



■ Working at Ford:
■ the Asian women's
■ story

a TUC oral history project on equal pay,
in association with the Wainwright Trust

RECORDING WOMEN'S VOICES



South Asians have settled in Britain for at least the past four centuries...

In the periods following World War II and decolonization there were particularly high rates of Asian migration to the UK. Due to severe shortages of industrial labour after World War II, Indian and Pakistani nationals were recruited by British employers and encouraged to migrate to the UK. When Britain experienced the post-war economic boom, lasting until the end of the 1970s, even greater numbers of Asian migrant workers from the Indian sub-continent came to join earlier immigrants, often family members. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, East Africans of Asian descent began arriving as a result of pressure from the 'Africanisation' policies in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Migrants of Asian origin from the Caribbean also began coming to the UK at this time. Many of them held British passports that provided free entry to the UK. Although these migrants spoke English and had been exposed to the 'British way of life' in former British colonies, their arrival in the UK was characterized by initial hardship and daily challenges both at work and in the home – as the interviews illustrate.

These are the personal histories of a group of Asian women from India, Kenya and St. Lucia employed as sewing machinists at the Ford Motor Company plant in Dagenham, Essex. They exemplify many of the obstacles experienced by Asian migrants to the UK during the 1960s and 1970s. Although there is tremendous diversity in their pathways to the UK (several came via other countries), they share a common experience of people treating and viewing them as different. Adjusting to new foods, styles of clothing and the general way of life in Britain were all part of their acculturation process to life in the UK. They share with us the stories of trying to find Indian spices or their equivalents, experiencing snow for the first time, the trepidation of the job interview, being told not to wear saris at work, and changes in gender roles in the household. For those with children who have grown up in the UK, we hear the reflections on the cultural divide between the older and younger generations. Their narratives

highlight the struggles of balancing work and family life, and especially how the change to shift work impacted on their lives.

All seven women featured in the documentary either had a spouse already employed at Ford or came to Ford through other ethnic social networks. They were drawn to Ford's good reputation in terms of salary and benefits. There was a strong union presence that effectively represented the employee's interests. The Transport and General Workers' Union was an important source of support to the women and helped them deal with their problems at work. Another clear benefit of a strong trade union presence was that Ford provided a work environment with established terms and conditions and recognised the union's role in assisting workers resolve problems at work. The women in this film speak of how the T&G supported them on pensions, racism and the question of language spoken on the job. In particular, they highlight the 1984 strike by sewing machinists at Ford for Grade C-skilled status which brought Ford's UK plants to a halt before Christmas.

Their narratives highlight the struggles of balancing work and family life

The Ford Motor Company car plant in Dagenham opened in 1931. Originally a 500-acre (200-hectare) riverside site, it was developed to become Europe's largest car plant. At its peak the Dagenham plant had four million square feet (371600 m²) of floor space and employed over 40,000 people. On February 20, 2002, full production was discontinued, and the Dagenham factory was downsized to produce engines and gearboxes. In 1994, the sewing machinist division closed and the majority of the 300 women working there retired. A few of the remaining women still working at Ford, albeit in a different capacity, are included in this film.

BIOGRAPHIES



PRABAVATHY SELVARAJU

Prabavathy was born in South India and moved to Singapore upon marriage. After her husband retired, they migrated to the UK in 1979 with their two children. In 1983, she began working at Ford

where she worked until her arthritis no longer made working possible. Prabavathy's husband was also employed by Ford and he was one of the last employees working there when the plant closed in 2002. His signature can be seen on the last car produced at the plant.



SUSHILA PITHIA

Sushila was born in Kenya and migrated to the UK in 1968. With only 24 hours notice from the Kenyan government, her family decided to leave. With two small children, she saved enough money to buy a sewing

machine and started sewing cushions for three pence each. When her children started school, she found her first job outside of the home at a factory sewing clothes. After eight years at that factory, she started working at Ford where her husband was also working. She worked as a sewing machinist there until the division closed.



SWATANTER MAYOR

Swatanter was born in India and migrated to the UK in 1965 only one year after her marriage. Balancing life at home with two small children, Swatanter decided to seek employment at Ford after her uncle, who

was also employed at Ford, told her that they were looking for sewing machinists. She shares the story of how initially she was not happy in England because her entire family was still in India, but eventually she settled. Swatanter took early retirement at age 50 because she wanted to visit her family in India every year.



LAURENTIA WALLACE

Born to an Indian father and a Creole mother in St. Lucia, Laurentia migrated to the UK in 1961 and got married shortly thereafter. Her sister trained her on how to use a sewing machine and she began sewing

at a factory on a shift basis. With three children this became difficult, so Laurentia applied for a job at Ford. Growing up speaking Hindi in the home, she reflects on how it was challenging at first to speak English in the UK. Now retired, Laurentia spends most of her time volunteering for various charitable causes.

The women in this film speak of how the union supported them on pensions, racism and the question of language spoken on the job.



PAPLA CHADHA

Born in Kenya, Papla migrated to the UK in 1964. She shares the story of watching a film that inspired her to want to move to England. After finally convincing her husband and then selling their belongings, they made

the move with their 3 year old daughter. Papla's narrative highlights how England did not always live up to the expectations of migrants. Accustomed to servants in Kenya, Papla started working in the UK out of economic necessity. She shares with us the often harsh realities of migration, such as the initial economic, cultural and linguistic barriers to employment. Now retired, Papla is nostalgic for the time she worked at Ford and the camaraderie between all the women.



SAROS KAVIA

Born in Kenya, Saros migrated to the UK in 1974 to join her brother. Saros shares the story of her initial resistance to coming to the UK and how her brother found her a job sewing leather jackets and trousers. Shortly

after, she married and her husband, who had been working at Ford, encouraged her to apply. She joined him there and worked as a sewing machinist until the division closed. She then moved to the engine division where she is now a line machinist inspecting engine motors. Saros shares with us the realities of shift work and what is like for women of color to work on an assembly line. In fact, to this day she is often the only Asian woman inspecting engines on a given shift.



BHANU GOHIL

Born in Kenya, Bhanu completed her secondary education in Northern India. She then migrated to the UK in 1973. Her husband starting working at Ford, and she later started working there as a

sewing machinist. After the sewing machinist division closed, Bhanu took up an administrative position at Ford in their corporate offices. She misses working with the other women and has particularly fond memories of singing, dancing and sharing food at work during break time.

The union was an important source of support to the women and helped them deal with their problems at work.

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The TUC is the national centre for British trade unionism. It has 60 member unions representing some 6.5 million workers. Trade union members come from all occupations and walks of life.

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Filmed interviews on the Ford Asian women's story are available from TUC publications on 020 7467 1294, or downloadable from www.unionhistory.info/equalpay, which also has further information on the TUC oral history project on equal pay.

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