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The Analysis of the Roles of Women in the Windrush Generation

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Abstract: After the British Nationality Act was enacted in 1948, the legislation expanded the pathway to immigration. In the same year, HMT Empire Windrush docked in Tilbury with 1,027 Caribbean immigrants that were, later on, referred to as the "Windrush generation." As the turning point of the UK's migration history, this specific historical period from 1948 to the 1970s had been studied thoroughly by scholars. However, only a limited proportion of them are about the 200 or more women on the Empire Windrush. Thus, this paper, through a method of literature review, explores and analyzes the roles played by women in the Windrush generation. The paper finds that Windrush women, firstly, often join the public phase and work as a paid workforce after immigrating to London through chain migration. By doing so, they not only provided additional income to their family but also contributed to the post-war recovery of the British Empire. Meanwhile, they served as community builders who not only managed chores but also bonded their family members and even the entire immigrant community. Moreover, the Windrush women became active advocates that voiced for racial and gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: Windrush generation, Windrush women, migration, the British Nationality Act.

1. Introduction

In 1948, the British Nationality Act was enacted, granting British citizenship not only to people born in Britain but also to individuals born in 47 British colonies worldwide [1]. This legislation significantly broadened the pathway to immigration. In the same year, HMT Empire Windrush docked in Tilbury, Essex, carrying 1,027 immigrants from the Caribbean, each harboring aspirations for a better life [2]. This generation of immigrants has since been referred to as "the Windrush generation." While the Windrush generation is often regarded as a turning point in the history of migration, the experiences of Windrush women have not received sufficient attention, despite more than two hundred women being aboard the Empire Windrush [3]. Thus, through the method of literature review and case study, this essay focuses on analyzing the roles women took on in the Windrush generation, exploring their experiences, and exploring the possibilities of their lives. Women of the Windrush generation were a paid workforce of community builders and advocates of equality and justice; they served as social contributors as well as family spiritual pillars. This paper aims to present the efforts, contribution, and plight of the Windrush women to its readers. The social responsibilities and expectations of women in different historical stages are always noteworthy. They

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can impose a significant influence on the contemporary generation, boosting a deeper understanding of Windrush history from either a gender or racial perspective.

2. Paid Workforce

As a paid workforce, Windrush women contributed to post-war Britain, especially in terms of the establishment of the British National Health Service. To get through the post-war economic recovery period, Britain needed a massive workforce, which included not only men but also female laborers from all over the Commonwealth. A letter from the British Ministry of Labor to the Zonal Executive Offices showcases the situation: in addition to the 20,000 to 30,000 men required for hard labor, the textile sector necessitates 20,000 women, while hospitals and other institutions continue to require substantial numbers of domestic workers. [4]. Although the letter revolves around the Westward Ho' scheme, which was oriented toward Europe instead of the Caribbean, it still effectively demonstrates the labor shortage in Britain at the time. Over 200 women on the Empire Windrush had varied experiences, each with distinct career aspirations. Their professions encompassed a diverse array, including dressmakers, typists, hairdressers, beauticians, nurses, and bank clerks. By assuming these roles, Windrush women became essential providers of money for their families. Ann Green, a 36-year-old beautician, and 21-year-old Mona Baptiste from Trinidad, who pursued a career as a blues singer and sang on prominent BBC music programs, were aboard the Empire Windrush [5]. Olive Gordon, who arrived in England in 1952 to pursue a career as a designer, generated income to sustain her family following her husband's demise [6].

Nursing was one of the most significant and enduring professions among the paid employment held by women of the Windrush generation. An extraordinary demand for healthcare personnel arose to support Britain's newly established National Health Service (NHS) on July 5th, 1948 [7]. Hence, the British government invited many Caribbean women to the UK to work as nurses [8]. Ena Clare Sullivan, a Jamaican woman born in 1931, disembarked at Tilbury with the Empire Windrush and became a nurse in London after passing the training program. Ena Clare Sullivan, a Jamaican woman born in 1931, arrived on the Empire Windrush at Tilbury and subsequently pursued a nursing career in London following her training. There were seven nurses on the Windrush in total, and Sullivan was one of the six female nurses. According to the archives, she was traveling alone in the most expensive type of ticket - a class 'A' ticket, which cost £48 (around £2,000 in today's money), which indicates her guaranteed financial status [7]. However, although some of the Windrush women who immigrated to Britain were economically above the middle class in the Caribbean, life in London as a nurse was not easy for them. One issue was the lack of recognition for the overseas qualifications they earned, and another was the potential for discrimination within the NHS system [9]. The story of the Windrush nurse Yvonne Daniel and her niece Dionne posted on the Royal College of Nursing Magazine reflects this phenomenon: people's racism and ignorance plagued their lives. Patients declining care from her and other Caribbean professionals, as well as individuals relocating from the vicinity of her initial residence [10]. She could not give up her life as a nurse in London because of the expensive travel costs. Fortunately, she gained her promotion to become a head nurse at the final phase of her career. Since her retirement, she has/had also volunteered for a local charity and conducted knitting classes at GP surgeries. Taking nurses as their occupation, the Windrush women dedicated themselves to developing both the NHS and the general British society.

3. Community Builders

The resilience and courage of the women created a sense of community within the Windrush generation, supporting them to overcome challenges such as racism. "Community" is always a crucial concept for immigrants. To the founder of the National Windrush Museum Dr. Les Johnson's account,

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some of the Caribbean migrants devised ingenious self-help micro-financing schemes, aiming to offer mutual aid in their community. Through the collective pooling of funds, numerous members of the Windrush generation were able to purchase tickets for their families [11]. This communal support aligns with the viewpoint of female political activist Claudia Jones. The increasing intensity of racialism necessitates their formation and participation in their own groups, similar to other Afro-Asians [12]. The common migration pattern, a family was the men of the family go to their destination first and bring their wives and children over after settling down, promoting the founding of the "organizations". The typical migration pattern saw the male family members migrating to their destination initially, succeeded by their wives and children once the males had established themselves. This strategy facilitated the formation of numerous community organizations. Lucilda relocated to Britain following her husband's accumulation of sufficient funds and participated in assisting fellow migrants upon their arrival in the 1950s [13]. In terms of establishing the organizations and bonding their members tightly, by no means should we ignore the crucial roles played by the Windrush women.

Vanessa Bovell-Clarke, employed in Student Support & Wellbeing Services at King's College London, discusses the Windrush women in her family, their sacrifices, and their resilience [14]. Her grandmother Clotelle Eudene Roach, a Barbadian woman born in 1937, had taken on the responsibility of a mother in the family at the age of 15 – both of her parents had died. In 1958, Roach went on a journey to Britain, with her husband waiting for her. Another grandmother Hermine Gertrude Morrison, also migrated after her husband in 1963. Both Roach and Morrison work in more than one paid job in Britain, as a tailor, school lunch worker, shoe factory worker, and so on, contributing financially to their families. At the same time, they use their efforts to connect the family emotionally. "Growing up, my grandmothers were the physical embodiment of home, stability, family, strength and damn hard work," narrates Vanessa, "I witnessed them prepare gargantuan feasts of brown stew chicken, rice and peas, fried flying fish and cou cou (a cornmeal-based dish, also Barbados' national dish) for crowds of family, friends and even neighbours on a regular basis." And behind this dedication, they were also facing the pressure of racism. A white woman once tugged at Roach's skirt and said, "Let's see your tail then?" Influenced by religious notions, the women of the Windrush generation were characterized by resilience and tolerance. Faced with the stressful, racist external environment, they were able to utilize their tender, yet strong power to render themselves and their families renewed hope.

4. Advocates

Windrush women were also advocates of strong conviction; they voiced for gender and racial equality and social justice. The Windrush ladies were fervent champions for gender and racial equality, as well as social justice.

With the passage of the Nationality Act in 1945, immigrants became an increasingly large group in Britain. From 1945 to 1973, Britain's non-white population expanded from 30,000 to over 1 million [15]. However, discrimination and racism against immigrants, especially the non-white ones, persisted through out the Windrush period. A document from the National Archive presents the discrimination toward black Barbadian women when it came to recruitment. Despite the heavy demand of female workers in several industries, securing assurances from companies regarding the employment of a specific number of workers, especially individuals of color, is exceedingly challenging. companies harbor skepticism about the productivity of Barbadian women. [16]. Discrimination faced by non-white women was also exacerbated by their gender. The writer of a record on migrant experience in Britain claims that it is crucial to acknowledge that there exists little to no racial barrier among men. The problem of the color bar intensifies when women participate in the discourse, assuming they are the source of this escalation, as I have indicated [17].

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Being aware of the unfair environment, the Windrush struggled to revolt. Just as Claudia Jones, who had always been advocating for female migrants, pointed out that conscious of the necessity to mitigate their second-class citizenship and resolute in their pursuit of living and working with human dignity, as is their inherent right. [18]. Systemic inequities hold down all black women in the job search process. Some of these women are standing up against injustice and becoming advocates while constantly striving to stand up for themselves. Allyson Williams, an NHS nurse who arrived in London in 1959 as part of the Windrush generation, took every opportunity to study midwifery and women's health, eventually becoming a senior midwife manager and then hospital deputy head. In 2002, she was awarded the MBE for outstanding service. When recalling her past hardships, Williams feels upset, "You didn't feel as though you were learning anything or doing anything positive to help them." During her long career, she once stood in the middle of the room and said firmly and loudly, "I am fed up of this abuse and the way you people treat me. I am 21 years old and I've been Black for 21 years. I know that I am Black and I have no problem being Black. So tell me something I don't know." Henceforth, her patient became less aggressive [10]. It was the strength of the Windrush women that enabled them to transition from victims of racial discrimination to courageous voices and advocates, allowing them to flourish in a barren era.

5. Conclusion

The history of British immigration in the post-war era frequently overlooks the in-depth examination of individual women's experiences; yet, it is indisputable that they constituted a significant and lasting demographic, playing a crucial role in the Windrush generation. The women originated from diverse backgrounds prior to departing the Caribbean; some were affluent and educated. Upon their arrival in Britain, many engaged in various occupations, significantly contributing to the nation's post-war recovery, while others assumed the roles of wives and mothers, fostering familial connections and imparting the spiritual fortitude necessary to navigate challenging circumstances. Black immigrant women are frequently regarded as a marginalized demographic. They were indeed in a challenging predicament and faced discrimination based on both race and gender. Nevertheless, individuals must not overlook their strength and fortitude; whether as wage earners or as spouses and mothers—roles that frequently intersect—they are formidable and essential. The Windrush women possess an unwavering vitality that enables them, their families, and their communities to thrive in foreign territories.

During the study process, the availability of actual first-hand and tangible materials is severely restricted. Consequently, the references in this article predominantly consist of secondary sources, derived from scholarly monographs and oral histories of individuals who experienced the Windrush generation. This research solely examines the role of Windrush women through statistical analysis, omitting more profound theoretical insights, such as the gender division of labor and the evolution of feminism in 19th century Europe. This study will utilize the experiences of Windrush women as a case study to further explore feminism and gender issues within the theoretical framework of immigration.

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