



Clear racism at Al Fayed's Harrods, former staff tell BBC



Kate Berry, Hannah Warren, Tim O'Callaghan and Jane Andrews

Clear racism at Al Fayed's Harrods, former staff tell BBC

Close up head and shoulders portrait of Mohamed Al Fayed looking to the left of camera wearing a suit and shirt, with festive colourful balls out of focus in the background. Image taken at Harrods in London in 2007. Getty Images

Many black staff members at London's world-famous Harrods department store would leave the shop floor before Mohamed Al Fayed toured the premises, former employees have told the BBC.

Staff would be given a warning before he appeared, says a former security guard, which was followed by a "beeline of certain people, certain races", leaving the floor.

"The level of racism was very clear," said "Henry" (not his real name).

A former member of the store's HR team, Lisa, told the BBC Al Fayed would "pick on" people negatively and that those "hidden" would also include "overweight" people.

These accounts follow a BBC documentary and podcast broadcast in September which included claims from more than 20 women that Mohamed Al Fayed sexually assaulted or raped them.

Harrods responded to the latest claims about racism by referring us to a previous statement in which it said it was "utterly appalled" by the abuse allegations made against Al Fayed, adding that it was a "very different organisation to the one owned and controlled" by him.

In November, the Met Police said it had launched a new investigation after 90 alleged new victims had come forward.

Henry told BBC Radio 5 Live's Clare McDonnell that before Al Fayed's daily walks around the store, there was a five-minute warning announced on guards' radios.

He said black people, and also other staff who didn't fit a certain look, would then leave the shop floor, in a "robotic" movement.

"It seemed very much like the protocol that [they] would disappear," he added.

He said the staff would leave the building via an underground tunnel, connecting the main store to an office across the road. Henry said they would then file back once Al Fayed had gone.

Another former staff member, who wishes to remain anonymous, also told the BBC that many black members of staff went to stock-rooms or "on tea breaks" when Al Fayed was visiting the shop floor. They also said that some women were sent to put on make-up.

Henry said the only staff who stayed on the shop floor were "young, thin, blonde", although some non-white door guards also remained.

Since the BBC's investigation was broadcast, we have heard scores of accounts of Al Fayed - who died in 2023 aged 94 - favouring women with these traits.

'Here today, gone today'

Lisa confirmed that security would "warn" staff members when Al Fayed was about to arrive - but "not the girls that he would like".

Those who left the shop floor "were good at their jobs", she said. "We didn't want to keep losing staff."

The BBC has been told that staff were frequently sacked.

Jon Brilliant, who worked in Al Fayed's private office for 18 months, previously told the BBC that within Harrods there was surveillance, sackings and a culture designed to keep top managers from trusting or communicating with one another.

Henry agreed there was a culture of "paranoia, fear and bullying" while he worked as a security guard there.

During his initial training, he said he had been warned not to invest in a monthly travel pass because "you could be here today and you [could] be gone today".

Another former member of Harrods HR staff, Anna, said when she worked for the men's tailored suit division she was told not to employ anyone who was black, because "the customers wouldn't like it".

Once, she said, the best candidate was a Caribbean man, who was "head and shoulders above anyone else".

"I just sat there thinking, 'What a waste of my time and your time. I cannot employ you because of the colour of your skin.'"

Anna said she recorded that in his recruitment notes, and was reprimanded for doing so.

Lisa said on one occasion, Al Fayed "came right up to my face" and used a racist word to describe the type of people he didn't want her to hire.

'Culture of paranoia, fear and bullying'

A number of employment tribunals, successfully brought by people claiming racial discrimination, took place during Al Fayed's ownership of Harrods.

Henry said he didn't witness any sexual assault when he worked at the store, but there was "hearsay" amongst staff.

"I had lots of people tell me things, I suspected a lot of things, I saw some things, but who am I going to tell?" he said. "You can suspect all you want, but without having some proof... it's not evidence in court."

Al Fayed was accused of racism by Vanity Fair in 1995, an allegation he vehemently denied. It sparked a libel lawsuit that the billionaire later agreed to drop, as long as further evidence the magazine had gathered in preparation for a trial was locked away.

Many years after leaving his post, Henry said he still feared reprisals from people in the former chairman's security team.

"Just a few things I said to you could cost me my life - and if not my life, my livelihood," he said.

Despite these fears, he said other members of Harrods security staff should come forward to the authorities.

"If they have daughters, they have granddaughters, they have a mother, they should tell [what they know]... but I can assure you those people would keep their mouths shut."

The statement received from Harrods also said: "These were the actions of an individual who was intent on abusing his power wherever he operated and we condemn them in the strongest terms. We also acknowledge that during this time his victims were failed and for this we sincerely apologise."

It added: "While we cannot undo the past, we have been determined to do the right thing as an organisation, driven by the values we hold today, while ensuring that such behaviour can never be repeated in the future."

