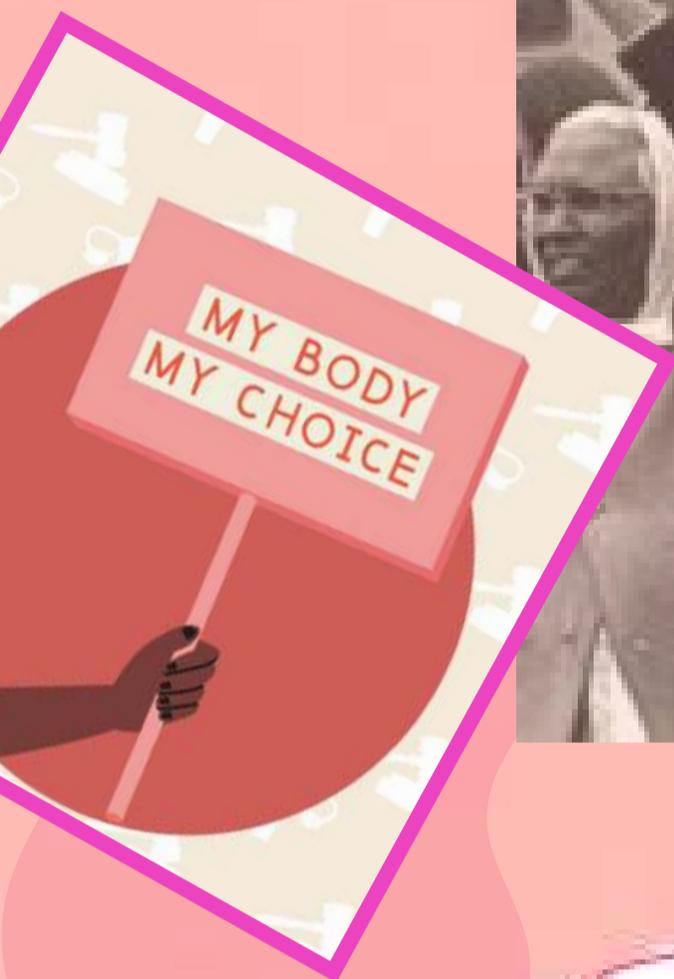


STATE SCANDAL'S

"VIRGINITY TESTING"

In the 1970s



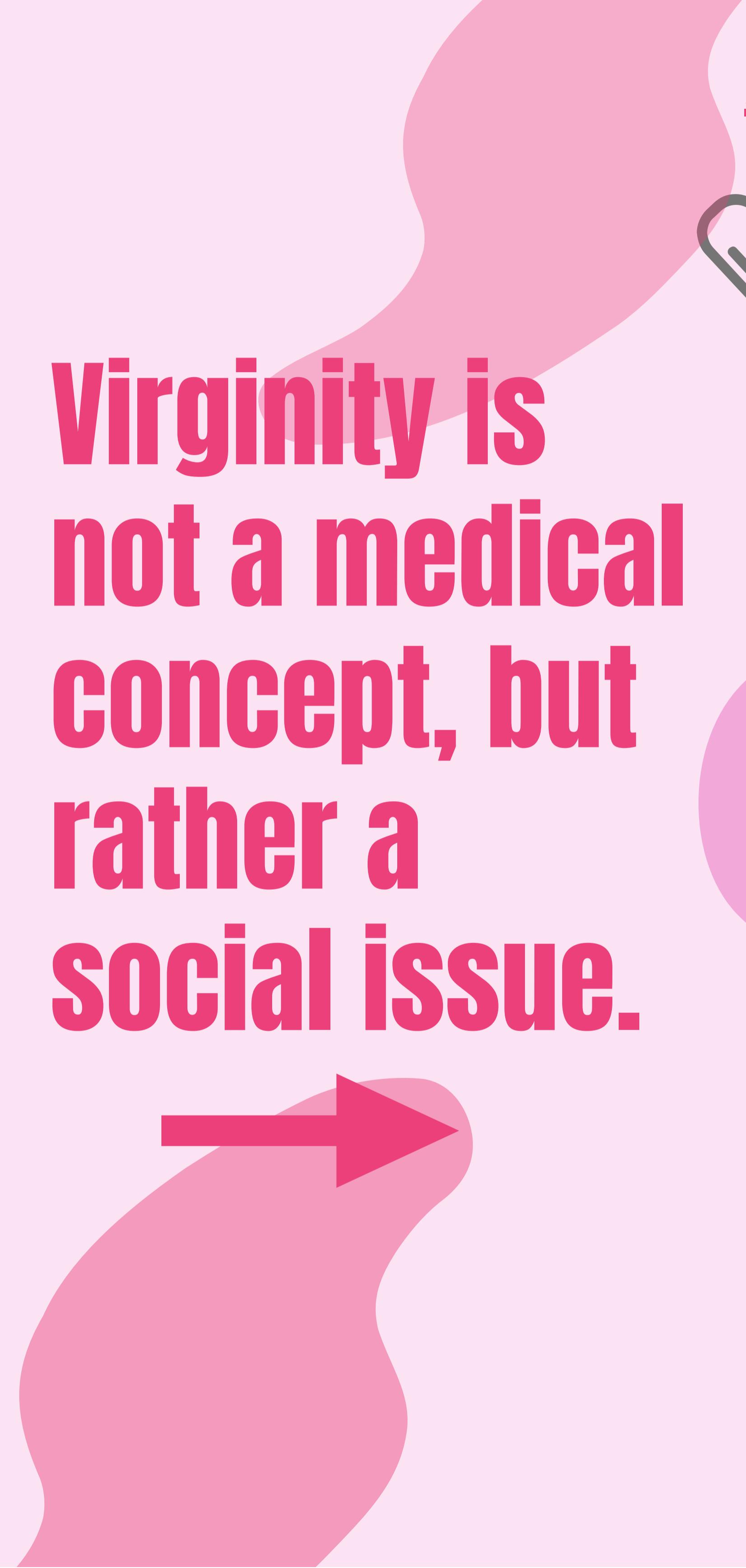
DON'T FORGET!

• Passport

• Flight Ticket

• Luggage

• intact Hymen

The background is a light pink color with several abstract shapes. At the top right, there is a dark pink paperclip. At the bottom left, there is a large, light pink arrow pointing to the right. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

**Virginity is
not a medical
concept, but
rather a
social issue.**

Introduction



Newly arrived immigrants from Pakistan at Heathrow airport in the 1960s. Photograph: Peter Keen/Taken from Observer Pic Lib

In February 1979, The Guardian made it public knowledge that numerous South Asian women were subjected to gynaecological examinations (A.K.A 'Virginity Testing') by immigration staff in the UK and at British High Commissions in South Asia.

Suspicious that South Asian women were abusing the 1971 Immigration Act that fast tracked fiancées of migrant workers into the UK, immigration officers needed physical proof that these women were unmarried, childless and therefore Virgins. A woman's virginal status (a concept that is socially constructed in the Western world) was considered an objective element to be used to determine the outcome of the migrant's application, alongside other documents, in cases where the Immigration Officer would not otherwise be convinced that the applicant's claims were genuine.

Why Should We Talk About it?

It is clear that Virginity Testing was fed by racist and sexist assumptions produced by the British State. First it was assumed that South Asian women had to be virgins if they were not married, and second, it was assumed that 'testing for virginity would provide conclusive medical evidence of sexual activity ... Clearly, they know nothing about how the female body works!

Whilst virginity testing officially ended shortly after the Guardian article was published, it is undeniable that the female immigrant body is abused by the British state. It is our job to recognise this from the past and prevent it for the FUTURE!!

The Legal

'Stuff'.

1971 Immigration Act.



- On 1 January 1973, the Immigration Act of 1971 came into effect to stop 'large-scale permanent immigration' to Britain.
- The British government was concerned with restricting 'non-white' Commonwealth migration due to fears fed by racist prejudices.
- However, Britain could not simply keep out 'undesirable' migrants, the country needed migrant workers for the economy, to maintain the Commonwealth system and ensure 'good race relations'.
- Therefore, 'non-white' commonwealth migrants still entered the UK after the 1971 Immigration Act BUT, they suffered considerably from Britain's racist attempts to make entering the country challenging and in many ways, humiliating.

- In the 1970s then, thousands of dependents (wives, fiancées, children, elderly relatives etc) entered the UK to join those who had already emigrated before 1973 for labour purposes
- Due to Britain's panic regarding the single, 'non-white' migrant surplus, legislative amendments were introduced to favour entrance of migrant fiancées to combat the 'problem'.
- Fiancées entering the UK were essentially 'fast tracked' at the boarder, as unlike the wives of migrant workers, fiancées did not did not have to endure the long application process of getting a visa or having a marriage certificate.
- Although this sounds like a positive, UK border control were convinced that female migrants were using this 'loop hole' in the Immigration Act to enter the country without having a fiancé.

1970s immigration birthed a whole range of different policies, acts and reforms. Understanding these acts can be difficult (as well as boring!) so here are the most important bits you'll need to know. Come back to this page throughout the zine!



“
women were largely
invisible to the immigration
rules, and in immigration
legislation as a whole:
where their existence was
recognised, it was almost
entirely in relation to men.”

“
-Jacqueline Bhabha and Sue Shutter,
Women's Movement: Women Under
Immigration, Nationality and Refugee Law.”



The South Asian Immigrant in the Eyes of the State.

WARNING

Harmful Stereotypes of gender, race and ethnicity were at the forefront of the British State's understandings of the Indian Immigrant in the 1970s.

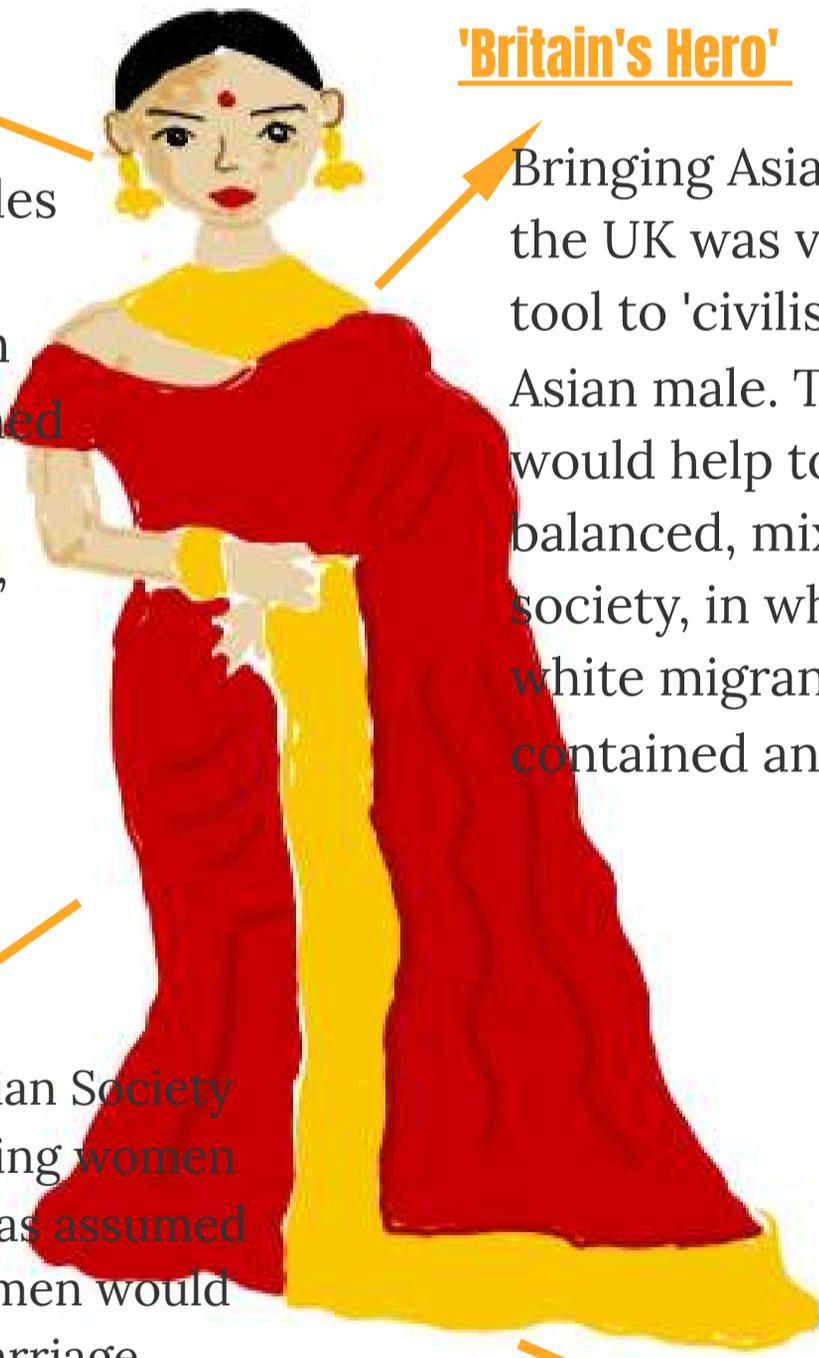
The South Asian Woman

'Submissive, Meek and Traditional Bound'.

Influenced by attitudes of the British authorities formed in colonial India. Assumed that women were subordinates to men, passive and lacked a voice within society.

'Britain's Hero'

Bringing Asian women to the UK was viewed as a tool to 'civilise' the South Asian male. Their role would help to maintain a balanced, mixed-race society, in which the non-white migrant would be contained and ghettoised.



'Virginal'.

Believing that South Asian Society was 'backwards' regarding women and the patriarchy, it was assumed that all South Asian women would remain a virgin until marriage. 'Virginality' reinforced the idea of women being innocent, naive and in 'need' of being protected.

South Asian women - Britain's answer to containing the migrant male 'problem'.

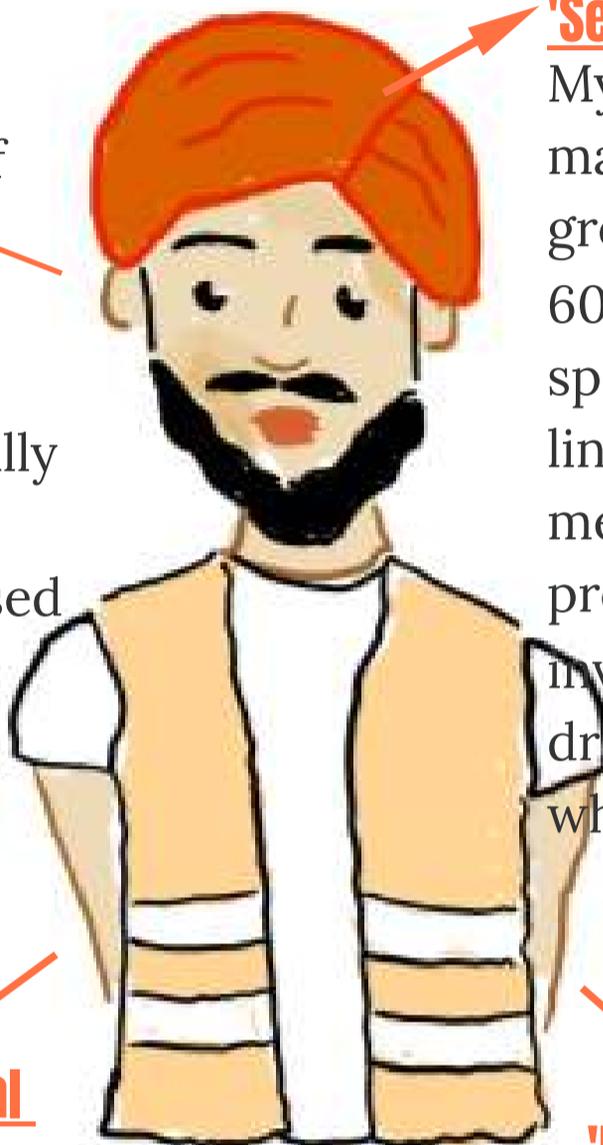
Can You See How These Assumptions Influenced 1970s Immigration Control?

Over 23,400 Indian men migrated to Britain with work permits between 1962 and 1972, compared with just over 2600 Indian women. In the same period, over 22,600 Pakistani men migrated to Britain with work permits, compared to a mere 471 Pakistani women

The South Asian Man.

'Causing Havoc'.

The 'surplus' amount of single, migrant men threatened the ideal, 'balanced' mixed-race community by potentially initiating interracial relationships. This caused great fear within in the media.



'Sexual Deviants'.

Myths circulating the male Asian migrant grew extensively in the 60s + 70s. 'Moral panic' spiralled as media linked South Asian men to have promiscuous relations involving sex and drugs with young, white women.

Unable to Control Sexual Desire

'Drug Pushers, Pimps and Predators'.

”

If we do not allow families to come into the country as units we shall have all sorts of trouble with women. The female element is absolutely essential, and the sooner the men here have their wives with them the better I shall be pleased. ”



Conservative MP, Sir John Smyth, 1965.

Here Comes the Bride!



Entering the UK under the condition that you were a fiancée to a migrant worker within the country seemed like the ideal for South Asian women: no need for a marriage certificate, not having to wait for a visa, the perfect 'fast track' into the country, right?

Unfortunately, this was far from the case. Women, in theory, had the right to join their future husbands here, but in practice, if black, faced great difficulties. South Asian women were viewed as con-artists who were abusing the 'liberal' (we can all agree, that immigration control was far from liberal!) attitudes of the state. For that reason, all Asian women were viewed as potential liars that had to prove herself and her worth to the state.

Britain's Biggest Fear... Jumping the Queue.

"The rationale for.. Interviewing fiances and not fiannees in the country of origin (for entry clearance) is that the former are more likely than the latter to be intending not to marry and it is better to stop them before rather than after they reach the port of entry"

- Official Explanation, 1977 Government Think Tank Report.

The Case of Zahira Galiara



Whilst this story is not specifically about a fiancée entering the UK, Zahira was a victim to British immigration control. Her story reflects the horrifying consequences of when wives were rejected at the border.



Zahira Galiara flew from Bombay to London on October 1976 to join her husband, whilst heavily pregnant. Due to the fact that Zahira did not have her entry certificate, she was denied access into the country, and detained without food or water, despite her condition. The following day, she was told that she would be sent back to India. Clearly stressed and shocked, this news induced Zahira into early labour. However, a doctor at the airport stated that she was 'fit to fly', believing she was faking; mocking her cries of pain. It was only when the baby's head began to emerge that Zahira was finally given medical attention, and was rushed to hospital. The baby was born prematurely with numerous abnormalities; it died shortly after. Whilst Zahira was permitted to stay in the UK, both her and her baby were victims of state neglect.



Would this medical neglect happened if Zahira was a born citizen?

The Immigration Officer Will See You Now...

'The 'Virginity Test'.



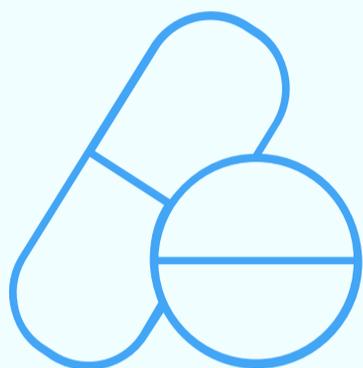
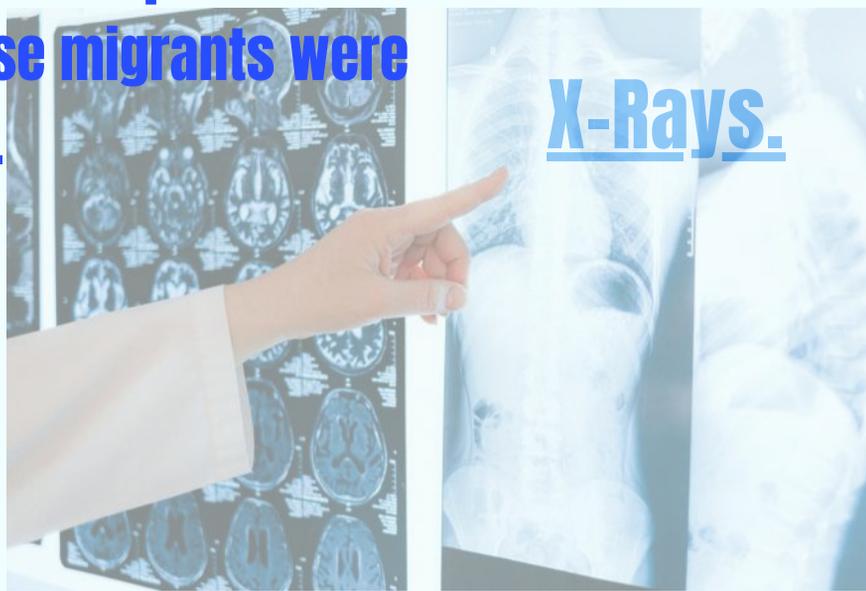
If immigration officers did suspect these South Asian women of lying about having a fiancé within the UK, the 'Virginity test' became the deciding factor of their fate within Britain. These women, the majority young and alone, were taken to a separate room where the 'test' was taken place. The fiancée of a widowed school teacher living in London, was made to 'strip naked without even a blanket or sheet' and was examined by a male doctor, despite her request to see a female doctor. Clearly traumatised by her experience, when reunited with her fiancé, she could barely talk or eat.

- Whilst British Immigration Control said that these women consented to these 'medical' examinations, we need to remember that these women did not have much of a choice. If they refused, they would automatically be sent home.



It is undeniable that the 'virginity tests' performed on South Asian women were discriminatory, inhumane and a form of sexual abuse. Not every women who is a virgin has a hymen, and not every South Asian women waited till marriage to have sex. British immigration control ignored both of these factors...

X-rays were used in British border control when immigration officers needed further proof regarding a migrants age. These migrants were primarily women and children.



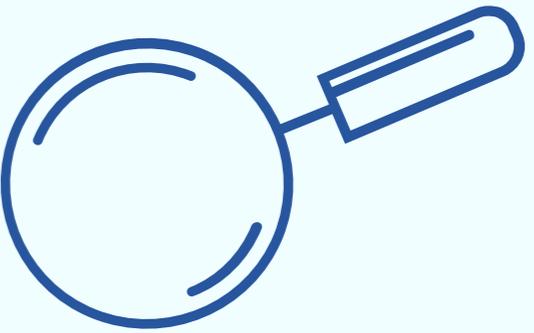
- **Officers carrying out examinations were not qualified to use X-ray machines, exposing numerous women and children to unnecessary radiation hazards.**
- **The British Medical Association knew about these implications and even condemned the practice within UK health services. However, this was not translated into the treatment of immigrants coming into the country.**

- **The Guardian also reported that at the British High Commission in Dacca, a pregnant woman had her skull X-rayed (for reasons not stated), 'despite the fact that Department of Health regulations would prevent such a test on pregnant British women'.**
- **Why was she not treated as an equal to a British woman?**

" The treatment of the migrant female body signals what her purpose is once she is 'fortunate enough' to be allowed into the country. The humiliation removes any expectation on her part that her position in Britain is one of equal rights and opportunities "

The shocking practice of the 'virginity testing' and the use of X-rays is a powerful reminder of how selection and scrutiny at the border can result in serious infringements of rights.

Read All About It.



The home office (interior ministry) admitted in a statement that an Indian woman teacher had been medically tested at Heathrow airport last week to see if she had ever borne a child. The Indian high commission today protested to the British foreign office about the incident after the press in India denounced the reported practice. The tests are designed to help immigration officials check whether claims of intended marriage to British residents are genuine.

He told the "Daily Telegraph" newspaper she was frightened to refuse the examination carried out by a male doctor despite her request to see a woman.

He added: "My fiancée was made to strip naked without even a blanket or a sheet... She had to stand like that for 20 minutes before a doctor came. What difference does it make whether she was a virgin or not?"

Mr. Phillips, who was then given Mrs Kakar, had been examination gynaecological to discover whether a gynathrow to discover whether at Heathrow "bona fide virgin, she was a she was a fiancée. she was without or fiancée. Britain without As a fiancée. Britain without entry to enter the lengthy entry tilled through the procedure. going clearance procedure.

The Government has admitted a charge by a minister in the Indian government that 34 Indian women who wanted to settle in Britain were given virginity tests in New Delhi to discover whether they were married.

The home office said the woman, aged 35, had flown from Delhi with her fiancé and had been examined because an immigration officer suspected she might already have been married. It said the woman gave her written consent after hearing an explanation in her own language. The test showed she had never had a child and the woman was given leave to remain in Britain for three months. "Any woman — English or Indian — would be shocked to have a reputation like this. What difference does it make whether she was a virgin or not," he said.

The National Federation of Indian Women today expressed shock at the indignity and humiliation to women of the Indian sub-continent who were subjected to virginity test before entry into Britain. The federation sought immediate intervention by the Indian government to stop this humiliating practice.

Mrs. Vimla Farooqui, general secretary of the federation, said that the detestable test was to terrorise the women so that they did not join their fiancés working in Britain.

She demanded an apology from the British authorities.

[Melanie, Phillips, Britain admits Indian virginity test charges](#)
[The Guardian \(1959-2003\); Mar 23, 1979;](#)

[U.K. to probe virginity test](#)
[The Times of India \(1861-2010\); Feb 3, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Times of India](#)

THE British government has decided to persist in the racially derogatory and medically indefensible practice of subjecting to X-ray examinations children from the Indian sub-continent to determine their age and consequently their right to settle in the U.K.

This can only be interpreted as a snub to the governments of the sub-continent, who have been assured from time to time that such questionable practices have no place in British immigration control. Only last year the British government apologised to India on the issue of virginity testing, in which an Indian woman figured, and promised to discard the practice.

Joshi, B K, UK to go on with X-ray tests, The Times of India (1861-2010); Nov 26, 1980

At that time, Mr. David Stephen, an adviser to the then foreign secretary, Dr. David Owen, was sent to the Indian sub-continent to assess how questionable medical tests would affect relations with the three governments. He is understood to have reported that the tests would cast a permanent shadow over the relationship between India and Britain. He also recommended the Yellowlee report should be shown to the governments of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

WHO criticised it as exposing people to unnecessary radiation risk. Even the British medical association condemned the practice. It said that radiological examination for administrative and political purposes was unethical.

Gaslight, Gatekeep, Government Responses.

- It is understandable that after the Guardian's report, there was major public uproar regarding the treatment of South Asian women. The government had no choice but to respond.
- For example, on 19 February 1979, Home Office Secretary Rees asserted in Parliament that 'a vaginal examination ... may have been made only once or twice during the past eight years, according to records which have been looked at'. We know now that this was false, and 'virginity testing' was a common practise.
- The DHSS (Department of Health and Social Security) responded to the 'virginity testing' scandal in a report, commonly known as the Yellowlees Report. It explicitly underlined the UK's racially discriminatory immigration system.
- Whilst the Home Office ended the practise of 'virginity testing' shortly after, anger still remains for many of the victims. The government never took full accountability for their humiliating and inhumane actions.

Reclaiming the Past for the Present.

"Heathrow Virginity Testing Protest"

[https://irr.org.uk/cool_timeline/thing2/?](https://irr.org.uk/cool_timeline/thing2/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=thing2)

[utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=thing2](https://irr.org.uk/cool_timeline/thing2/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=thing2)

We will never know how many women underwent forced 'virginity testing' under the British state. What we do know is that these women were victims because of their race and because of their gender.

These women deserve their experiences of Britain's immigration laws to be heard, not just as a 'disturbing' story from the past, but as a useful tool to understand the discriminations of female migrants in the present.

Migrant women from the past as well as migrant women now are not the 'submissive', 'meek' and 'traditional-bound' bodies that the State assume.

Migrant women will bite back!

Images from 1979 picket at Heathrow Airport, organised by AWAZ (UK Asian women's collective) + OWAAD (Organisation of Women of African+Asian descent.)

