

# ***Immigrant Women: The Silent Partners of the Women's Movement***

*Immigrant women are the silent partners of Canadian society and the women's movement. Exploited in both domestic and employment situations, these women might naturally seek to embrace feminism. But a variety of reasons, both within their own cultures and within Canadian feminism, has inhibited such connections.*

*At the same time, there has been a growing sense of solidarity among women of different cultural backgrounds.*

Winnie Ng

*Les femmes immigrées sont les partenaires silencieuses du mouvement des femmes et de la société canadienne. Exploitées comme elles le sont à la maison et sur le marché du travail, il serait tout naturel que ces femmes rejoignent les féministes. Mais plusieurs raisons, à l'intérieur de leur propre culture comme dans le mouvement féministe, s'opposent à cela. En même temps, il existe un sentiment de solidarité grandissant entre les femmes de cultures différentes.*

Since the sixties, the women's movement has had a tremendous impact on North American society. Its presence, struggles, and gains have affected the welfare of all women. However, the movement has created only ripple effects on the plight of immigrant women in Canada. Immigrant women remain the "muted shadows," the silent partners of our society and the women's movement.

Politically, socially, and economically, immigrant women are easy targets for abuse and exploitation. They are exploited both as women and as immigrants. This situation is decidedly not what they were prepared for psychologically when they came to Canada. Most immigrant women come to seek a better future for their families. They come with dreams that are woven with hope

and colours. Yet after the initial excitement of arrival, their dreams are shattered by the cold realities of surviving in this land of "great opportunities."

Working immigrant women are in worse situations than immigrant men. Very often they have been sponsored by their husbands as dependents. This bars them from being eligible for government-sponsored language training or skills-upgrading programs on the rationale that they do not need English to do housework or work as cleaners or sewing-machine operators. For those with professional training and experience from their home countries, but without language fluency, there is usually little hope that they will ever return to their professions. Without language skills, "Canadian experience," and connections, immigrant women are forced to take jobs in the service industries, garment factories, and within their own ethnic communities. These low-paying and dead-end jobs will never enable immigrant women to gain equal access to the larger labour force.

At home the immigrant woman starts another shift of work as she cares for her children and waits on her husband. In many cultures housework is considered to be the woman's job; thus for most working immigrant women, the day is long

and back-breaking. The language difficulty, the need to care for young children, and the tight control by husbands all contribute to the immigrant woman's isolation.

The double exploitation of immigrant women in domestic and employment situations is beyond the grasp of the majority of Canadian women. With such an experience, it would seem natural for immigrant women to embrace feminism and for women from the women's movement to seek out their doubly exploited sisters. But few links have been made. The reasons can perhaps be explained by differences in language and priorities, ignorance on both sides, and the fact that organizing within the immigrant women's community is just beginning.

In addition, the cultural values of the different ethnic groups have discouraged immigrant women from associating with the outside community. The needs of their husbands, children, and even their employers come before their own personal needs. Besides, feminism threatens the traditional values of many cultures. Even for those who are articulate in English, the fear of being labelled "radical" or "crazy," of being socially sanctioned by their own community, is so great that it outweighs their motivation to find out more about feminism.

The minimal participation of immigrant women in the women's movement can also be attributed to the manner in which women's-movement activities are organized. Most of the meetings are highly structured and formal, with rules that lead to the intimidation and exclusion of immigrant women. Meetings are usually held in the evenings or on weekends, when many immigrant women are either too exhausted or too busy to participate. In addition, translations are almost never available, making it pointless for non-English speakers to attend.

cerns and for building up a network between the two groups.

Within the immigrant women's community there has been a growing sense of solidarity among women of different cultural backgrounds. Community agencies such as the Immigrant Women's Centre and the Immigrant Women Job Placement Centre in Toronto are prime examples of women of different ethnic backgrounds working under one roof, developing cross-cultural links. The strong activist commitment of the umbrella organization Women Working with Immigrant Women

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There needs to be an ongoing process of building links between the immigrant women's community and feminists. Besides regular promotion in different languages, co-operation should be encouraged through community programs, English-as-a-second-language classes, and union activities. There need to be opportunities for immigrants to see the connections and the relationships between themselves and other women.

Even though the women's movement claims to be non-racist and non-biased, stereotyping is an issue that it should critically examine. A fairly prevalent characteristic among English-speaking social workers, ESL teachers, and health professionals who claim to be feminists is a self-righteous and condescending attitude towards immigrant women. Their pity and tears for these "poor immigrant women," in a sense, help to trap immigrant women in this vicious circle. Despite these people's concerns, there is often a lack of sensitivity towards the immigrant woman's choice and cultural traditions.

Of course, it is not a one-way process: immigrant women must also take responsibility for informing the women's movement of their con-

(WWIW) has undoubtedly sparked an initial network between the women's movement and immigrant women.

It is only through this kind of solidarity that immigrant women can emerge from the shadows, from being the "silent partners," to become the full participating and equal members of the movement to fight for a just society for all.

#### **Suggested Readings:**

Arnopoulos, Sheila McLeod. *Problems of Immigrant Women in the Canadian Labour Force*. Ottawa: Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

Cross Cultural Communication Centre. *By and About Immigrant Women*. (Available from CCCC, 1991 Dufferin Street, Toronto, Ont. M6E 3P9.)

Multiculturalism Directorate. *The Immigrant Woman in Canada — A Right to Recognition*. Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State.

*For the full text of this article, see Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today, ed. Maureen Fitzgerald, Connie Guberman, and Margie Wolfe. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982.*

## **MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY**

Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada's only women's university, recently launched a \$1 million campaign to support scholarships and bursaries for deserving women and to fund neglected areas of research in women's issues. The university is asking \$1 from every Canadian woman to help reach its goal of \$3.5 million. The first \$2.5 million has been given in pledges, but many of them are contingent on the university's raising the remaining amount.

Be a part of the Canadian women's network. Send a contribution to Development Office, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3M 2J6.



The  
**Women's  
Press**

Women's Press is planning to publish an anthology of original feminist short stories by Canadian women. If interested, please write for details to Judy McClard, Women's Press, 16 Baldwin Street, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1L2.