



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,

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

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 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. Ramona

Working class women stand in the centre of a contradiction: the general pressure on working class people

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/ww4_finalproof.pdf

means that 'family' becomes increasingly unstable and often fails to function as a care unit; at the same time the state pushes more and more care work from paid jobs and public institutions into the 'private' and unpaid sphere. Working class women pick up the slack. It is up to us to build independent structures that can claim space and resources to care for each other. Some of the rebelliousness and collectivity necessary to do this might be brewing under the surface in various working class based 'charities' or the so-called voluntary sector. We have to resist the state's intention to cheaply outsource the 'care-crisis' to the charity sector by linking up the collective structures of (voluntary) care work with general working class organising and self-defence. Here in west London we met great sisters and brothers who do voluntary care work - here is the story of one of them.

"I was born in Paddington and grew up in Kilburn.

My mum started working when she was thirteen. She is from a large Irish family, she had nine sisters and one brother. She worked in a remand home. She started care work, she did care work throughout her life. Care work then is different to what care work is now. You were there all day, you cleaned the peoples' houses. When we were younger she would take us to work with her, we were sitting on the sofas. She was cleaning, doing the shopping for people, everything. This was by social services. Social services did everything. Things were done properly. It wasn't this measly hour that you spent with someone, like today, "just make sure to take your medicine and good-bye". She cared for a person with motor neurone disease. When she came back from holiday and found bruises she would fight with social services if things were not done right.

I was with my mum and dad, and then they split up. I went and lived with my



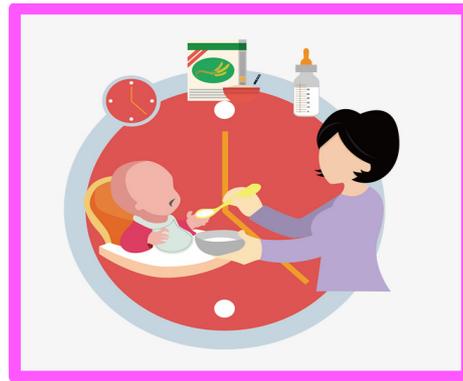
dad, we were in Shepherd's Bush at the time. When I was five I moved in with my nan, because my dad was working and we didn't see our mum. When I was eleven my dad got re-married and I lived with them in Willesden, Harlesden area. That was in the eighties, I went to high school from 1981 to 1986. When my dad had trouble with his wife I moved back to my mum. I did City and Guilds, they had just come out. I did plumbing and electrical. There was also car maintenance, but I chose office skills, but I enjoyed the plumbing and electrics, I can do these things.

As I got older I got jobs. Even in school I worked. I did paper rounds, milk rounds. I tried to make money for myself. Things with my mum weren't that good. My brother, he put himself in care. He then joined the army when he was 17, he went to Ireland. To get away from my mother. When he left the army he had a building company, painting and decorating, but there was too much cheap competition. He's now studying to become a black cab driver.

I got married when I was 18, also basically to get away from my mum. My husband was 12 years older than me, he was from Egypt. His English wasn't that good, but we got along. I sorted him out, the English, the swearwords. I got him a job with the council. He taught me his swearwords in Arabic. I know the ways to live as a Muslim, I don't show my body around. I would make him eat bacon, though although we wouldn't eat it when his family was around.

We had a child. He was born with brain damage, he was starved of oxygen. So I was his carer. He lived for four and a half years, he had cerebral palsy, fits. He had to be fed, he needed to be attached to machines to clear his chest. I dealt with that for four and a half years while my husband at the time was working. I cared at home, but I had respite care. One lady would take him occasionally, to give me a break. He had to be cared for 24/7. Hammersmith Council was more

helpful with disabilities, compared to the situation in Ealing now.



Then my son passed away in 1992. My husband and me drifted apart. We are friends now, better friends than when we were married. I am also friends with his wife. When we split up, I was working at the time, as a park keeper for the council. I found someone else. I got married to a man from Kenya, he is the father of my two other children. One of my sons is now second year at uni, in Kent. He studies criminology. As a six year old he read all my novels. Now he is fighting to find jobs. Last year he had to work, to save money for a deposit to rent a house. He worked in Greenford. He worked for an agency, in a warehouse. The manager was a bully. Most of his friends started working there, because they needed the money. Management used the fact that they needed the job during semester break. My son managed to get the money for the deposit and one month rent together.

I am looking after my other son. He is autistic, he was diagnosed with autism at the age of five. He went to a special needs nursery here in Greenford. I got divorced, in the end I didn't get on with their dad. He remarried and the kids don't really see him. I looked after my son continuously as a carer. I was paid carers money. Since he turned 21 they went for an assessment, because they got rid of DLA and they changed it to PIP. And from PIP everyone is going downhill, because they don't understand mental health issues. They don't understand disabilities. The people who are assessing you are not doctors, as far as I am concerned. He only got four

points, and that was for getting around by himself. Which he cannot do. He was kicked off of it, and put onto ESA. I was put on job seekers. At the end of the day, I have to look for jobs. Despite the fact that my son has gone downhill fast. Calling the Samaritans five times. All these things in between have been missed out. If you haven't been given a proper diagnosis, a proper label, you are left to your own devices and nobody helps. With social services you hit brick walls. They put him on anti-depressants, but that was not helping him.



He only now started seeing the mental health team. There are long waiting lists for hospital appointments, he is on there for a year now, to get an appointment to get a diagnosis. In other councils you have better outreach programs, activities for disabled people. Without a diagnosis you can't go to these places.

He won't go out, won't see anybody. He is so in himself. I have to sort things out for him. He will only go out once every two weeks. He goes over and over and over the plan about what he wants to get from the shop. It is non-stop. You have to make him feel okay. You have to prompt him to do things. Everything has to be in order for him. He is always fretful. You are always on edge with him.

My sisters helps, she lives around ten minutes away from me. My mum comes around once a week, but it's rather me helping her - she had two knee replacements recently and I had to go round her house a lot. I am always there for my mum no matter how weird she has been to me throughout life. Apart

from family there are friends. I am the godmother to my friends kid, who is in a wheel-chair. My friend has seven kids, she divorced recently, because her husband wasn't that nice. My ex-husband did do his part, until his job was being an alcoholic. I left it at that. I could stand up to him today and stick a chair over his head, but back then I was a soft touch. My other half now, he lives in his own place, I see him when I want to. He doesn't pressure me to come round. He knows my kids come first. We go out, he is fine with my kids, but I have no men coming round my house. Because it's my house. It's where my kids live. I won't invite him into my house. I go to his.

My get-out is to go to Community Care, to give me a break from my son. Because I need that break. Community Care is a voluntary charity. It helps all the people over 60. It provides help with housing problems, they have somebody from the Citizen's Advice Bureau, we take day trips in the summer, we provide yoga classes - all free. Nothing you pay for, unlike other charities in Ealing, who ask for payment. I help out there. I make tea, organise the bingo, travelling to the different community centres around Ealing, there are activities every day in different parts of the borough. Caring at home and at Community Care is different. At Community Care you have a different variety of people around you. They are adults. It's not the same question after question, like when I'm at home with my son. You can have a laugh and a joke and feel normal. My home, I would say, is not normal. You are on edge, you don't know what he's up to next. I can make tea for people, have a game of bingo or scrabble. I feel just human for that day.

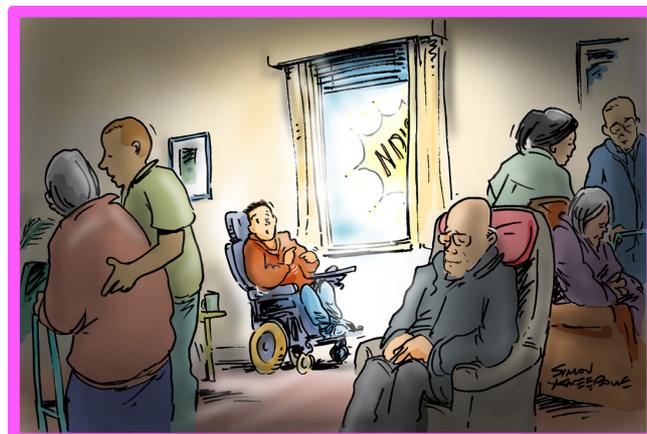


I take care of an old man, he's 75 years old. He comes to Community Care, but had major health issues. I found him on the floor of his flat around Christmas, he had pneumonia. I saw him through the window, but couldn't get in and panicked. The neighbours had a key, I called the ambulance. His step-kids live too far away. I do his medicine now, take him to his hospital appointments. He refuses to have any carers to come round his house, to do his cleaning. I help him. I do his shopping. I told him to ring me daily. He is stubborn, but getting less stubborn, he listens to me. I have jokes with him. When people are older, it's too much paper work, he gets confused. With the hospitals and everything.

But what they put in his mind years ago about people from other countries. Racism. I have no racism, my sister is mixed-race, her father is Jamaican. I took her to the park and the things that I got called. This was in the 80s and 90s. You still get it now. I have mixed-race children, they are Muslim. I am a non-believer, but if I am with people at their home and they are praying, I join in. And with my kids, you see it, how people look at you. The further north you go. You are classed as a, I won't say it, it's too rude, as a slave to the black man. As a piece of dirt. Then the far-right in Eastern Europe, we didn't have all this years ago. The old man has his views, like, "Everyone should go back to their own countries". He is 75 years old. Sometimes I think, I don't want to be around him and look after him. He likes Ali, one of the Community Care workers, a Somali man. He calls him Ali Baba...

But then Community Care depends on council money, it's ridiculous really, why should you have to beg for things like this. The council used to provide the care work, then they outsourced it to agencies, where people only spent an hour at people's homes. They don't have time to look after peoples' needs. This is why I would never work in a care home, because I would get mad at people who are meant to look after people. The

people who abuse people. If you could swap the elderly care home people with prison inmates, then you would see who is cared for better. In prison you get a gym, computers, you have education, you have doctors. Whereas if you go to an elderly patient... they have to pay thousands a month. They want to care for prisoners more. All the paedophiles, they need to be strung up. If you can turn your life around in prison, good for them. The tax payer is paying all that money. The same in hospital, nurses are overworked. They used to have matrons, things were done properly. They want to close some of the local hospitals, like Charing Cross, and privatise them. The facilities are thrown all over the place and the waiting lists get longer.



I was on job seekers, now I am on ESA, so I have my own problems. I have to see that my son is okay. The job centre tries to push me into care work, which I don't want to do, I want to do volunteer work. You have to sign on, while all the stress is going on at home, and you feel humiliated. The way they look at you from behind the desk. They are rude. I have to go to west Ealing, because Southall job centre closed down. It's all messed up. My doctor said that I need a break, carry on volunteering and be there for your son.

I did find a job, it was cleaning. Cleaning in a hotel in Greenford. You have 40 minutes to clean ten toilets and a disabled toilet. For £7.60 an hour. And that's night-work. It's only two of you working and it's a big place. You clean

blood, faeces. I got the sack, because I called in telling them that my son was ill. I worked all my life, except from when I was looking after my children. I worked for British Airways, in the accounts department. I enjoyed it, but there were too many managers telling one from the other. They were all blablabla at each other. All up themselves. I did enjoy working in the park. You meet all kinds of people. My other half has a similar job, in recycling. But that is through an agency, He's sometimes sent to Hounslow, sometimes to Hillingdon. He thinks he is being discriminated against. I don't know. I can't say yes and I can't say no. Because he's black. He often has to wait, other people are called on to the recycling trucks first. The pay is ridiculous. In some places it is still £7.60. That depends if you are on the cages or on the lorries.



I have been on food banks, because of how they cut everything. When you run into rent arrears. I wouldn't say that I feel disheartened by a food bank, but there are more and more of them. This government doesn't see it. They don't see what's at the end of the tunnel. Theresa May says she will lower the student fees, I don't see it. Then there is Jeremy Corbyn, who says it will be free. My son will have 32 grand debt when he leaves uni in 2020. In Scotland it's free.

Students who come there from abroad don't pay, why should we? I voted out. But there again, I am not sure. I am happy if people come here, we have West-Indians in our family, Indian, African. I get on with everybody. If people are here to work, let them work. Because there are lazy people here in this country who don't want to work. Lazy English people, - and I am English for a start - who don't get off their bums and work for £7.50 an hour. I have friends from Romania and Poland and they are doing three, four jobs. They are doing something to achieve something in life. I am not against asylum seekers, but if you have people who fought for this country being homeless, then the priorities are wrong. But then I think they should have never been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

I am a Liverpool supporter through and through. I was always more tomboyish than girlish. I hate handbags. I like football and boxing. I like Tupac. I like cage-fighting and unusual looking cars. But I do care. It's mainly women who do the volunteering at Community Care. You don't find many men, I find that weird. Maybe men think that volunteering is not really something. They were not brought up to care, its not in their profile."

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
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