

THE WOMEN'S DECADE ACTION COMMITTEE FOR MIGRANT, IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN IN BRITAIN

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En avril 1985 un groupe de femmes nomades, immigrantes, et réfugiées (N.I.R.) (d'Afrique, d'Amérique latine, du Moyen Orient, de l'Europe du sud, du subcontinent des Indes, et de l'Asie du sud-est) vivant et travaillant en Angleterre, ont mis sur pied le Comité d'Action de la Décennie pour les femmes. Les buts du comité étaient d'envoyer une délégation de femmes au Forum 1985 pour présenter la situation des femmes N.I.R. en Angleterre et pour publiciser leurs soucis aussi largement que possible. Mandana Hendessi rapporte leur situation difficile, en tant que section la plus invisible et la plus exploitée de la population britannique, ainsi que leurs expériences au Forum 1985.

We are a group of Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee (MIR) women from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Southern Europe, the Indian Sub-Continent and South-East Asia who live and work in Britain. In April 1985 we formed the Women's Decade Action Committee for MIR Women to send a delegation of women to the UN non-governmental Forum held in Nairobi to present the case of MIR Women in Britain, and to publicise the issues concerning MIR Women as widely as possible.

We believe that we are the most invisible and exploited section of the British population. We face a number of difficulties in our daily lives, some of which are shared with the larger black communities (that is, the West Indian and Asian Communities), while others are specific to us. For instance, unlike the established black communities, which consist mostly of Commonwealth citizens, we are only granted work permits, resident permits or refugee status – none of which allows us voting rights. Those of us on work permits do not have 'Recourse to Public Funds,' in spite of the fact that all of us fulfil our civil obligations (such as paying our taxes, National Insurance contributions and local rates). Little is known about our situation because of the lack of resources

in this area. Many of our difficulties are a result of our location in the poorest sections of the community; these are compounded by insecure immigration status and lack of governmental or community support.

Our communities are located in industries offering the lowest pay, menial work, often unsafe conditions and long unsocial hours: in hotels and catering; resident domestic work in hospitals, hotels and private homes; in nursing auxiliaries; and in the textile industry (in both 'sweat' shops and homeworking). These areas are the least organised in the labour field because of their nature and structure. This leaves our communities vulnerable to extreme exploitation in terms of pay and working conditions. Isolation, lack of English language, and threats of job loss combine to maintain our communities in poverty; we are often unaware of, or unable to exercise our rights to agreements over pay, benefits and conditions. Because we have no right to elect or be elected, no politician or major political party feels the slightest responsibility towards us, even to propose changes which could improve our situation.

The present Conservative Government in Britain is curtailing people's democratic rights by attempting to abolish Wages Councils (which set the minimum wage for various industries and monitor them) and the Greater London Council has restricted Local Authorities' spending on vital services to our communities. Our community organisations, at present, are threatened with closure: one of the main funding bodies, the GLC, was terminated by the Government on 1 April 1986. We desperately need to maintain and expand our communities' activities through our community organisations.

IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY IN BRITAIN

Many MIR Women in Britain face enormous strain because their immigration status is tied to that of their husbands. For

many women this means remaining in violent situations for fear of being deported. For example, Manda Kunda, a Zambian mother of three children who left her violent husband, now faces deportation. Women are literally forced to follow their husbands. If he decides to leave Britain, she will be forced to leave against her will.

Many MIR women who have been in this country for many years and who have borne children in this country are often forced to take their children to a very different country with a different language. This causes severe problems for the children and for the women since they still bear the main responsibility for the care of children. In some cases, the Home Office deports women who have British-born children with full citizenship rights. When these officials are asked the simple question "What about our children?," their reply is that the women could leave their children behind! An additional stress for women – and unprecedented in the Western World – is the provision of the 1981 Nationality Act which declares that some children born in Britain do not have the automatic right to British citizenship. Some children are stateless as a result.

UNAUTHORISED MIR WOMEN WORKERS

The continuing demand of the British economy for cheap foreign labour to do low paid, unskilled work which – even in a period of unemployment – the local workforce are not willing to do, coupled with the lack of work opportunities, and other political, social and economic conditions in the countries of origin, means that numbers of MIR women arrive here for work, asylum, etc. These women, who are overstaying their visitors' visas, and have had problems in the renewal of work permits and/or regularising their status, find themselves in the position of being categorised 'illegal' workers by the British state. Police operations to track down 'illegal' workers in Britain are notorious: regu-

lar raids are carried out by the police in many workplaces where there are a large number of immigrant workers employed, like the hotels and restaurants, clothing trade, etc.

We believe that no MIR women workers, students, wives are illegal. Immigration control in Britain is racist and sexist. We believe that people have the right to choose where they want to live and work: for this reason we oppose all immigration controls. Immigration control in Britain and elsewhere in the industrial world is used to serve the interests of the Capitalist class and not the workers.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Britain is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol which define a refugee as someone who is outside his/her country of origin and has a well-founded fear of returning because he/she might be persecuted there for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social or political group. In Britain, there have been cases of people who are genuinely in fear of returning to their countries of origin because of the above reasons, but who nonetheless have been denied asylum. For example, Tamil and Cypriot refugees often are considered not to have a 'well founded fear of returning – despite repeated media coverage of Tamils facing massacres by the Sri-Lankan army and police, and the poor conditions of refugee camps in Cyprus.

The British Government operates a divide-and-rule strategy by calling some refugees, such as the Vietnamese, "Government Programme Refugees," whereas others have to prove their cases. Many women are also not accepted for asylum in Britain because the definition and interpretation of a refugee by the United Nations and the British Government respectively operate in such a way, discriminating against refugee women. The definition excludes a large number of women who are persecuted for their gender in their countries, such as lesbians, prostitutes, and 'adulterous' women who are not given refugee status. For example, in Iran, these women are stoned to death. Women in Iran are forced to be veiled (as in some other countries), and unveiled women are attacked by organised thugs in the streets, arrested, lashed seventy-five times or imprisoned for six months.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UN DECADE FOR WOMEN

Most of us were not even aware of the existence of a Women's Decade! Our situation as Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women, in fact *deteriorated* over the last ten years! The Conservative Government was elected in 1979 with the commitment to make fundamental cuts in public spending. All areas of public spending, except Defense and Social Security, were affected by massive cuts. Mrs. Thatcher told a packed meeting of Conservative Party activists at Wembley in 1983: "We are committed to a civilised society where the poor, the sick, the disabled and the elderly are properly cared for. By the community, by their families, by voluntary organisations." She made no reference to the State. She has become increasingly committed to a shift in the emphasis of welfare provision away from the State to the individual. Government Defence expenditure rose by 30 percent in real terms and its Social Security bill rose by 30 percent (accounted for by the rising number of claimants as a result of huge unemployment). Housing suffered the deepest cut of 70 percent; National Health Service and Child Care provisions and other Social Services followed suit. These changes reinforced the natural tendency of the recession to accentuate poverty and widen inequalities.

All the above cuts have resulted in deprivation for Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee Women. Deprivation, together with insecure immigration status, lack of employment rights and exploitation, have resulted in ghettoization and severe depression for many Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee Women. We are also coming increasingly face-to-face with racial harassment, which takes many forms: arson, physical attacks, racist graffiti, and damage to properties, harassment and murder of children, etc. The authorities' response, including that of the police, has mostly been blaming the victims. There is a strong belief that we shouldn't be living and working in this country in the first place!

Many of us found out about the End of Decade Conference and Forum '85 only four months before it was held! We felt that, although there was such a short time to organise our delegation, we should pull all our limited resources together and make such a delegation possible. We came across a number of difficulties – such as convincing funding organisations of the

importance of our attendance at the Forum, seeking the support of various community organisations for the delegation, and encouraging their participation. The Forum provided us with a platform to talk about our experiences to a wider audience and exchange important information. We were able to listen to the experiences of women who are fighting for their rights in other countries.

Future strategies for women's equality and development, drafted at the Forum and the Conference, are a step forward towards achieving a larger share of the resources for women in the world. However, the question is whether they will be put into practice by respective Governments. We are doubtful about that. We feel that we cannot afford to sit back and rely upon a few pieces of paper to take their effect, assuming that they are considered by world Governments as programmes for positive action to improve women's lot. Our struggle must go on. Our voice has to be heard at every level of society and in the world at large. And to be effective, we need the support of our sisters in other parts of the world.

We are asking the British Government to make changes around the following demands:

ALL IMMIGRATION CONTROLS MUST CEASE

In the interim we demand:

- The right to bring our children, husbands and fiancés, parents, grandparents and all other dependants with us to Britain;
- The right to British nationality for any child born in Britain;
- The right to independent immigration status, not tied to that of our husbands;
- An end to all deportations;
- Refugee status for women whose lives are threatened and who are persecuted because of their gender, such as lesbians, prostitutes, 'adulterers';
- Work permits or settlement rights for all 'unauthorised' migrants and their families;
- Automatic right of settlement for any migrant who has lived in Britain over 4 years;
- Reform of the work permit system in favour of the worker. The work permit must always lead to settlement;

- Right of full time students to part time and/or holiday employment.

**WE SUPPORT THE REFUGEE
CHARTER FOR EUROPE,
THE DEMANDS OF WHICH ARE:**

- Every refugee granted asylum by a member country of the EEC should enjoy the same rights of movement, work and political activity as a national within the EEC.
- As soon as the application for asylum is submitted, the applicant should be entitled to all welfare rights and benefits.
- There should be an independent appeals system with legal rights for all those facing deportation, detention or repatriation. The criteria for assessing whether asylum seekers are refugees should be clearly interpreted, taking into account the conditions prevailing in the country of origin.
- There should be an expeditious processing of applications for asylum. If the application is not disposed of within three months, the asylee should have the right to seek employment and/or study awaiting decision.
- Refugees, and those with exceptional leave to remain, should be able to obtain permanent residence, and if refused, should have the right of appeal.
- At all points of arrival, there must be a directory in English and all appropriate languages, with the names, addresses and telephone numbers (including emergency numbers) of advisers, advisory and advocacy services. All asylum seekers must be offered such information and be given full opportunity, as of right, to contact such services or people.

WE FURTHER DEMAND:

- The right to vote in Britain;
- Access to social security for all, regardless of our legal status;
- A stop to all internal immigration controls and passport checks by the DHSS, NHS and Social Services Departments, Police, Schools, Colleges, Housing Offices and other agencies;
- Free and accessible pre-school and



- nursery education, and before and after school free childcare for older children;
- Health and safety to be guaranteed at work;
- More trade union involvement of Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women;
- The provision of free English language classes; literacy and numeracy courses, community languages to be taught to all children; bilingual service provisions and appropriately trained community interpreters. All information about work, services, health and education should be available in different languages;
- Non-ethnocentric, non-sexist, non-classist education for all children;
- Better training programmes, including bridging courses for overseas qualified people;
- Official recognition of our skills and qualifications, reflected in higher pay and work contracts;
- The right to fair rented and reasonable standard public and private accommodation;
- Better provisions for battered women, in particular Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women;
- More Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women employed by the National Health Service to tackle the problems of communication;
- Female doctors to be made available to Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women on demand;

- Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women get proper consultation about the state of their health on all matters, particularly on contraceptives, abortion, sterilisation, childbirth, antenatal care, etc.
- Appropriate sheltered accommodation for Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee elderly run by their own communities;
- Free meals for the elderly that include different ethnic food, with religious considerations taken into account;
- Cultural background and past experiences of individuals in need of psychiatric care to be taken into account;
- Emotional, psychological, and physical needs specific to Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee women to be recognised;
- More resources to be devoted to physical and mental health of Refugees, taking into account their past experiences, many of which involved being subjected to torture or forced to witness torture of loved ones, imprisonment, detention, solitary confinement, witnessing executions, bombardment, massacres and forced removals.

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