

**PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM**

# **MIGRANT WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT**

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# The Cycle: Difficulties Faced by Female Asian Migrants in the World of Work

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Me and my mum are preparing dinner. It's a regular Tuesday evening and we're performing our daily chores; I am bustling around emptying the dishwasher, a damp cloth in hand, whilst half of my mum's body has disappeared into the fridge as she retrieves ingredients.

I clean the worktop and thoughtfully glance at my mum, her much loved dressing gown a bright splash of pink against the slate grey fridge. She must be bone-tired, I think; she woke up before us to prepare my sister's packed lunch, tolerated the cramped bus to work, walked home, spruced up the house with some vinegar concoction, and is now cooking a dinner for four.

A smile creeps onto my lips, as I think, superwoman. It is a sad smile, a wistful one, a pained one. A smile that hopes I'm not next in line. A smile that wishes to whisk my mother away, dressing gown and all, and give her a well deserved holiday.

I tell her all of this, and in response, she tells me about the cycle. The word reminds me of washing machines. It smells like laundry detergent, a nostril-quivering strong lavender, and makes me shudder involuntary.

She tells me about the barriers blocking women like her, Asian migrants, from becoming financially independent. She tells me about how she felt "powerless, sad and left out," knowing that she was unable to financially support herself when she moved to the UK with my dad. She moved from Nepal to build a better life for her future family. She explains that her greatest difficulty was not being proficient in English: "I could not get a good job because of my English. It is my second language". She says that the inability to communicate was the most significant hindrance, followed closely by "having to adjust to a different culture and environment". I then ask her: "But many people argue that there are enough employment services for female Asian migrants - what do you think about this?". Her response was "That's not true. I didn't get any support when I was applying to jobs twenty years ago".

**“it is easy to see why female Asian migrants may be reluctant to pursue professional opportunities”**

My mum's backstory is similar to so many other migrant women in the UK. At 24, she got engaged to my dad, who already lived and worked in Wales. My father works as a civil engineer and mum always felt that she would be judged for working a low-level job, such as a cleaner, compared to my dad's traditional white collar one. She felt that this social disparity would be frowned upon by our family in Nepal, yet it was the only type of job that she could get without fluent English language skills.

Support from an organisation could have significantly changed my mum's career prospects. EYST (Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales) supports Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals living in Wales. Selima Bahadur, Programme Manager, explained that negative views of Asian migrant women are oversimplified: "Difficulties they face stem from the intersectional issues related to being a Person of Colour, a Woman [or] a Muslim. Each of these can have negative associations in day to day life and when getting employment."

She said there has been some improvement compared to 20 years ago because “[some Asian] women were not given the opportunity for employment. Now this has changed, we have also seen more opportunities within some employment fields and progression through to senior positions,”. However, she is aware of “employers [...] who take on people of minority ethnic backgrounds, almost as tokenistic gestures and then expect them to be the face of the company. There is no real opportunity for these individuals to progress to higher positions if they wish to do so.” She said that she witnesses many migrants with career histories from abroad struggle to find “work in their chosen fields due to not having the qualifications in this country. So they apply for unskilled vacancies. This means that things are not getting better really but, if anything, worse for Asian migrants”.

This issue is echoed in my mum’s story. She was previously a primary school teacher in Nepal, and has a BA in Social Sciences but was unable to transfer these skills as her qualifications mean little to nothing in the UK.

As a charity, EYST have set up the Black Asian Minority Ethnic Employability Network to increase employment and employability of minority ethnic backgrounds. The group meets weekly and has been effective in “raising awareness of the disparities in employment among different racialised groups”. However, the network ought to be expanded to all regions of Wales. Selima also believes that Wales could be more welcoming and inclusive to female Asian migrants by “having more role models in different fields and value the contributions that they make to society”.

## “A smile creeps onto my lips, as I think, superwoman”

Various other charities such as Women for Refugee Women, which operates UK wide, have identified similar difficulties for refugee women. In response, they have organised countryside retreats to improve their leadership skills. Helping disadvantaged women develop their confidence can lead to personal transformations, as Rebecca (a pseudonym) writes in a blog on the charity’s website from 2018. “Before joining Women for Refugee Women I was very shy and I had lost all hope of living a normal life... This all changed for me when I met Women for Refugee Women because I have had opportunities and training”. She explains the various activities that they participated in, including drama sessions, a sewing course and poetry performance. “Don’t hide away, there are opportunities available and you have so much potential.” She now supports other female migrants on their journey to success.

Overall, it is easy to see why female Asian migrants may be reluctant to pursue professional opportunities, whether that is due to language barriers or low self esteem. However, it is also encouraging to see women gaining independence, knowledge and experience, allowing the integration of valuable voices into our work industry.

I hope that the future will hold further support, advice and services aimed at female Asian migrants to allow them to unlock their full potential and gain financial independence.

Sometimes, we need to stop being polite, scrunch up our noses and squint at the world, and tell it that it’s not treating us well enough. Sometimes, we need to discard overpriced laundry detergent by tipping it down the sink, slam the kitchen door and put our shoes on.

Let’s break the cycle.

# GALWAD



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