 60s and 70s was based on racist ideas of South Asian women as docile, weak and passive.

The next few pages will explore female Commonwealth migration in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. Beginning with legislation and state policy towards incoming migrants, We will then move onto discuss the lived realities of South Asian Women in Britain, to restore agency to women who have been overlooked within British history.





LAYING DOWN THE LAW

A key feature of immigration legislation was that it was designed to filter migration, not to prohibit it entirely. This highlights the contradictory nature of the British government's response towards immigration during the 1960s and 1970s; it was a period characterised by both an increased emphasis on integration and intense racism.

1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act

It prohibited entry through the use of passports issued by colonial administrations. Migrants now required either a work voucher that prioritised skilled workers or they had to be a dependant. This reduced primary migration from the Commonwealth, ushering in a phase of family reunification. After its passing, 74% of Commonwealth migrants entered as female dependants or children.

1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act

Extended the measures of the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act to any migrant who did not have a parent or grandparent who was either born or a citizen in the UK. This effectively banned primary migration from the Commonwealth, even if the prospective immigrant had been granted citizenship after independence.

1971 Immigration Act

Divided the world into 'patrials' and 'non-patrials'. Patrials had an unrestricted right to live in the UK either by being born in the UK or being the descendent of a UK citizen, while 'non-patrials' were subject to immigration controls. Immigrants from Commonwealth countries were no longer distinct to those from any other country. A Commonwealth immigrant's right to enter the UK now depended on the discretion of administrators. This in turn enabled direct intervention into families; wives, children and elderly parents could be told they did not have sufficient reason to migrate.

1981 British Nationality Act

Introduced three categories to citizenship:
British citizenship: those who are 'closely connected' to Britain
British Dependent Territories citizenship: did not have the right to abode, This made a distinction between British citizens and citizens of Britain's overseas territories.
British Overseas citizenship: Those connected with former British colonies were now subject to immigration controls. Its aim was "to draw a line across the page of recent immigration" as quoted in The Times on the 19th of February, 1981.

A SWAMPED STATE OF AFFAIRS

The 1960s and 70s saw numerous displays of racism from prominent politicians.

- **Enoch Powell's** notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968 described the policy of family reunification to being "like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre".
- **Ann Cryer**, the MP for Bradford claimed Muslim marriage practices were the reason many migrants were poor, stating leaders of their community must "encourage people to put their daughters happiness and welfare first, and only then will they progress"

However, There was a contradiction in the state's approach to immigration. By preventing primary migration and facilitating family reunification, the government made the settlement of Commonwealth migrants in Britain permanent. Policy was caught between wanting to appeal to right-wing voices and appear outwardly anti-racist.

This can be attributed to three reasons:

- Female South Asian migrants were tools to help the integration process by civilising their male counterparts and preventing interracial relationships.
- Britain's ties with the former Commonwealth were dwindling so the government began to look towards Europe. They had to ensure their treatment of migrants would not violate the European convention on Human rights in order to uphold their international reputation
- Did not want to damage their relationship with the migrant community in the UK.

British immigration policy was not a barrier to all incoming migrants. Instead it was a filter that allowed entry to desirable migrants. This meant South Asian women, who could serve British interests. Thus, female migrants were perceived to have no agency in British immigration policy; they were simply viewed as a way to integrate their male counterparts..



"I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.'... In my view, that is one thing that is driving some people to the National Front."

Margaret Thatcher 1978, in a TV interview for Granada World in Action

BORDERLINE INVASIVE?

The humiliation and subordination caused by Immigration practices at the border signalled the incoming migrants inferiority within British society. The immigration practices were based on racist ideas of South Asian women, both in regards to their sexuality: being virginal and pure bodies to be consumed by men and as deceptive and fraudulent migrants.

X-Rays:

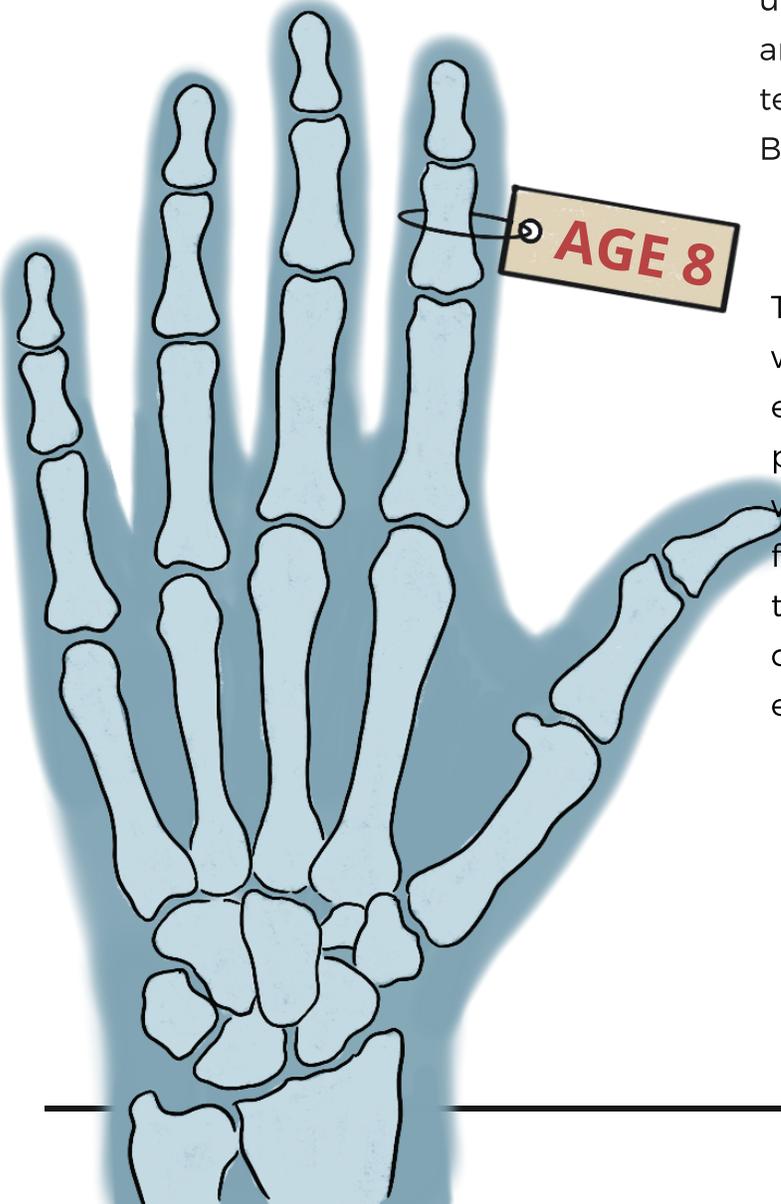
X-Rays were taken of women and children to find out the age of migrants who they believed were lying, or to screen for disease. Sometimes these were carried out by untrained officers. In Dhaka, Bangladesh there was a case where an x-ray was taken on a pregnant woman - a highly dangerous procedure.

Virginity Test:

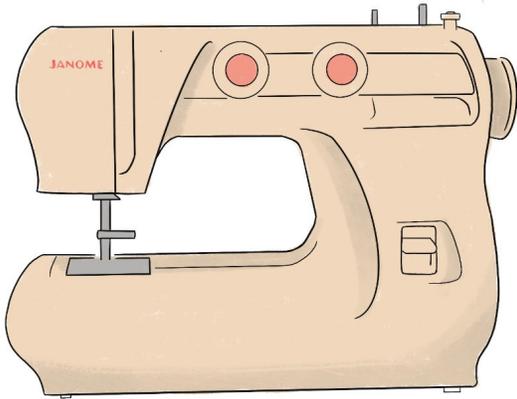
Some women were forced to have a medical examination of their vagina to prove their intentions for migrating. It was based on racist ideas of Asian female sexuality: if she was not a virgin she could not be a fiancée and if she was a virgin she could not be a wife. The Guardian reported that an Indian woman arriving at Heathrow on the 24th of January 1979 underwent a virginity test, and it was believed another 80 women went through the same tests. Similar incidents were reported in the British Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Primary Purpose Rule:

To prove the primary reason for the marriage was not to gain settlement rights, couples were expected to remain in their relationships for a probationary time period. This left many women vulnerable as there was no exemption for victims of domestic abuse until 1999. Even then they were not given access to public funds, confining many to their relationships due to economic necessity.



WHAT A WAY TO MAKE A LIVING



When South Asian women were admitted into Britain, it was expected they would hold an entirely different position in society than their male counterparts. They had social expectations placed on them, not economic. This was based on the idea that Single South Asian men were a threat to British society, and by allowing them to bring over dependants, it would curb their potential to form interracial relationships.

However, with so many Asian men being in low paid employment, Asian women were forced to work. Thus, the image promoted by immigration policy of South Asian women as non-workers did not reflect their lived reality. Even in work, many were confined to the domestic space, transforming their homes in to workshops. Often their husbands could become their employers by sourcing work for them. This did not mean that they were passive in their work. Many would establish Informal unions by creating networks with neighbours and friends. By 1979, a woman could make up to £50 a week in the garment trade.



South Asian Women were still one of the most exploited groups. In the late 70s Asian women on average earned 95p per hour compared to a white woman who would earn £1.10 per hour. This was arguably due to the perception of them being docile and submissive. In reality, South Asian women played a crucial role in numerous industrial struggles throughout the 1970s. Perhaps, the most significant example was The Grunwick Strike in 1977. A group of South Asian women walked out of a photo-processing factory in North London in protest at the poor working conditions and compulsory overtime. The women demanded trade union recognition and after 10 months the strike gained the support of trade unions and anti-racist organisations.

Although the strike ended without meeting all of its aims, it has been praised as a significant moment that forced trade unions to represent minority workers. The Grunwick Strike was not an isolated incident. In 1979, 96 Asian women struck at the Chix Bubblegum Factory in Slough. On the 10th of August 2005, over 500 employees, who were mostly South Asian Women, walked out of The Gate Gourmet factory. This led to further strikes at Heathrow airport in solidarity. Many of the women continue to meet regularly in a support network showing that the legacy of these disputes lives on today.

The power of South Asian women has to often been dismissed in favour of their being portrayed as submissive and meek wives and fiances. In reality these women were independent and individual, who cannot be defined simply by their relation to the men that settled in Britain before them. It is only when we start to look at the history of 'ordinary' individuals: workers, wives, immigrants, that we can an begin to uncover the real story of our mothers, grandmothers and aunties.



Jayaben Desai, Leader of The Grunwick Strike
