

Immigrant and Visible Minority Women in Canada: Organizing and Building a Coalition

by Christina Lee

The special needs of immigrant women and the difficulties they encounter in adapting to Canadian society have long been neglected. Recent attention is largely a result of the organizing efforts of the women themselves in their attempts to articulate needs and press for change.

Immigration women have called for greater access to services, more equitable allocation of funding and representation in the decision-making process, among other things. In 1981, in response to this continued advocacy campaign, the federal government initiated the first national conference of immigrant women in Toronto. The goal was to identify key problems facing immigrant women in their adjustment to Canadian society and to facilitate a process of intervention. At the conference, seventy-eight recommendations were made, and a National Follow-up Committee was struck to establish provincial networks and to prepare for a second conference.

Historically, the federal government's approach to immigrant women's issues has been ad-hoc and piecemeal. This apparent fragmentation is attributed to the fact that immigrants are generally considered preserves of separate government departments, a perception that results in the marginalization of this population group. For this reason, immigrants are totally segregated from the overall development of mainstream policies and programmes.

The need for change is long overdue. Yet, four years after the first national conference, most of the seventy-eight recommendations remain unimplemented. With persistent pressure from the community, a national consultation was called by the Minister of Multiculturalism, then Jack Murta, in June 1985. Thirty-seven women representing over forty national immigrant and visible minority women groups and ethnocultural organizations were invited. The consultation was an unprecedented decision of the federal government to initiate an integrative approach in dealing with immigrant and visible minority women's issues. Other Ministers present were Flora MacDonald, Employment and Immigration, Walter McLean, Status of Women, and Jake Epp, Health and Welfare.

The representatives refined the 1981 proposal and developed a brief with twenty-five recommendations. As one participant said to the government, "none of our recommendations would startle you. They may differ in form,

but in essence they are the same as those that have been put forward over the last ten years." The recommendations covered important areas on language and skills training, employment equity, health and social services, immigration policies and funding. A ten-member Action Committee was formed to continue dialogue with the government and to reconvene the consultation in a year's time.

In September 1986, the consultation was reconvened in Ottawa. David Crombie, Minister of Secretary of State and Multiculturalism, Gerry Weiner, Minister of State for Immigration, Maureen Law, Deputy Minister of Health and Welfare, and Kay Stanley, Co-ordinator of Status of Women, represented the government. The following is a status report:

- Canada Employment and Immigration, in response to the Action Committee's original recommendation, has spent \$50 million on language training. In addition, Flora MacDonald has allocated \$1 million to the Settlement Language Training Programme to provide 200 demonstration projects of 300 hours of language training to those who do not intend to enter the work force. These projects will include on-site child care and access allowance, and will benefit homebound immigrant women.
- The funding criteria of the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Programme (ISAP) was amended to allow for services to non-landed domestic workers. Settlement programmes will now be able to provide subsidized services to non-landed domestics. This is an important gain for immigrant and visible minority women who have come to Canada as domestics.
- Immigrant and visible minority women were included on the agenda at the Federal/Provincial Ministerial Conference on Status of Women in June 1986. A working group was formed to examine data collection, language training and certification.
- In 1986, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women published its first background paper on immigrant women.
- The Secretary of State Women's Programme is currently conducting a review of its mandate, policies and funding criteria with regard to immigrant and visible minority women. Traditionally, immigrant women's projects fall primarily under the jurisdiction of the Multiculturalism Directorate "Cultural Integration Programme". The budget for 1984-

85 was \$2.6 million and its allocation was for all immigrants. On the other hand, the Women's Programme had a budget of \$9 million for 1984-85, and \$12.8 million for 1985-86, from which mainstream women's groups could secure operational and project funding. Since ethnocultural, immigrant and visible minority women represent more than one third of the female population, the Women's programme should allocate its funding accordingly.

- The federal government has created an Interdepartmental Committee on Immigrant and Visible Minority Women as a mechanism to establish an integrative approach in dealing with these women's issues.
- The joint sponsorship of the Federal Task Force on Mental Health of Immigrants and Refugees by the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism Directorate, and Health and Welfare is a result of this integrative approach. Of the twelve people appointed to direct this study, there are five women from various immigrant and visible minority communities.
- In terms of appointments, the present government has committed itself to increasing the representation of immigrant and visible minority women on boards and commissions. Since September 1984, there have been 404 women appointed by Governor-In-Council, with fifty-one from an ethnocultural background.

What has been achieved is the sensitization of the policy-makers and a general recognition of the issues of immigrant and visible minority women. What has not been achieved is the concrete legislative changes required to promote efficient delivery of programmes. The summation of the consultation emphasized immediate changes in language training and the Canada Job Strategy.

- Language training, as part of the National Training Act, is channelled through the provinces. This has resulted in overlapping federal/provincial jurisdictions and confusion in service delivery. The government is urged to conduct a thorough analysis of language training, and to examine the feasibility of diversified programmes such as language in the workplace, job-related English as a Second Language (ESL) training for professionals and media language programmes for the homebound or illiterate women.
- The Canadian Job Strategy as a global response to job entry and re-entry has failed to meet the needs of immigrant and visible minority women. The programme must be reviewed to remove restrictive eligibility criteria and to ensure representation on local advisory councils, access to refugee claimants and persons with Minister's Permits, and the allocation of training funds to community-based non-governmental organizations rather than to private business.

Besides the priorities to review language training and the Canadian Job Strategy, the urgent and unresolved need to formulate a long-term co-ordinated approach to immigrant and visible minority women's issues is still outstanding. Such an approach must be co-ordinated on the federal/provincial level since education, health and social services, all delivered under provincial jurisdictions, are the areas with the most direct impact on the everyday lives of immigrant and visible minority women.

After frustrated attempts to obtain action, immigrant and visible minority women groups requested federal assistance for a national conference in Winnipeg in November 1986. Over 250 delegates from across the country participated. The conference was attended by David Crombie, Minister of Secretary of State and Multiculturalism, and Barbara MacDougall, Minister responsible for Status of Women, together with other senior government officials.

The gathering provided a forum for the delegates to gain a deeper understanding of the commonality of experiences which oppress both immigrant and visible minority women. Being immigrant, visible minority and women in a predominantly white society, they are confronted with daily practical problems of racism, sexism and various forms of discrimination. The discussion also underscored the unique situation of the immigrant and refugee women, whose life and work conditions are compounded by transitory compensation such as the lack of language and job skills and the loss of traditional support systems. These conditions are reinforced by the systemic barriers in immigration policies that classify most women as "sponsored" immigrants, rendering them ineligible for language and skills training assistance, and further enforcing their economic dependence and social isolation.

What has emerged in the Winnipeg Conference is a powerful coalition of immigrant and visible minority women. An interim board was elected to form a constitution and to continue the lobbying work of the Action Committee. This historic development marks the beginning of an important era in the immigrant and visible minority women's movement and in their collective struggle for social change, so that they can participate in Canadian society more fully, productively and meaningfully.

Christina Lee was a member of the Action Committee on Immigrant and Visible Minority Women. She is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Ethnic Research Programme at York University.

Book Review

Tania Das Gupta
*Learning from Our History:
Community Development by
Immigrant Women in Ontario
1958-1986 - A Tool for
Action*

Toronto: Cross Cultural
Communication Centre, 1987

by *Christina Lee*

This is a resource book written specifically for those working directly with immigrant women in community development, education, health and social services. The approach is primarily participatory research. Originally from India, the author has spent the last seven years working with immigrant and visible minority organizations. The information is drawn directly from the real life experiences of Southern European and Third World immigrant women in their efforts to develop services for their constituents.

The book focuses on the process of community mobilization and development, a crucial component in the collective efforts of these immigrant women to better their lives, and to effect changes in services and programmes. Beginning with a schematic analysis of the history of community development of immigrant women in Ontario for the last twenty years, and interspersed with reflections, specific examples are used to illustrate the process and outcomes. Examples include networking, community health, employment orientation, co-operative enterprises, skills training, battered women shelters, elderly immigrant women services, and special programmes in large formal organizations. The individual case studies give a poignant portrait of the struggles and initiatives of these immigrant women, as well as the lessons learned from the development of these programmes. The adaptability of such projects in different contexts and locations is also noted. A resource list of

significant programmes in Ontario and a selected biography of references are included.

In addition to the information on community development of immigrant women, the book raises important issues for mainstream and ethnic service providers. As revealed from past experiences, employment has been an issue around which immigrant women have developed community programmes, and there is a strong need to obtain secure and acceptable working conditions. The development of collective structures as an approach to community mobilization is also described, particularly in a non-hierarchical way by which immigrant women have equal access to decision making. Since insufficient and unstable funding has always been identified as a major obstacle, concerns are raised regarding the increasing privatization of immigrant women's programmes. Such a move would tend to be counterproductive to the community development spirit and would eliminate the supportive, developmental and empowering process inherent in these programmes. The author argues for the need to allocate funding so that it is reflective of the best interest of the people being served.

The book provides a comprehensive review of the history of community development of immigrant women in Ontario and offers valuable insights regarding the planning and implementation of these programmes. Moreover, significant questions are raised to develop awareness and understanding of immigrant women's issues. The answers to these pressing questions are critical in assisting immigrant women to organize to bring about change to their lives.

Tania Das Gupta, Community Coordinator at Cross Cultural Communication Centre, has recently completed her doctoral thesis at OISE on the deskilling of garment workers.

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News Digest

• The Dean of Graduate Studies and the Refugee Documentation Project at York University, have been co-sponsoring a 1987 Seminar Series about Refugees in Policy and Practice. The closing session on "The Role of Agencies and Practitioners: Appeals-Programmes" will take place at noon on March 20th, Room 035, Administrative Studies Building, "Area 7", York University. Participants include Phillip Berger (Consultant, Medical Practitioner, the Canadian Centre for the Investigation and Prevention of Torture), Michael Schelew (Amnesty International), Tom Clark (Inter-Church Committee for Refugees), Doris Dobbin (Co-ordinator, Refugee Referral Service), C. Michael Lanphier (Director, Refugee Documentation Project; member -- Canadian Council for Refugees).

Previous seminars in this series have dealt with "Refugees and the Law: International-Canadian Perspectives", "Researching Refugee Issues: Library and Field Work" and "Refugee Women: Mental Health and Settlement Issues".

• **Forcible Repatriation After World War II: An International Symposium**, Oxford University, England, March 20-22, 1987. For more information please contact Professor Hugh A. Macdonald, Department of International Relations, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, England, WC2A 2AE, tel.: (01) 405-7686 or Dr. Lubomyr Luciuk, Department of Geography, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, tel.: (416) 978-5042.

New Publications

- John Garrick and Janice Reid, *Indo-Chinese Welfare Workers: Issues from a Cross-Cultural Training Programme* (Richmond, Australia: CHOMI, 1986).
- Kati Sunner, compiler, *Press Views: Migrants and Unemployment* (Richmond, Australia: CHOMI, 1986).
- *Promoting Tolerance in a Multicultural Society* (Richmond, Australia: CHOMI, 1986). Papers presented at a Conference held at the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, Melbourne, in August 1985.
- Mark Deasey and Renata Singer, *A Rational Approach to Immigration Policy* (Richmond, Australia: CHOMI, 1986).

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