

PRESS RELEASE

NEW BOOK SHOWS EXTENT OF 'VIRGINITY TESTING' OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN BY UK IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS IN 1970s

Race, Gender and the Body in British Immigration Control: Subject to Examination
(published July 30 by Palgrave Macmillan)

This 2014 book by Evan Smith and Marinella Marmo (Flinders University, South Australia) is the first that fully explores the 'virginity testing' controversy surrounding the UK immigration control system in 1979/1980. Using recently disclosed archival documents from the National Archives at Kew (UK), Smith and Marmo outline the level of physical abuse and interrogation inflicted upon South Asian women by UK immigration authorities in the 1970s. The book also reveals the lengths that both the Callaghan and Thatcher governments went to cover up and downplay public knowledge of these abuses.

The key findings of the book are:

- **Increased number of cases:** Despite the British government only ever publicly acknowledging 34 cases, this book reveals that official documents showed between 123 and 143 cases of virginity testing, adding to the number of 80 cases previously discovered by the same authors in 2011.
- **Virginity testing continued despite official halt:** The same documents explain that these examinations were conducted at the different embassies in the late 1970s, even after the Minister for Immigration, Alex Lyon, had ordered for tests to stop in 1976.
- **Reason why the test continued even after its official halt:** Although government officials ordered tests to stop in 1976, Foreign & Commonwealth Office documents show that gynecological examinations were still used clandestinely to obtain personal information about certain migrants.
- **X-rays for age assessment:** Before the use of x-rays for age assessment purposes became public knowledge in 1979, FCO documents show that doubts were already raised about their usefulness; the use of x-rays was only kept up due to the encouragement of the High Commission staff in Bangladesh and Pakistan to maintain the practice.
- **The case of Mrs K and ex gratia payment:** The FCO and the Treasury explored possible scenarios for paying compensation to Mrs K, who had been the victim of virginity testing who went public in February 1979. The FCO was advised by its legal team that Mrs K had 'consented' to the examination and could only expect a small ex gratia payment of £500. Even at this point, there was hesitation by some FCO and Treasury officials about offering such a payment.
- **The reason behind the ex gratia payment:** The government tried to reach agreement with Mrs K before meeting of UN Human Rights Committee in February 1980 only to prevent Indian government bringing formal complaint against the UK.

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