

ANGRYWORKERSWORLD



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY INTERVIEW SERIES, 2018

A series of interviews with working class women from west London

To mark international women's day...

AngryWorkers would like to share five stories of working women in the sprawling city of London in 2018. They are from a cross-section of people that we have met in our neck of the woods: the western suburban hinterland that is home to many migrants, new and old, who bust their asses at work and at home, who are on the frontlines of austerity and brexit policies, but who all live in relative obscurity. The papers are full of stories of scroungers, thieves, murderers and rip-off merchants. They are bleeding this country dry, apparently. But the people who keep the economy going – those doing the low-paid jobs, those doing the lionshare of caring work – are rarely given any meaningful space to articulate their own experiences, needs and desires. We hope this series plays a modest role in giving some space over to them.

Over the last few years, there has been an avalanche of campaigns and news centred around the violence and harassment of women: the relentless everyday sexism and harassment through #MeToo on social media, which followed the accusations of rape by Harvey Weinstein, that itself was the latest in a string of high-profile men outed as rapists. More recently we have heard about the collusion of humanitarian institutions with the widespread sexual abuse of young women and girls. This followed on from reports about the collusion of state and public agencies in regional paedophile rings. All of these cases are seen as 'scandals'. This extends to news on exploitation in general: for example, the 'victorian conditions' endured by the workers of Amazon and Sports Direct. But the focus on 'scandals', preferably with a discernible villain like Weinstein, Crosby, Saville or 'Muslim men', keeps the daily and structural oppression of working class women hidden in the shadows.

In the current aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 working class women have been squeezed between welfare cuts and the increased pressure to work more on one side, and the conservative backlash that

promotes traditional family values on the other. This has a practical purpose: valorising the family sets it up as a safe haven or ideal antidote to these times of austerity and hardship - as well as the masculine uncertainties it invokes. But it is increasingly impossible to both bring in an extra-income and create a family haven. Instead, these conflicting pressures of modern life make the home into a place of tension, that can easily boil over into violence.

We need to address the main contradiction of women's continued triple burden (of waged work, emotional labour and male violence) in an age of supposed equality. The role of a feminist movement and analysis is vital if we are to properly understand and respond to the worsening situation of the labour market in terms of real wages, precarisation, legal rights and the slashing of the social wage. We cannot afford to cling to the old labour organising models of 'natural leaders' and singular workplace-focused issues, that, implicitly, relegate women to the margins. Now, more than ever, we need class action that has its roots in the experiences of working class lives. If this is not the starting point of our political activities, we lay ourselves open to 'representative' talking heads that fill the vacuum of ideas. There are aspects of the feminist movement in the UK that do this better, for example supporters of Yarl's Wood detainees.¹ Often though, feminism does not touch the lives of the women it professes to place at its centre. A feminism that largely focuses on 'choice', when it come to, for example, the question of abortion, sex work or 'gender identity' often fails to address the material forces on working class women which often make such 'choices' a privilege.

The women in this interview series bear the brunt of sexism in the workplace, racist border controls and an increasingly punitive welfare system, with little recourse to amplify their experiences through the media or organisations that can represent them. We don't just want to share them as 'sad tale' fodder, but as the foundation upon which we can orient our political work. We need to build working class, grassroots organisations that address working class women's issues.

AngryWorkers tries to do this with our

¹ <https://detainedvoices.com/tag/yarls-wood/>

workplace newsletters,² weekly solidarity network drop-ins and newspaper.³

We think these short interviews show the complexity and richness of womens' lived experiences in relation to the broader changes of capitalist expansion and crisis. They should be our starting point.

We hope you find them interesting.

4. Meena



There have been high profile cases recently of companies such as Tesco and Sainsbury's and organisations like Birmingham City Council being sued over pay discrimination. While in some cases companies try and get away with paying their female staff less than men doing exactly the same job, it is more common for them to judge certain jobs of being of lesser value than others. This so-called 'objective evaluation' is based on a pretty random assessment of 'skills' that this is highly gendered and works to women's disadvantage. Women like Carrie Gracie, who quit the BBC over the pay equality scandal said: "If the BBC can't sort it for me – a senior editor – how will they sort it for more vulnerable staff?" The same could be said of women employed in less high profile and low-waged sector jobs. If equality legislation is circumvented in workplaces where women at least have the resources and access to a public voice, what chance is there for those women who do not? Meena's account sheds some light on why gender and sexism in the workplace is still a massive problem, and what might be done about it.

²<https://angryworkersworld.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/bakkavor-bulletin-issue-3.pdf>
<https://angryworkersworld.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/bakkavor-bulletin-issue-1.pdf>

³https://workerswildwest.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/www4_finalproof.pdf

"I was born in the UK and am now in my mid 30s. I went to university but after working for NGOs in my twenties, I became disillusioned with the whole apparatus. I did not want to spend the rest of my life deluding myself that I was doing something 'worthwhile' when the reality was that charities operate like businesses. The thought of having to ingratiate myself to the government agents of power for the next ten years was too much to bear so when I was made redundant, I was happy to take the pittance redundancy money and live abroad for a while. When I came back, I needed a job so signed up with a local temp agency and got sent to a food factory in west London. It is a big company, with a name you have never heard of but that supply food to all of the major supermarkets. I remembered walking past one of their factories before, it was huge, and I wondered what went on inside. I had no idea of what this kind of work was like, but I was curious to know.

Although it was a zero-hours contract, I had to do some food safety 'training' which was just answering loads of basic questions on a piece of paper in the temp agency office. It was a tick box exercise. Many people could not understand the questions though because their English was not very good so they used their mobile phones and copied the answers from each other. They said I could start the next day.

At the induction morning there were people from many different countries: Goa in India, the Congo and Somalia in Africa, Sri Lanka. There was only one white British guy and two black British guys. Many people had not been told what the shifts or hours were so one woman left straight away because she couldn't work Saturdays. Most people hadn't been told anything at all. The white British guy left at the end of the training because he said it was too far to commute there from Berkshire! Two older African ladies said they were commuting to west London from Mitcham! I remember thinking that people must be seriously desperate to travel so far for a minimum wage (£6.79 at the time), zero hours job.

The site tour was quite overwhelming; there were lots of different areas, different colours of coats/shoes/hairnets that meant different things, for example, temp agency workers had to wear a green hairnet, permanents wore either blue or white on

alternate days, and managers wore red hairnets. I guess this was a way to make sure hierarchies were stuck to, basically who you get away with shouting at I guess. There was lots of hand washing as we went to different areas and when a different product was being assembled on the line there were a lot of different areas too: blast chillers (freezing), meat chillers (very cold), and veg chillers (pretty cold). All these assembly lines were going with so many women working on them in a row. I was surprised because apart from the actual assembly lines and machines that sealed the containers of food, there was not as much in the way of machinery and lots of the work seemed to be done by hand.

On my first day I was first sent to the assembly line, putting 'glue' (a flour and water paste) around the edges of the round pastry. I had to keep swapping hands because the glue bottle made my hands/thumb/arm really sore. The women on the line all seemed to have a favourite job, but they also moved frequently to guard against pains. On the assembly lines there were mainly older gujarati women who didn't speak English so well, but they were pretty friendly to me and made an effort to talk to me as best they could. One woman said she had worked there for 15 years. A woman from the Congo had been there 6 years. A Gujarati woman on another line said she'd been there 11 years, and her husband also worked there. I did not think I would have the stamina to do that – you are on your feet all day and they were aching by the time of the first break so all I wanted to do was to sit down. A lot of the women also had children and husbands they had to cook for when they got home, so rest was not on the cards until bedtime. Many of them asked me why I wasn't married. After their own descriptions of the never-ending work involved in 'family life', I did not need to look hard for an answer.

This is why I could not really understand it when workers in the factory always said that the assembly line work was the 'easiest' job. To me, it was the hardest job. You were stuck in one position for hours at a time with only small variations, my feet and back ached with all that standing up, you could not stop for a second because you had to go as fast as the line, the managers were always watching you so you could not skive off for a second, the breaks were strictly half an hour because you all had to be back

at the same time to start the line – it was so tough. You began to appreciate that a job with even only slightly more varied movements, that allowed you the smallest more freedoms of movement, were like a godsend. So the men who kept the assembly line stocked with the ingredients we needed were in a much better position to my mind. Yes, their job meant that they had to carry heavier stuff, but I would not say this was more physically demanding, and definitely less mentally demanding than what we women had to go through. We got our sanity by talking to each other, arguing with the line manager when they made the line go faster, and singing. I didn't know the words to any of these songs though because they were religious gujarati songs but just to hear them broke the monotony. So when sometimes a manager would tell you to stop talking to the person next to you on the line, I got so mad! I mean, they obviously had no clue how important it was to be able to talk, just to make you feel more human. I got into a couple of arguments with managers who did not allow talking on the line, at times like this it felt like a prison.

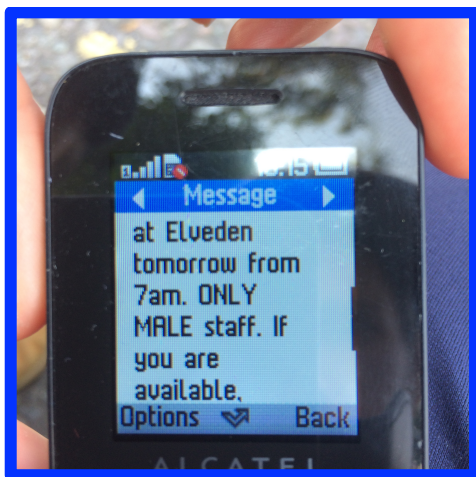


But it was not like everyone was a victim. Some groups of assembly line women were pretty feisty. Things would erupt frequently, the managers, under pressure, were shouting at other managers lower than them, then they started shouting their heads off to the women on the line but then they would often shout back. One day, in the run-up to Christmas when it was really busy, all workers were called to a meeting about 'quality issues'. Afterwards, managers were keeping an extra eye on whether the pastry was closing properly. But they refused to slow the line to make this possible. I mean, there literally wasn't enough time to make the product properly because the line was going too damn fast!

Plus the pastry was very dry and not sticking anyway. So when the line manager started complaining, the whole line erupted into shouting, everyone yelling at the same time, they were like a bunch of hyenas. You really need a big gob and seems most people had one. But it seems for the big things – like better pay rates, more breaks, less stress at work – most people don't speak out together.

The contract we were on meant that the temp agency could call you in or cancel your shift by text message at any time. A couple of time I was even called into work, only to sit around for half an hour and then be told there wasn't any work. Because I am a native English speaker and could kick up a bit of fuss, I was offered a couple of hours pay in compensation. But others definitely were not. The agency generally did what they knew they could get away with.

For example, they would sometimes send texts for jobs saying that they needed men only.



There was no justification given for this and to be honest, even if you needed someone stronger to lift stuff for the job they had in mind, you cannot automatically exclude women based on their gender. After all, some women can be very strong and some men can be very weak! I saw this in action when I was working on the assembly line (this is where I worked, part of a chain of women making pastries or lasagnas or putting them into boxes or packaging them). At the end of the line you had a man that placed the finished tray of products into a larger trolley that held lots of trays. A few times I saw men who were so old, they were definitely too old to do this job. One guy was past retirement age for sure and looked withered and in poor health. But it

didn't matter because the job just required a man to do it. But one day I decided to stand there and take over this job. There was an uproar, mainly from the other women on the assembly line. I was confused and annoyed – I could do the job perfectly fine, plus it was a lot better to do the same repetitive task every 20 seconds rather than every second. But it was not just some old-fashioned idea of what men and women should do. The women explained that if managers saw me doing this job, they would expect all women to do this job, and they did not want to have to do any extra jobs. I could understand this and mulled it over. Should I give up this job and go back to the line? I decided no. The fact was, if you were able to do this job, you should do it, but if you couldn't, for whatever reason, you should not have to. This should not be a question of your gender but of whether you were capable. So I stuck to my guns. Later I saw other women take on this job willingly. Having another choice of job in a series of monotonous jobs could only be a good thing.

The workplace is pretty segregated in terms of the jobs that men and women do. Women work the lines, men supply the lines, women put the cardboard sleeves onto the finished containers, men stack the pallets with the finished product, some women are managers but men tend to be the higher up managers and team leaders. This could be because the men's English tends to be better so they are given more promotions. On the other hand, women are not offered the chance to do so-called 'men's' jobs, like use an electric pallet truck, which pay more money. There was a new pay deal negotiated between the union and management of the company recently which split up workers into four new categories: unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled and supervisory. The rates of pay are different according to your skill, but it was ridiculous: all the women on the line were categorised as 'unskilled' and got the lowest rate of pay, and anything like using a machine, was semi-skilled. Obviously it is a man that decides what is skilled or not. But I bet he wouldn't last half an hour on that line...I think the union should have challenged this pay deal as an example of indirect discrimination, meaning it ends up affecting women more negatively than men. But the union was actually endorsing the crappy deal! All the reps and regional

officers were men so it was no surprise. Another effect of the segregation of men and women in different jobs at the factory was the high level of bullying and even sexual harassment. I never realised before, but the fact that: women are supervised so much more and men can wander around; the elevated status of men inside the factory as their work is seen as more skilled and higher paid; the fact that many men are managers and have the right to shout at women and tell them what to do; the fact that women accept their lower status; the fact that there is such a high work pressure which makes people angry and stressed and nasty; the fact that in the outside world these workers are the lowest and poorest of all workers meaning they have few ways to exert their power and frustrations except over the few people around them they can boss around; – all this makes it the perfect breeding grounds for bad behaviour.



I could see how it was easy for men to take advantage of women in the generally terrible work situation, and that the way things were organised inside the factory actually encouraged this. Women do not support each other much because they are just happy it is not them. But unless they start supporting each other and speaking out, taking out grievances against the men and refusing to be stigmatised, things will be slow to change. I decided I couldn't stand it anymore and decided to move job. I wanted a change and decided to get my forklift licence. Sometimes companies pay for their employees to get this licence but at the factory, I was never offered this chance, although a male friend of mine who worked there did. I knew I would have to pay for it myself if I wanted a licence and I decided it was worth it because you can earn a bit more per hour than the minimum. It is strange that not more women drive forklifts – they are pretty easy to get the hang of and you don't even need to prove you are strong because the machine does all the work!

Straight after I got my licence I found a job at a logistics warehouse. I was the only woman in the team. On my first day I was shown around by the manager. After a few minutes he stopped and said to me, "Smile!" He was showing me some racking in one of the storage areas so I didn't see what I should be so smiley and happy about. It was racking! I have never heard a man saying to even the grumpiest and moodiest of guys to, "Smile!" But the amount of times I have had men in this job tell me to smile, when I am just getting on with my job is unbelievable. One time I said, "I'm a forklift driver not an air stewardess."

I think men think women have only two moods: happy and grumpy. There is no inbetween. We cannot be thoughtful, we cannot be sad, we cannot be troubled. We are allowed two emotions, and if we are not obviously happy, we must be grumpy. These expectations of who I was were stifling. My mood, dress, hair, actions, were all commented upon but in relation to an expectation that the man had of what I should be doing, or thinking or wearing. It was worthy of comment because it somehow defied their expectation. But in the process it made me self-conscious and I did not want to think about myself through the eyes of someone else. It felt like I was constantly having to justify myself and all I wanted to do was get on with the job and improve my driving skills.

Because I was the only woman in that team, and because I was a new driver, I got a lot of advice about how to do things. In a way this was good – I definitely improved fast because men would try and help me, give me tips about how best to operate the forklift. Some new forklift drivers who are men have since started the job and they have been totally clueless but nobody helps them. They are left to sink or swim. I could not escape others attention, which could also be infuriating because I didn't want to be stared at all the time.

There was one guy from Poland who worked in the yard who could never get over the fact that I was a woman operating a forklift. When I was doing boring things like moving some pallets he would stop and stare at me. I asked him to stop and told him it was offputting, I was just trying to improve my skills and did not need

someone looking over my shoulder. But he couldn't help himself. After about the third or fourth time of me asking him to stop staring, I got really angry with him. He acted insulted, justifying his behaviour by praising me, implying I should be grateful for his admiration. But if someone repeatedly ignores your request, they are not listening to you and why should you be respectful to someone who does not listen to you? We had an argument. He could not see my point of view. In his mind he was just being chivalrous. I gave him a couple more chances but then gave up and cut him off altogether. He stalked me for a while, taking photos of me and trying to find me on social media. It was exhausting to never look at him and not talk to him but he did not give me much choice. The sad thing is I don't think he ever examined his own behaviour. It was easier for him to think it was me being unreasonable because he thought his intentions were good and he was just being nice. I had mentioned his behaviour to some other male work colleagues. They listened but they did not take it too seriously. I know because they were genuinely shocked when I showed them all the photos he had sent to me after about a year as he was clearing out his phone. It's like, they will only truly believe it when they see it, a woman's word is never good enough.

I have been called "babe", "honey", "darling", "girly" more times than I can remember. When an older man calls me "girl" in a broad cockney accent or "mate", I don't mind. I have been whistled at before 7am and I am half asleep. Men can be macho in different ways. They insist on carrying the gas bottle when it runs out, even though I can carry it by myself. They find it emasculating to share the load with you. But they will share the load with another guy. They are 'chivalrous' when actually it is just creepy. They say, 'Ladies first'. They try and be helpful when all you want them to do is get out of the way. Some start spilling their guts about their romantic lives, thinking I am interested. The ones who have wives seem to be more normal.

My manager has commented on my weight ("have you put on weight?") more than once. I told him that I could have an eating disorder, what does he know? He apologised but a couple of months later he did it again. He also mentioned me having

kids. "Are you pregnant?" "Are you gonna have kids?" "When you gonna have kids?" I said I might have a medical problem that means I cannot have kids, what did he know? He apologised. When I see him, he sometimes puckers up his lips for a kiss. I give him a look of disgust. But it has turned into a sort of game now, he does that, I react like that. He does not take it seriously, even though I have been quite clear that it is not cool.

The first few months were really tough. I was always angry and fuming. I did not want to have to deal with this, and I felt I was being forced to. I was always being put into a 'woman' box. If I acted friendly to anyone it was taken as an invitation to flirt and touch me. So I became less friendly. I did not realise how backwards things still are for women before I started doing these jobs. It makes me hate men sometimes, they can be so stupid. I have no patience to humour them. I feel myself becoming more closed off but I cannot afford to 'be nice' unless I want to deal with all their sexist shit.

I am a damned good forklift driver now though. Maybe one day I will run them over."



AngryWorkers are a political collective based in west London. We get jobs in the bigger local workplaces and see how we can organise with our co-workers. We encourage workers' self-activity and mutual help. We run weekly solidarity network drop-ins and distribute a local workers' newspaper. Get in touch!

www.angryworkersworld.wordpress.com
www.workerswildwest.wordpress.com