

## MRS SAYEDA CHOWDHURY

I came to this country when I was 18 years old.

### **What year was it when you came?**

1969

### **When you came to this country did you come with someone?**

I came alone and my husband was already in this country. Then I went to stay in Kent, Sidcup.

### **What was your husband doing in Sidcup, was he working there?**

No my husband's uncle had a restaurant there and my husband was working as a waiter in a Restaurant near Charing Cross. I used to stay alone in Sidcup in the flat above the restaurant. Downstairs there were Bengali people.

### **(Where there any ladies?)**

No there weren't any ladies there. In terms of ladies I was the only one. Then a student of my fathers had come to the country so I went to see him, I used to call him uncle due to the fact the he was a friend. Everyone used to look after and care for me there though. When my husband used to come he used to eat in the restaurant with me but because I was alone a lot of the time I used to come back up to the flat and I used

I cried a lot because I had no one and hardly had anything to do. I used to get frequent headaches too. When I went to the doctors, the doctor would say that this was because I was upset with my current situation. Then my husband went and talked in a cake factory near Charing Cross for me to have a job and they agreed to give me a job. It wasn't that far from Sidcup maybe about 10 or 12 stations. Back then I didn't know English very well, because it was a factory I was told I had to work the early shift, and for a rough duration of 2 months I continued to work there. Because I didn't know English very well I didn't understand much. The cakes came in a box, I was told to add different things to cakes such as fruits, nuts and then the lady did this and found myself confused without anything to do. Then the manager came and started counting the boxes on our sides and there are no boxes on my side because I can't find anything to do. Then I thought to myself how my manager is meant to pay me if I am not doing anything. The lady is not letting me do anything so how am I meant to complete the task. Then I went on my own accord to the manager to say there's something wrong the lady keeps doing everything, the response I got to that was to let them continue because everyone will get the same pay anyway. The manager used to look after me too and used to check if I was eating and was feeling ok.

### **What ethnicity was your manager?**

My manager was white, but used to tell me when to go and eat and used to distinguish for me what was halal and what wasn't halal although majority of foods were not halal. They know me because of my husband too. After two months I became pregnant, and my daughter Jusna was born.

**Did you continue to stay in Charing Cross?**

No after I became pregnant I went back to Sidcup to stay. Then after staying in Sidcup, my eldest daughter was born in 1971, after I came to a flat in Westminster with a room and kitchen.

**Where there many Bengalis there?**

There used to be Bengali males but not many Bengali females.

**So during that time you weren't acquainted with many Bengali women?**

There weren't many Bengali people there anyway.

**So did Bengali people come there after slowly?**

Yes, in 1971 and I had another child born in 1973. During that time people started coming, many of whom we didn't know but became friends with.

**What sort of clothes did you wear in those days? A saree?**

Yes I wore a saree.

**Did people make any comments on your clothes when walking down the street?**

No, no one made any comments like that. In fact people used to help me when I used to go to the shop because I used to go to the shop on my own. Because my husband used to work, I was responsible for getting the babies food and nappies. People used to see me and take care of me and understand that I would require help.

**In the shops were there Bengali foods available?**

No there wasn't much. One day I asked the person is there any rice powder as I desired phita (Traditional Bengali Bread). Then he brought a packet to me and when he brought it I took it home and made it this was whilst I was at Sidcup. The people that used to work at the restaurant were surprised and asked how you came across the phita; we weren't able to get this. I went and got more and fed everyone and they happily ate it. It was many years since we ate Phita.

**When you came first in 1969 , was halal food available?**

There was but mainly Roe fish was available. We didn't know what country it was from. People used to tell me that it came from America. So yes it was mainly Roe fish and hardly anything else. I didn't eat chicken or meat really , I mainly this kind of fish anyway. The men although ate chicken and meat occasionally but didn't really know whether it was halal or not. Although when people first came it was hard to know what was halal anyway. I used to have a lot of vegetable and prawns too.

**Where you able to keep your fasts during Ramadan?**

Of course I kept my fasts. I know that I am a Muslim.

**Did everyone keep their fasts?**

Honestly most people didn't but I still did.

**For your husband, in terms of going to the mosque, especially Friday prayers what was that like?**

There weren't mosques to start with.

**So did the men stay together and pray together or how did it work?**

To be honest I didn't see this happening so I don't know.

**When you went to the doctors how you would communicate with doctors?**

I used to go with an English lady who was my neighbour, she was Italian and I used to always give her curry from the restaurant, and because I didn't have a washing machine she said to give my washing to her and shed do it for me. In Bangladesh all the women did the washing so I didn't really know or learn how to do it. So it was difficult for me. So I used to tell my husband to give rice and curry so the lady would wash our clothes.

**So when you said you were home on your own, during the time you weren't working what did you do with your time?**

I used to sit down and relax , and when the restaurant wasn't busy id go there and everyone there id call uncle and they'd all treat me like there niece, feed me always and used to always treat me with something if they went out.

**How were you able to keep contact with people from Bangladesh?**

We used to write letters. During those times we didn't have phones.

**For the letters to be sent and received, how long did this take?**

It used to take around 7-8 days.

**Do you still have any of the letters from them now ?**

No I don't think I kept any of the letters from then.

**When your children were born , after did they go to school and how did you feel?**

So one of my children was born in 1971 then another was born in 1973 and then after another one in 1974. So they were all really young so it was hard for me, as for example, changing nappies alone because I hardly had any support. I used to say to myself when will I be able to sleep because it was hard to sleep during the night with the children , so I said to God when will you make my children older so that I can sleep throughout the day.

**What school did you send your children too? Did they go too school in Sidcup?**

No they studied in Westminster. They went to gateway school.

**Where there many Bengalis there?**

No there weren't many Bengalis there but there was this one lady very light skinned whom I saw from a distance once and then I ended up moving near her. Then once in the street we saw each other and she was wearing a sharee so I spoke to her and she asked me which country are you from? I said Bangladesh. That moment she gave me a massive hug and said she hasn't found another Bengali person and she has been here for a few months. So I used to go to her house a lot and she used to care about me a lot and treated me like her sister. If she cooked she would make it for me too, I did cook occasionally too.

**When your children were studying at gateway, which ethnicity of children would they mix with, what ethnicities were there in the school?**

It was mainly of white children in the school.

**Did they get involved into many fights ?**

No nothing like that, except one of my children used to get into the occasional argument with another Bengali child but would always be friend's aswell and both of them would always come to me to tell tales about the other. The other child used to always remember why they would argue by my child would always forget. So then I told her if you both are going to argue don't be friends with her but the next day first thing she'd go to her house.

**Did you have any fears or any worries sending your children to school with other children here or did you have any fears about the whole school experience with them?**

Not really except one day, which I was scared when a black man came and snatched my bag from me and my keys were in the bag too. Now that he took it how was I meant to collect my child, only my husband had keys, there was an Indian shop, which is now a costcutter, then I told them that my keys were lost and I told him I don't know what to do or how I am meant to collect my children. He told me not to worry that he will help me; he asked me where does my husband work? I said my husband works in Baker Street. My Husband then worked in the ticket office in Baker Street station in the underground. So the man took me to Baker Street, so then I found my husband explained to him the situation, so then the man took me back by car and I had already told someone else to collect my children and look after them until I return. So they looked after my children till I returned from my husband's work place.

**What year did you start work in Gateway Primary school?**

I started working there in 1984.

**During those times did you yourself see many Bengali children?**

Me and my friend started work at the same time in the school. Mr Philip Allen was the head teacher.

**How did you feel when working at gateway? Where you worried?**

My English was not that good, but the school wanted Bengali support staff there.

**From when you first came, how does London seem to you now, are there much changes?**

Now it's more like family. When we go to work now all ethnicities are like one big family together. In April, I retired and left my full time job. The teachers that came from Australia said to me it felt like we lost our mum. They really cared for me and looked after me.