
Migrant Professional Women

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ne of the issues that strikes me, as a refugee woman and as a social worker, comes out of looking at the situation of migrant professionals. A 'foreigner' does not so readily get to work in her profession, does not so readily get to utilize what she had regarded as owning — her expertise.

The issue is more complex, and more refined than even that within the greatest divide: that between foreign and non-foreign professional. There are divisions. Foreign/non-foreign breaks into immigrant/refugee which in turn breaks into refugee man/refugee woman.

Presumably an immigrant finds her life in Canada a consequence of a choice. That choice was an awareness, and an acceptance of difficulties.

The refugee has made a choice only between surviving or not surviving. The consequence of that choice is an unprepared arrival in Canada. Unprepared in time, in commitment, in psychological and physical readiness, acceptance, tolerance, and overcoming of difficulties.

The difficulties, and the possibilities of getting through them, are further differentiated by gender. Seemingly gender-free problems of English skill acquisition and credential recognition are heavily gender-determined.

A woman is *a priori* presumed to be in charge of the kids by the officials who determine eligibility for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Women do not thus readily, if at all, receive the preparatory assistance necessary for passing a major hurdle in credential acceptance — the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

A woman must at best secure a place in a packed out subsidized

daycare 'system.' At worst she must claim a place has been secured, in order to avoid stopping the process that leads to a seat in an English course and then scramble to find a place before her claim, as part of due process, is checked out.

The reclaiming of human worth, the re-appropriation of professional and family identity is a difficult task — a task that not all refugee professional women accomplish even after five or six years.

What follows is an interview with just one of many refugee women who share this plight:

When did you come to Canada?

In the Summer of '85.

Were you on your own?

I came with my husband and our two children.

Under what conditions did you come?

We were sponsored by the government. Both my husband and I had a political history. Both of us were political prisoners for ten years.

Had you worked before?

Yes, I worked as a staff nurse in a hospital in my country, Argentina.

BY OLGA CASS

Are you working now?

Not as a nurse. I'm dependent on the government economically now.

You've been in Canada three years?

And I can't work as a nurse yet. I want to but I can't yet.

If you want to, why can't you?

There seems to be a sequence of barriers. The first is English. It seems to require two years just to gain a functional command. You need two years to negotiate transport, shopping, etc. Maybe just a little longer to carry on an easy conversation or to be understood on the telephone. To fully interrogate the test — to make anything other than a functional, stereotypical response in a situation — takes longer still, and again to grasp the cultural flavour of an interaction is an ongoing process...

What other barriers are in the sequence?

Well, there are barriers that aren't really English but still are called "English." The greatest is the TOEFL. To pass it requires something more than, and different from, English. One has to be able to do very formal operations. I wonder how many native speakers of English could work their way through it the first time. I didn't pass the first time by only two points. There is no appeal procedure. I'm waiting for the results on my second attempt.

And if you pass? You said it was a sequence in passing the TOEFL. Where you are located in the sequence?

If I make it, there are other barriers. I wish I could call them steps — but at this time I see them as barriers. I will need to get through the three year "refresher" course, the Ontario Registration Exam...

Is your determination to normalize as a professional as strong?

Yes, I am aware that Canada needs nurses. I'm aware that if one looks at North America as a unit, the fastest growing population is Hispanic, and I'm aware that cleaning staff function as translators at present.

These points argue for change.

I'm not sure if my argument is with the government or with myself, only to keep trying. Two more points on my TOEFL and I would have been further on my way... or is it stopped because no one was willing to consider me for two points? I don't know right now if I'd win an argument with myself. Perhaps I should go back to a factory, but its not the solution — not because a factory is too low, but because I am what I am. I can give what I can, I can get what I need as the professional that I am — or is it, that I was.

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