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 lion’s share 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 workplace newsletters,² weekly solidarity network drop-ins and newspaper.³

We think these short interviews show the complexity and richness of women’s 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.

¹ www.detainedvoices.com/tag/yarls-wood/
³ https://workerswildwest.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/bakkavor-factory-newsletter-no-1/

1. Hanna

Since 2004 many people from Eastern Europe have come to work in the UK - to make and save some money, perhaps learn English and make the most of the opportunities available to them. They are often either demonised in the media or seen as victims of the system, prepared to accept any pay or conditions. But we rarely hear their own voices. Like the vast majority of people from EU8 countries, Hanna is of working age, in employment, and is over-qualified for the work she does here. Like many others, she has worked in other European countries before reaching England. There is some power in this mobility: you can move job if things are not good at work - especially when you have been in the country for a while, know some people, and can perhaps speak a little English. But with poor pay and conditions endemic in the lower ranks of the labour market, moving job will not necessarily improve things much. With possible restrictions in mobility on the horizon with Brexit, can this be translated into an organised collective power against the bosses?
“I was born in 1989 in Hungary. I lived with my parents in a small town called Leckemet. After high-school, my parents wanted me to go to the university. I passed the entrance examination but I did not get enough points for a scholarship. So I had to pay more than £1200 per year in student fees.

I went to Budapest and registered to a college. I studied tourism and catering for one year. My parents paid everything for me but I felt bad about it. I took a part-time job at Tesco. I was working night shift, shelving clothes and things like that. After one year, I wanted to stop the Uni but my parents wanted me to continue. I shifted to a financial course. It was quite mathematical, which I did not mind, but it was very boring. Simultaneously, I found work as a room attendant in a five star hotel. I liked the job but it was paid less than £300 per month. Of course, in Hungary the rents are less expensive than in London, but the food for example is just as expensive.

During my time in Budapest, I was living in a big private dormitory. We were four girls in a room. The showers were at the end of the corridor. I paid £90 per month for this accommodation. In the end, they closed the dormitory. I lived in the family of an ex-boyfriend for a while, but they were so poor that I felt bad about staying there.

I decided to stop attending college and find a job. With a friend of mine, we registered at an agency called Otto Workforce. This was in 2011. We had interviews in English in Budapest and they sent us to the Netherlands. We were picking in a huge warehouse near a town called Oss. We all lived in bungalows. The accommodation cost around £50 per week. The agency would pick us by car in the morning to bring us to the warehouse and they would bring us back to the bungalows in the evening.

Every day you would learn if you had work for this day or not. There were many Eastern Europeans there. At the beginning it was okay, but then they chose a Polish guy to be the supervisor and he would only give work to the Polish. My friend and I asked for another job. We worked in a chiller for some time. Then they sent us to a place close to Düsseldorf. We lived in dormitories in an old military base. There were people from Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic. There was not enough work there, we could not pay for the accommodation. It was always harder for women, because some jobs they would only give to men. So we came back to Hungary.

In the summer of 2012, I got a job opportunity through a colleague of my mum who worked as a manicure-pedicurist in Cyprus. I went there and learnt about this trade. I was paid £750 per month and worked 5 days a week. I lived with my mum’s colleague. The rent was £200. The job was good but I was lonely there. I tried to learn a bit of Greek but I did not have lots of motivation as I did not really want to stay. I could not even go to the sea because we were in the centre of the island and there was almost no transportation. There were bus stops, but you never knew if and when a bus would come, and where it would go... It also turned out that my mum’s colleague was very unfriendly. She made me pay for a lot of things and never contributed to anything. The house was not properly insulated and in the winter it got very cold in there. My mum came visit me around Christmas and when she saw the situation she took me back to Hungary with her.

I am an only child, but I have lots of cousins. When I look at my friends and cousins, I can say that many of them have left Hungary. Of the ones who have stayed, I’ve got friends who work in a Mercedes factory, one as a mechanic and
one as a welder. Those are skilled jobs and the pay is a bit higher. But it's harder for women because they will only be put to work on the line in these factories. A cousin of mine works at a reception desk. She works 60 hours per week but is only paid £4 per hour and this is not even the worst hourly rate you can get. I think the minimum wage is around £200 per month in Hungary.

In 2013, I decided to move to the UK. A cousin of mine fell in love with a guy from Azerbaijan who had lived in the UK for a long long and had a UK passport. He found a room for us in Brentwood. The room was huge and I had to pay £210 per month. I found a job as a room attendant in a hotel. I liked the job. The staff was all British and they were extremely nice with me. When I left they gave me lots of presents and I cried.

In January 2014, my cousin moved back to Hungary. She had split with the guy and found a Hungarian boyfriend online. I could not keep the huge room on my own so I found a box-room online for £65 per week. It was near Bank station. The flatmates were nice. They were from Italy, Spain, Romania. I applied for a job in the Hilton Hotel but had a bad feeling there. At the same time, I got a text message from the agency Omni for a room attendant job in the Park Plaza hotel, which I think is the second biggest hotel in London. It was a full time job, but paid at the minimum wage through the agency. I was working from 8am to 4:30pm with a 30 minutes unpaid break, but at least they would give us food. What was unfair was that if you could not finish the rooms you had to do in this time frame, then you had to do unpaid overtime, which happened regularly. I do not regret that I worked there though, because I met my best friend in this place, a Hungarian girl. There were also many Romanians in housekeeping.

After a couple of months, I decided that I wanted a Monday to Friday job. I registered at another local temp agency. They got me a job in a chocolate factory in Park Royal. There were maybe a hundred people working there, plus the agency staff. I met my second best friend in this factory. There were only a few British workers, but many Polish, Lithuanian, Romanians. They put me in production. The shift was from 2pm to 11pm and I worked 6 days a week. It was still a minimum wage job (at the time the hourly rate was £6.50).

I was not happy with working 6 days a week because I paid too much in taxes and it was not worth it. I complained to the head of production. I thought she would fire me but in fact she offered me a contract. The hourly pay was £6.66 at the beginning but it went up to £8.75 after six months. This was in February 2015. I had a lot of responsibilities. In the morning, I was supposed to plan everything for the day, the order in which we would treat the different orders, etc. There was a lot to think about, for example one should not do an order with black chocolate before one with white chocolate, because black chocolate is harder to clean and will contaminate white chocolate. But although I planned everything carefully, the packing manager would always change all my plans, which was really annoying.

I loved the job and was really dedicated. I even bought a couple of things myself to improve work. For example, I bought a fork we used to make shapes on hot chocolate because the ones we had in the factory did not work properly. One day, I
bought amaretto biscuits at Tesco because I was sure the head of production would have forgotten to order them and we needed them for a decoration. I knew everything there. I would test the different types of chocolates, etc. I even thought of becoming a 'chocolatier'. But the head of production, a German lady we called 'Hitler', was really terrible. I cried almost every day after work because of her. In February 2016, I decided to leave, but I still miss that job. Before leaving, I trained my friend there. Now she is just below the head of production. She has lots of responsibilities but had to fight to get £9.75 per hour, which is still not enough. The 'chocolatier' gets £12 per hour.

In October 2015 I had moved to Greenford with my boyfriend. I like the area. It's also convenient because it's close to Heathrow. Now I still live here, but not with my boyfriend anymore. I have to say that life was not easy when I was working day shift and he was working night shift. After a while he could not stand the night shift any more and had a mental breakdown. It was not only the night work but also the drugs, it was too much.

After the chocolate factory, I registered in several temp agencies again. I was sent to a car parts warehouse in Feltham (easy but boring); then to a food distribution warehouse in Park Royal (working in the cold area at 5°C). We had to separate fresh garlic and despatch it in small bags. It was a bit disgusting because they were many snails. We also had to pack lots of different types of flowers, leaves, etc. in bags that would be sent to posh restaurants in London. I don't even know how people can eat those!

After this, I found a job through a colleague from the chocolate factory, a Hungarian lady who was a carer and took care of three disabled ladies. I was supposed to take care of a disabled lady. I would stay at her place for 24 hours, 2 or 3 days a week. When I was there, I had to wake up at 4:30, take care of her four dogs, wash the clothes of his 19-year old son, etc. Lots of things which had nothing to do with helping the disabled lady. I think you have to be submissive to do this type of job. I did not like it. I stayed only for one month. I was paid cash in hand there.

At this point, a friend of mine started a little business making and selling traditional Hungarian 'chimney cakes' at a market in Stratford. I decided to help her. We did that from Monday to Friday until Christmas 2016, but then my friend decided to stop. It was not easy to make enough money and it was getting very cold on the market.

In 2017, I found a packing job online, through the 'Indeed' website. I had a contract but the pay was still only £7.20 per hour, the minimum wage then. I was working for a pharmaceutical company in Park Royal. Actually, it was much more than packing: we had to operate lots of different machines, and they wanted us to read all the regulations concerning these machines, because they were afraid that an inspector would come and realise that we were not trained to use them. There were three supervisors, a Polish, a British and an Indian. They were friendly. We would go out together from time to time, go to pubs, etc. But I did not like the job. I felt very lonely standing on the side of a machine for hours.

We had to learn so much but we were still paid very badly. I thought it was not fair. What was also strange was that they were changing their plans all the time.
The organisation was weird. I knew that the same factory was operated before by another company who was forced to close down after an inspection. What always bothered me was that the new company seemed to have strong ties to the old one. It looked unclear to me. Anyway, after a few months I decided to leave and shortly after everyone in production was fired. There are still people working in the offices, but I do not understand what they do. Now I found a job as a cleaner, near Oxford Circus. I know that the job is okay for me because I feel relaxed there. I think it’s a good sign where you are not stressed going to work.

I do not want to go back to Hungary. Of course, I miss my family a bit, but I couldn’t live their lives. My parents live in a small flat in my home-town. I couldn’t live with them. My friends at home can’t save anything. They don’t even have money to go out. The only thing they do is get drunk every weekend. A friend of mine works in a printing company for £2 per hour. Another one works in customer services in a kind of B&Q store; sometimes she works 18 hours a day. My cousin’s boyfriend has a very good job, he is a web developer, but lately I learnt that the company does not pay his salary...

In Hungary, you can only afford to go in holidays once a year, and only in a nearby country, Croatia or Bulgaria, maybe Turkey. In August last year, I went to Ibiza: I would not be able to go if I was working there. And you can have a much healthier life here. For example, the oat milk I like to drink is £1 here but £2 in Hungary. Here I can easily go to the gym, but in Hungary I could not afford it. For all these reasons, I want to stay here.

Of course, now there is all this talk about Brexit. But I’m not afraid. I’ve been working here for five years. I’ve got a contract. I don’t think they will ask me to leave. And in the worst case, I will go to another country and find another job. I don’t think it will be a problem. In any case, I don’t want to go back to Hungary.

But you have to be strong when you are alone.”

2. Ramona

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

3. Kulbir

People with insecure immigration statuses are having an increasingly tough time. Many Brexit voters wanted less immigration and the referendum decision has given a mandate for the state to tighten their controls. This has not meant deporting more people though. Enforced deportations have actually declined since 2014. This is partly because voluntary removals have gone up, no doubt due to the increasing restrictions and lack of state financial help that forces people to leave ‘voluntarily’. At the same time, talking tough on immigration can be a smokescreen for not doing all that much. After all, the state needs such precarious workers as a pool of ultra-cheap labour that won’t make trouble. What is more important is not to round them all up and fly them out out of the UK immediately, but to have more control over them. Landlords, schoolteachers, doctors and employers are all being enlisted in this policing effort. The overall effect is an increasingly fearful and hostile environment, which spreads to the migrant low-waged sector in general, especially when workers witness the occasional immigration raid. But how much scope is there in the current situation for people with insecure immigration statuses to challenge it? As well as Kulbir’s account, we can learn from collective actions of undocumented workers in the US or France.4

“I was born in the Punjab, in India, in a small rural village. My mother, father, brother and sister-in-law still live there. I have two brothers and one sister. I am the youngest. We did not have much money growing up. The fields and land around our village were owned by a landowner, who my mother (and occasionally me and my sisters) worked for. It was seasonal, labouring work. At harvest time I helped my mother cut the sugar beet, plus there were rice paddies and maize fields. My grandparents had also done this type of work.

My father was a policeman but was often absent from work because he was an alcoholic. This increased the pressure on my mother to bring the income from labouring in the fields. My parents argued a lot and he was sometimes violent towards her. I did not want this kind of life.

I was lucky because I was able to focus mainly on my studies. My older sisters did more of the housework than me. I started school at the age of around 6 or 7. I went to the local village school, which was a government school, open to everybody. I could walk there in 10 minutes, no problem. I was good at school and so when I finished high school I took the admission test for college. I passed and studied commerce at the college for three years. The college

4 http://en.labournet.tv/sans-papiers-occupy-temporary-work-agency-paris
was in the city, so I travelled by bus for about one hour to get there. I graduated when I was 21 years old.

This is when I also got married. I wanted to be settled, plus I wanted to start my own life away from my quarrelling parents. My uncle, my mother’s brother, introduced my parents to my future husband’s family. They were a nice and respectable family with more money than my own family. I met my husband once before we got married. He seemed fine to me. We had the marriage in the gurdwara and a small party. I was excited about my future life.

Before I was married, I had already submitted my visa to study in the UK. This was my dream. And in a double stroke of luck, I got news that my visa had been awarded on my wedding day! So I only spent one week in my husband’s family home because after this we both flew to the UK. I was planning to study for an MBA at the University of X.

As my course came to an end I gave birth to my daughter. Because of this I was able to extend my student visa for 7 months while I stayed at home to look after my baby. I did not receive any maternity pay or anything like that, I did not know if I was entitled to maternity pay or not, there was nobody to ask. Anyway, we were able to survive on the pay of my husband in the grocery shop.

Our visa allowed me to work for up to 20 hours a week on top of my studies but I never found a job. My husband, through a friend, found a job in an Indian grocery store, which was full time. He was earning around £220 a week then. We rented a room in a shared house, all Indians. 8 people lived in a 3-bedroom house, I remember that there was one family also staying there, the rest were single men from India, all working locally. Although we lived in the same house, we did our cooking separately from each other. There were never any arguments about housework – we all took turns to clean the kitchen and bathroom. We paid £350 a month rent in this place.

We returned to India to visit our families with our new baby. We spent two months there but my husband and I were quarrelling. After my course had finished, we could apply for a two-year work visa. He thought we should use the visa to the maximum and that we should both work full time in the UK to make as much money as we could. I also wanted to work but it would not have been possible with a baby. We did not have any family in the UK and there was nobody to look after her. The only way it was possible was if we left our daughter with her grandparents in India. They agreed, thinking that even though they were quite old (my husband’s mum was in her late 50s and his father was in his mid-60s), it would only be for two years.

So we returned to the UK, without my baby, and moved to X. I found a zero-
hours job, picking in a chill warehouse for a big supermarket chain. It was cold and sometimes they cancelled my shift at very late notice, even when I was on my way to work! A friend of mine was a manager in this warehouse so that’s how I found out about the job. My husband found a part-time job in an industrial bakery. We found another room in a shared house nearby. It was a 3-bedroom house, with 6 people living there, all Indians again. We spoke to each other in the kitchen, everyone was working in similar types of jobs, through temp agencies or in construction. None of them wanted to go back to India. Everyone knew this was there chance to make some money and even though the work here was hard, they thought it was still an easier life than they would have in India. All the landlords, who owned and rented out quite a few properties, asked to see our passports and visa when we moved in.

We used the services of a local visa agent to get our two-year work visa. There are lots of visa agents and immigration solicitors around here, and I thought I could trust him because he was a professional – he had his own office, he had the correct qualifications and many people used his services because he could also speak punjabi/hindi. His website also said he was endorsed on a Home Office list. We paid him £10,000 to arrange IT training at a company that would then sponsor my visa application. But I only got 2 weeks training, and was then given fake documents to apply for a visa. I thought he could help me get my visa legally but he was only after our money. He thought he could get away with it, that we would not make a fuss. But I did not let him get away with it. I went to his office so many times to complain. Eventually he agreed to give us our money back. He wrote us a cheque. But straightaway afterwards he called the bank and said his chequebook had been stolen so when I went to cash the cheque, the bank thought I was committing fraud and froze my bank account! I talked about the situation with my friend at work in the chill warehouse. By this point, I was very stressed and was not sure what else to do. She said she could bring a group of friends to his office to put pressure on him to give back the money. So we all went, there was about 10 of us, including a local catholic priest! We refused to leave until he agreed to pay back the money. He was shocked and nervous and wanted to get rid of us. He tried to scare us, and when that did not work, he tried to be nice and make promises. In the end, because we were causing him such embarrassment he ended up paying all the money back over the next two months. It was such a relief.

After all this, we submitted our own visa application. But it was rejected. They immediately took away our right to work. We had to go and sign on at the immigration enforcement office once a month. They said that if they caught us working they would deport us immediately. But if we were not working, what were we supposed to live on?

When we submitted our visa application independently after the visa agent had ripped us off, I decided to get pregnant again. I thought we would get our visa and everything would be okay. I was getting older and I wanted to complete my family. So it was very disappointing to have our visa rejected. Because we did not have leave to remain, I was not
entitled to free healthcare. New rules mean that I had to pay £4000 to have my baby delivered in the hospital. I agreed to a repayment plan. They wanted me to pay £100 a month. I said yes but then when they said we could not work in the UK, there was no way we could pay this. I said, look, all I can pay is £20 a month. They refused. They sent me so many letters, but I stood firm. I cancelled the direct debit so they were getting nothing at all from me. They had their own targets: they wanted people to re-pay their debt within two years. But I could not do this and kept saying we could only pay £20 a month. In the end, they agreed.

Now obviously we have to earn money to survive. The three of us – me, my husband and my baby – share one room in a house where 10 people live. We pay £420 a month for the rent. The landlady make a lot of money from renting this house out to so many people but even so, she is stingy about the amount of heating we use. In the end, because she was using this as an excuse to keep putting the rent up, we said, fine, put a lock on the boiler cupboard door so that you know we are not using all the gas. So now we have a lock on the door of the boiler – we have heating for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. I have had many arguments with this woman but at the end, I know it would be difficult to find another place to live with a baby that we could afford...

Me and my husband both have cash-in-hand jobs. It is the only way we can survive here while our other visa application is being processed. Because my husband works nights though, it is difficult to share the room all three of us. He has to get some sleep during the day and this is very difficult with a small child. Somehow we are coping though... I also have a job, working as a cook for a couple in a private household. They pay £10 an hour and I do 2 hours a day for them. In India this would be looked down on – a woman like me, working as a domestic worker? No way! People would look down on it. But here, I can do it. It is a pretty easy job, and it allows me to have my own money, to spend how I want. This is important to me. The immigration department might say no to our visa application again but we wait and hope that this time they will say yes. I have not seen my daughter since we left her with her grandparents in India when she was almost 1 years old. She is now 7. We talk on whatsapp, she knows she has a baby brother but she has never seen him. She says she wants to come to the UK and be with us but we cannot leave the UK unless we don’t want to come back. And I don’t want to leave.

Of course, it is always a worry in your mind, that we cannot legally work, that we might be deported, but at the same time, I still feel more freedom here than in India. I hate the Indian mentality, people always caring about what other people will think, having to always justify where you are going, what you are doing. Here, I don’t have to do that. I can work, there will be a good school for my child, there are activities for him to do here, we can earn money. I want to study IT. I can have a future here, but not having the right to work makes everything harder.

What have I learned about being in England? I have learned to be independent, to be self-sufficient, to earn my own money. I have realised my human worth. I work honestly and hard. But I have also learned that you cannot
trust everyone. Like the visa agent. That was a big shock to me – that people like that can trick people and make lots of money and think they can get away with it. But I can fight back. Why? Because I know I haven’t done anything wrong. I believe in myself.”

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.

“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 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 pasty. 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 Gujurati 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 really.

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 quite 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 in-between. 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 off-putting, 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.”

5. Kemi

Contending with racism on top of the usual wage-slave misery and poverty pay makes working class life even tougher. Historically in London, groups of new immigrants tended to live together in certain areas, providing a sense of community in a big, overwhelming, and sometimes hostile city. Nowadays, with rising rents and gentrification of certain areas, it is becoming more difficult to find and benefit from your ‘community’ links. Family is still important, at least for new arrivals. But if you are a single woman, who wants her freedom and to find new opportunities in London, things can become pretty isolating...

“I was born in the Netherlands. My mother is Jamaican, she was only sixteen at the time. My father is from Nigeria. I soon moved to Lagos in Nigeria with him. My dad had kids from different wives over there. I know nine of my half brothers and sisters. My dad soon left the house we lived in and I stayed with my stepmother. It was a bit the Cinderella story then, to make a long
story short. My stepmother abused me mentally and physically. As a kid, I almost lost my confidence. As a result, I would always be out of the house rather than at home.

I finished high-school and went to university. I studied Industrial Relations and Personal Management. It was a five-year course, but it took me seven years to complete it, as the uni was often on strike. I had my own room at that point, it was not too bad. I would always be with friends and liked partying. I always had a rather independent mind, I did not want to be trapped in the traditional ways of thinking, especially about women.

I did not really try to get a job in Nigeria with my degree, as it would have been an office job, and those are not really for me. Anyway, many people in Nigeria can’t find a job even though they have plenty of degrees. There are so many problems over there – poverty, corruption... Life is hard. There’s no infrastructure. For example, every house has its own generator, otherwise you have no electricity. There’s nothing like benefits either. But you can’t eat sand, right? There, if you’ve got nothing, you can only beg. My people are suffering over there. I try to help them, but life is hard here too.

I’ve got family in the US, in Canada and in the UK. I decided to try it in the UK because I think it’s more female-friendly here, and in general less violent than North America, and especially than the US with all those guns off the street and heavy racism. So I came to the UK and lived with family at first - I’ve got uncles here, extended family you know. I lived in Essex to begin with.

My degree was not worth anything here and I did not want to go back to school. I found a job as a nanny. For over a year I worked for a family and lived in shared housing. I found a room in a 2-bedroom house. The landlord lived in the other room. He was a British guy in his sixties with a fat belly. I mostly did not interact with him, I would go directly to my room. But one day he did not like the way I answered to his ‘Good morning’ and he pulled a knife on me! I stayed very calm. I left the house two weeks later. That was my first experience of accommodation outside of the family. After that I got another job as a nanny, but this time I was housed. I slept in a room with the two kids. I was paid only £100 per week, cash in hand. What could I do with that? Sure, I did not have to pay a rent, but I did not want to stay in the house with the kids over the whole weekend either. I could not have my own life.

In 2014, I began to do care work. I registered with an agency and only had a brief induction – one day or something like that. But for me, care work is not a problem. In Africa, we live in close-knit extended families. There are always young nephews and nieces around that will be sent to run errands; we take care of the old people at home; etc. People piss and shit the same way here, right?

I worked in domiciliary care, where you go to the house of people for half an hour maybe three or four time a day, for breakfast, lunch and in the evening. You’ve got to do everything: do the laundry, cook, make sure they took their medicines, etc. I was always paid at the minimum wage. Then the problem is to get enough hours, because as you have to travel back and forth to people’s house, and you’re not paid for the travelling time, you can hardly get more than six paid hours a day – and that’s if you’re lucky.

I never wanted to work in a care home. It’s too much stress. All these people together in the same place, that’s just too much. If I go back to care work, as I might do, I would like to be a support worker – you stay at disabled people’s
house for twelve hours in a row, for example, then you don't have this problem with going here and there.

But in general, I think carers should be paid more. It's very demanding. We have to do everything. We might have to clean the shit. We expose ourselves to many diseases. Sometimes we also have to do 'end of life', this means we go to people that are about to die but are able to stay at home. It's tough. We risk our lives and they pay us peanuts.

I could not make enough money with care work, so I looked online and registered to a couple more temp agencies. I was sent to a food factory in west London. It was the first time I worked in a factory, and it was tough. First of all, it was really far, as I lived in east London. When I worked late shift, which was from 5pm to 1am (or more if there was overtime), it would take me forever to get home, as I had to take night buses. Then, it was again a minimum wage job. And finally, in this type of job you have to stand all the time – on the production line or in packing, it's all the same.

There's lots of tension also in the factory. Actually, the first day I worked there, it was hell. The team leaders were impatient and rude. They looked at you as if you were in the wrong line of profession. I saw people being sent back home for various reasons, like being five minutes late or having an argument with a fellow worker. There was also a language barrier between us workers, as many Indians and Eastern Europeans can't speak English very much. As a consequence, the permanent staff would get impatient trying to explain how to execute a certain task to the newcomers. This ultimately led to altercations, verbal and sometimes even physical.

When I was transferred to the packing department, it did not get better. From the moment I walked in, I got funny stares and funny looks. A young man, young enough to be my first born, kept ignoring me whenever I tried to speak with him or ask a question. He would look past me and ignore whatever was coming out of my mouth. It was very frustrating and I was not quite sure what to make of it. Another time, a fellow worker and I got into a verbal altercation and he called me a monkey and said my family belonged to the zoo... At this point, a line manager moved me from the line I was working but did not ask any questions.

Finally, I worked in the hygiene team for a while. It was better as there is minimal interaction with the team leaders or managers – and they do not bark orders at you, they simply tell you to clean this or that and you do it. There are still tensions though, and I had a few altercations with fellow workers that were not respecting my work. In this case, there's usually nobody to support you, and as you are a temp worker, they can get rid of you any time without having to give an explanation, and without you having a chance to defend yourself.

Now I found a permanent job in East London. I clean offices for a big company. It's much less stressful and I'm paid a bit more than the minimum wage. But somehow, I'm not really happy. I'd like to get something better, because I'm still always borderline with money. And I've got my people in Nigeria. I want to help them. Hence I'm thinking of going back to care work, if I could find a support worker position, with a better pay. Let's see.
I mostly lived in shared houses in east London. Generally, it was ok, but I never made friends with my housemates either. It's more like every one minds his own business. I lived in a 6-bedroom house with Italians. Two of them were students, the others were workers. They were cool, but I would say I spent 99% of the time in my room. I noticed that when the Italians would meet randomly in the kitchen, they would have a little chat and maybe sit together for a while in the living room. But it never happened to me. I think because they were all Italians and spoke the same language, they had a common ground.

In the house I live in now, there is one British guy, and all other are Black folks (one boy, one girl, one couple with a new-born baby and me). We do not socialise. Anyway, there is not even a space were we could sit down, and you don't necessarily want to invite people to your room when it's already so hard to have a little privacy. But it's true that living like this makes you a bit antisocial. You get used to isolating yourself from the others, and then you will behave the same way in the bus, in the tube, at work, etc.

I do not socialise much here. I was very different back in Nigeria, but now I don't feel like it. When I finish work, I want to go home and lock myself in my room. Of course, it's not easy to meet a partner this way. I am single at the moment, but I would like to meet someone serious and build a family. I would really like to have at least one child, because if not I would feel like I leave nothing after me when I die. But you know, the clock is ticking. I do online dating, but it's got its’ problems also. You've got all those funny guys online, you don't know what they're up to.

At the moment, I still want to stay in the UK. I still hope I can find love here and build a family. But if it does not work out, I would try Canada, where I also have family. Not the US, as I said, I would never want to live there. But Canada might be an option."

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