

March 8th Coordination and Action Committee of Women of Diverse Origins

FARHA NAJAH HUSSAIN AND MARIE BOTI

Les populations et les groupes continuent à défier la notion d'un Canada multiculturel officiel et préfèrent former entre eux des liens de solidarité basés sur une justice sociale. Cet article donne l'exemple de la célébration de la journée internationale des femmes organisée par le «Comité d'action et de coordination des femmes de diverses origines pour le 8 mars (FDO)».

Canada has often boasted and has been viewed as an exemplary multicultural nation. The image that has been constructed is one of a world mosaic, all within the borders of one nation-state. This image, however, is not only an illusion but an attempt to ignore the systemic injustices that Indigenous and racialized communities face within and outside of Canada.

At the same time, however, people and groups continue to challenge the notions of formal state multiculturalism, and instead, form links of solidarity among each other based on social justice, understanding and a sharing of each others' conditions, and building cultures of resistance. They have made the links between international policies affecting their countries of origin, and national and local policies affecting Aboriginal and communities of Colour in Canada. They have revealed the hidden fabric of Canada: colonialism, racism, imperialism, and sexism. One of these groups is the March 8th Coordination and Action Committee

of Women of Diverse Origins (WDO-FDO), in Montreal. This grassroots group, from the get-go, has had an anti-imperialist feminist analysis that has implicitly challenged the premise of multiculturalism and instead, formed a basis of unity built on international solidarity, social, political, and economic justice, and sisterhood. The following is a case-study of March 8th WDO-FDO: its recent history and functioning in organizing an annual event for International Women's Day (IWD) for the past seven years, and in the process, its attempts to shed light on progressive and grassroots struggles and issues from an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal perspective.

Herstory: A Brief History of March 8th -WDO-FDO

"We want to be visible" was the rallying cry and the theme of the first event organized by a new committee in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Côte-des-neiges in Montreal in 2001. Behind the unwieldy but descriptive name, the March 8th WDO-FDO is a group of progressive anti-imperialist women who have since been creating a new tradition of militant feminism in Montreal on International Women's Day.

The committee was born out of a coming together of women's groups at the Immigrant Workers' Centre

(IWC), a hub of cross-cultural grassroots organizing. The women had previously supported each other during campaigns such as the Melca Salvador campaign to stop the deportation of a Filipina domestic worker; the Justice for Milia Abrar campaign about the brutal unsolved murder of a young woman and student; campaigns supporting unionization and opposing sweatshop conditions in the garment and other manufacturing sectors, with mainly women and migrant workforces. Women from the South-Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC), from PINAY, (the Filipino Women's Organization of Québec) and from the Iranian Women's Association were represented from the beginning of the WDO-FDO committee's formation. Some knew each other from a similar anti-imperialist feminist network, set up over a decade before, called Women Without Borders.

While several of these women's groups had been brought into the large Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) as part of that organization's attempt to reach out to (im)migrant communities, they found that their issues still remained all but invisible, and felt it was time to create their own events with their issues at centre stage. The women who first came together were activists, connected to other community groups, already juggling activists' tasks and responsibilities

besides their jobs and families. As a result, they opted for an informal network-style structure and annual event to mark international women's day in their own image: diverse, feminist, anti-imperialist.

Basis of Unity

Many of the women were first-generation immigrants, or of diverse

the clause recognizing the place of Indigenous women (please see Box 1 for "Basis of Unity").

Annual Theme and Conference Format

Each year, a theme is chosen based on struggles taking place on the international and local scenes (please see "Themes" in Box 2). At times

The Culture of Resistance

The culture of progressive feminist expression and resistance has always been a priority for the March 8th WDO-FDO and thus the committee has made a place for it each year. The group recognizes the importance of culture as a means of communicating resistance and of bringing people in who are not necessarily interested

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ethnic origins, and felt a connection to their countries of origin. Others saw the importance of international politics and its impact on their local conditions. The U.S. Government's "war on terror" made these connections all the more acute after September 11th, 2001. On a daily basis, in their respective groups and communities, the women were organizing opposition to racist immigration policies, racial profiling, police brutality, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and repression in Iran. They were working in solidarity with resistance movements in the Philippines, Palestine, and others.

After two years of organizing the IWD events, choosing themes, speakers, format, venue, and mobilizing participants for the conference, the process of discussing world events, how to reach out to different communities, draw in younger women, build alliances with mainstream women's organizations, with unions, student groups, and so on, a basis of unity was drafted by the core group of women. This document, drafted through discussion and debate, became the subsequent basis for new membership. This was an important step to ensure continuity and build on past experience. It has been maintained with only one important addition,

the theme imposed itself, as with the looming U.S. Invasion of Iraq in 2003. At other times, it was prompted by local events, like the election of the provincial Charest government in 2004 on the ticket of re-engineering the state (a new spin on neo-liberal privatization and deregulation schemes). Most years, the IWD event has been dedicated to a woman or women who have played a significant role in advancing the cause of women's and people's rights and are an inspiration to the organizers (please refer to Box 3 to see some of the "Dedications").

The committee experimented each year with conference formats to best allow input from guest speakers, and sharing among participants, analysis and practical lessons for action. A conference format has become standard, with a combination of plenary sessions and workshops. Booths displaying literature, leaflets and crafts of each group, with poster, photo and artworks exhibits reflecting feminist themes, and a community lunch of diverse cuisines have become a standard feature. On-site childcare has always been seen as a priority and is present every year. A nominal entrance fee has been asked, with a "no one turned away" policy in place.

in political discourse. Moreover, the cultural aspect of the conference has also been a way to bring a sense of celebration to International Women's Day through music, dance and performance.

In 2005, a special evening concert showcased artists at the peak of their craft, who carried powerful content in their presentations. For example, Aparna Sindhoor, a dancer of Indian origin based in the U.S., danced to her choreography of "The Chase," a contemporary tale by Mahasweta Devi, of a woman rising up against an oppressive caste system and the relationships it imposes. The all-woman choir Choeur Maha sang diverse songs, Iranian drummer and singer Homa Alizadeh performed a revolutionary Persian song, and Tania Nesterovksy from Venezuela sang Latin American classics, accompanied by the late progressive musician Renato Pavez from Chili.

Taking Back the Streets

At a time when street demonstrations had waned, especially by women's groups in Montreal, the March 8th WDO-FDO made a street march part of each year's events. The committee wanted to bring back the militant tradition of

Box 1: Basis of Unity

8 March Coordination and Action Committee of Women of Diverse Origins

1. We want to be visible. We want to organize March 8 with our issues and our organizations occupying centre stage (not just as a workshop or in an addendum to a mainstream women's event).
2. We are feminists of diverse origins—born in other countries, mainly in the southern hemisphere, or Canadian-born. We have a continuing strong connection to our countries of origin, and to issues of the Third World.
3. In our communities and in the wider society we oppose patriarchy and misogyny in terms of family relations, societal and political institutions, culture and the media.
4. We are committed to dignity and to basic rights—freedom from fear and intimidation, freedom from sexual discrimination, freedom from fundamentalism.
5. Without basic rights women and their families are unable to achieve human dignity. So we are committed to rights in the areas of housing, education and healthcare, choice in matters of lifestyle and reproductive rights.
6. We support the on-going national liberation struggles in our countries of origin and the Third World in general, and people's struggles against imperialism and local repressive governments. We want to celebrate and inform on women's traditions of resistance from our communities and countries of origin.
7. We support the ongoing struggles of the indigenous people, the original inhabitants of Turtle Island, who, as a consequence of settler colonialism, have suffered dispossession of land, destruction of culture and way of life, including more egalitarian gender relations.
8. Locally, we actively oppose racism, and all forms of oppression, particularly the heightened repression against visible minorities since September 11, 2001, and against justice-loving people speaking out against war preparations, Canadian and U.S. foreign policy and global economic inequality.
9. We oppose discriminatory immigration and refugee policies which marginalize women and their families, keeping them in poverty and near-slave conditions, and the effects of globalization which are driving down wages and working conditions of women, particularly immigrants and refugees and putting people into increasingly desperate conditions.
10. We are anti-war and anti-imperialist and wish to contribute to building a strong women's stance against war and aggression, particularly U.S.-led wars of terror.
11. We do not wish to work in opposition to existing feminist organization and practice. We invite the participation and support of women from the mainstream and recognize the importance of joint action in strategic areas.
12. We are a coordination and action committee, because we wish to coordinate the activities of existing groups, which some of us represent, and because we also intend to initiate new activities jointly for which we will mobilize our respective networks.

Box 2: Themes

Each year's International Women's Day theme reflects the current social, political and economic context.

2002: *We Want to be Visible*. Issues discussed: migrant domestic workers and cheap labour; women and autonomy; "war on terror," and racial profiling in Arab, Muslim and communities of Colour.

2003: *Women Resisting War at Home and Abroad* focused on the connections between the war and terrorism hysteria and attacks on minority and refugee communities in Canada. The workshop themes on "War Abroad" covered issues in Iraq, Latin America, Afghanistan, Columbia, Palestine, the Philippines; and "War at Home" workshops covered issues such as, mothers and youth combating police brutality, and non-status Algerians in their struggle to live in Canada with dignity.

2004: *Women, Migrations and Borders*. Issues covered: Women being forced to leave their homes and families to earn money to survive and then are relegated to cheap labour (e.g., live-in caregivers and seasonal farmworkers) and criminalized or deported if they claim their rights.

2005: *Global Reengineering, Modern Slavery and Feminization of Migration*. In addition to Quebec Premier Jean Charest's "reengineering of the state where people are dealing with a higher cost of living, and privatization of services and resources," the committee made the links between economic globalization and the controls exercised by powerful nations and corporations that continue to dominate and control people for increased profits.

2006: *Global Feminisms and Social Transformation* allowed the committee to examine how women locally and abroad were contributing to transforming their societies. This year's event was organized in collaboration with Concordia University's Simone de Beauvoir Institute. This was the first year that the committee formally associated with an academic institution. International speakers spoke on issues in Guatemala, Philippines, Palestine and Haiti. Workshops included one on women and prisons and one on comparing socialism and anarchism as paths to fundamental transformation.

2007: *Reclaiming the Roots of Resistance; Remembering the Past Looking Towards the Future*. This year's event was informed by a particular discussion about how "feminism" had become the new 'f-word' and how important it was to reassert feminism as a positive and progressive movement for young women.

2008: *Women Take Back Democratic Space* was a direct response to the police brutality that occurred in the 2007 IWD demo in addition to the reality that there was an encroachment in public-space from governmental and private institutions.

2009: *Women Demand a New World Order: End Imperialism, Exploitation, War and Repression*. This theme was chosen in the context of the financial crisis and how institutions, which form an integral part of capitalist society, are attempting to rescue this inherently unjust system with bailouts, while leaving intact the neo-liberal policies, colonial and neo-colonial endeavours, imperialism and war.

IWD, from its origins in New York, where women workers marched to demand an eight-hour day and an end to child labour in 1908, to the 1970s and '80s, when women in Canada marched for abortion rights and to Take Back the Night against violence and rape. The demonstrations also became a priority to mark solidarity with women marching all over the world.

The demonstrations varied in size, from about 100 at first, swelling to over 1,000 in the height of anti-war activities during that year. In 2007, the demonstration was marred by police brutality. Marchers had been walking along Ste-Catherine street in downtown Montreal and after making speeches, they started to make their way back to the original starting point. The Montreal police made an announcement asking people to walk on the sidewalk. An ally in the march complied with this demand but was nonetheless targeted. Police threw him against a police car and he was eventually arrested on bogus charges—that were dropped a year later—and spent five days in prison. When other marchers had gathered around the car out of concern for the violent way in which this police intervention had taken place, police began hitting and pushing indiscriminately: several people were knocked to the ground; a woman from the demonstration was hit in the chest with the end of a truncheon and thrown to the ground by an officer. She was trembling from shock and blood from an open wound to her knee seeped through her jeans. Her ribs had also been bruised. Another woman's lips and mouth were swollen and bled from being punched in the face by a police officer, another woman had cuts on her knee and stomach due to the police violence. A press release stated:

[The] police attack on women and their allies proves that even those who are supposed to be the guardians of the law and ensure gender equality, see wom-



Box 3: Dedications

In the past, IWD has been dedicated to a woman who has contributed to the cause of women globally or is a symbol of the women's struggle:

Zahra Kazemi: Canadian photo-journalist originally from Iran who was arrested in Tehran while taking photographs, and who died in detention after being brutally tortured in 2003.

Rachel Corrie: a young internationalist from the International Solidarity Movement, who was crushed by an Israeli Defence Forces bulldozer while she protested the demolition of Palestinian homes in 2003.

Milia Abrar: a 21-year-old Bangladeshi-Canadian student who decided to determine her own future and act autonomously in her decision concerning an interpersonal relationship but as a result, was brutally murdered and disfigured in a public bathroom in Montreal in October 1998.

Patricia Perez: coordinator of Quebec Migrant Workers' Support Centre who dedicated the last years of her life to the rights and welfare of seasonal farmworkers in the Montreal region.

Gabriela Silang: of the Philippines who led an armed uprising against the Spanish colonialists in 1763 before she was captured and executed.

Melca Salvador: the Filipina domestic helper who won her right to stay in Canada with her Canadian-born son, Richard, following a year-long campaign in 2001. Melca died of cancer in Montreal on February 27, 2009.

en as people to be controlled with the threat and the use of violence.... How can women seek assistance against the violence in their lives when those entrusted with their safekeeping are perpetrators of brutality and violence?" ("Montreal women against police brutality")

The March 8th WDO-FDO demanded that the City of Montreal and the government of Quebec immediately investigate the assaults and arrest. Neither the city nor the province ever issued any official statement or made any response. The following year, rather than be intimidated, the WDO-FDO demonstration was stronger than ever. Women, children and allies from an array of communities braved a heavy snow storm and chilling winds to protest the police brutality of the previous year.

Going International

The international perspective has always been present in the March 8th WDO-FDO's activities. Links with women's groups outside of Canada have been created through invited speakers from Guatemala, Philippines, Palestine, Haiti, Iran, U.S., etc. In 2008, the March 8th WDO-FDO also participated in the founding of the International Migrants' Alliance of migrant workers, formed at a meeting in Hong Kong in June 2008. There were 118 organizations from 25 countries at the founding congress (International Migrants Alliance).

Dr. Irene Fernandez of the migrants' organization Tenaganita in Malaysia talked about women's forced displacement as part of the politics of migration and imperialist globalization:

Women are forced abroad as a result of social and economic dislocations in their countries of origin brought about largely by corporate-driven globaliza-

tion that keeps siphoning off human and natural resources from the South into the centres of global capitalism in the North.... It is only by placing the local issues and struggles in a global context that we can make sense of what is being attempted by the forces of capital, patriarchy and imperialism.

In 2010, the March 8th CAC-WDO will be hosting an international women's meeting towards forming a global alliance of women, similar to the International Migrants' Alliance.

Feminist Organizing and Group Functioning

The organizing meetings take place on Saturday mornings around a pot-luck brunch. The composition of the core group varies slightly each year, as a result of women's availabilities and commitments.¹ The meetings are far from flawless. For example, there are language barriers. The meetings take place mostly in English and at times in French, with ongoing whisper translation by fellow members. Nevertheless, inevitably, some things are missed, especially when minutes, or other documents have not been translated.

It is important to emphasize that although women on the committee agree on the basis of unity, the group remains quite heterogeneous in terms of experiences, analysis and opinions concerning complex issues. Even when the women themselves are in agreement, there is still the challenge of taking formal positions on various issues. Nevertheless, these discussions help maintain an essential level of productive critique and dialogue within the group.

The spirit of sisterhood, the common bonds of political outlook, mutual support for each others' struggles and situations, community brunches, and the satisfaction of seeing a collective work materialize each year with its depth, outreach, and renewed



vigour are among the elements that have sustained the group and kept its members participating each year.

We would like to thank Dolores Chew and Tess Tesalona for offering comments and feedback. We would also like to acknowledge the reality that the two of us cannot represent all the women who have contributed to March 8th WDO-FDO and as a result, our recounting of March 8th WDO-FDO is limited to our recollection, resources and what we chose to include in this article. Many specific and pertinent topics may not have been mentioned due to space constraints and issues that have been addressed in conferences and/or marches cannot be done justice in a brief article. We would like to thank photographers, filmmakers and community radio CKUT 90.3 FM for always recording and broadcasting IWD events. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the participation and dedication of all the women and groups who have and continue to participate in March 8th WDO-FDO.

Address for correspondence: March 8th Committee Women of Diverse Origins, c/o Immigrant Worker's Centre 6420 ave. Victoria, Suite #9, Montréal, Québec, Canada, H3W 2S7 email: wdo.fdo@gmail.com.

Photo credits page 80 (from the top): Tessa Tesalona — "Members of the Action Committee for Women of Diverse Origins. Taking it to the Streets, IWD demonstration, 2004" and "IWD Panel in 2005." Reproduced with permission from <http://citoyen.onf.ca/node/3141&dossier_nid=1266>.

Photo credits page 81 (from the top): Tatiana Gomez and Ion Etxebarria — "The march took to the street along Cote-des-Neiges Ave," March 3, 2008; "PINAY has been a member of the organizing committee since its inception in 2002," March 3, 2008; and "Organized by the Action Committee for Women of Diverse Origins, women from different backgrounds and racialized communities partici-

pated in the march," December 2, 2008. Reproduced with permission from <<http://photos.cmaq.net/v/InternationalWomensDay>>.

Farha Najah Hussain is part of the March 8th Coordination and Action Committee, Women of Diverse Origins. At the time this article was written, this was her third year organizing with the committee.

Marie Boti is an original member of the March 8th Coordination and Action Committee, Women of Diverse Origins. She is an international solidarity activist with the Centre d'appui aux Philippines/ Centre for Philippine Concerns and was also a founding member of Femmes sans Frontières/ Women Without Borders.

¹Groups (or members from these groups) who have, are and/or continue to participate on the March 8th WDO-FDO include: Association des aides familiales du Québec; Centre des femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs; Chinese Family Services Centre; Collectif régional Simone Monet-Chartrand de la Fédération des femmes du Québec; Immigrant Worker's Centre; International Solidarity Movement (Palestine); l'Association pour la défense des droits sociaux; Le Congrès des femmes noires; Mouvement contre le viol et l'inceste; Native Friendship Centre of Montreal; No One Is Illegal-Montreal; PINAY, Filipino Women's Association Quebec Iranian Women's Association, Centre d'appui aux Philippines; Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University; Solidarity with Afghan Women; Solidarity with Palestinian Human Rights; South Asian Women's Community Centre; Tamil Women's Association of Quebec; The Voice of Women, Women of the Revolutionary Communist Party, and many more.

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Women of Diverse Origins
 will be hosting
 an international women’s
 conference in Montreal,
 August 13-15, 2010,
 under the theme:
 “*For a Militant*
Global Women’s Movement
in the 21st Century,”
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She departs the house as if going up to the corner store
 Her bags ready by the door, carefully packed, precisely
 what she needs
 No more, no less
 The best and most favoured of twenty years
 Few of them purchased by him
 She says, “Goodbye then,” what else is there to say
 Informing him weeks ago there was nothing left here for
 her
 In that unadorned dwelling, the same carpeting as the day
 they moved in
 The painted refreshed now and then, the wallpaper peeling
 in places
 The nursery and the never-used crib with its lead paint
 He grunts, not raising his head from the afternoon paper
 His lone activity until the time for ‘Jeopardy’ then bed
 Always the same, day after day
 The summer holidays at the same rented cottage
 By the same lake, year after year
 Expressionless, unemotional, was he ever any other way
 She didn’t know, had never known
 Then reaching the end of the walk, the cab waiting
 Looks back upon the seedy lawn and tidy unimpressive
 house
 Feels such sadness at the emptiness inside and out
 Feet trembling on the brink of return
 “No. No more.” Final whispered farewell, and turning,
 faces west
 To brilliance of sunset, calmness, and new beginnings.

L. June Stevenson is a retired editor of 24 years experience with The Presbyterian Church in Canada. An award-winning poet, editor and writer, June continues to freelance. June is a member of The Word Guild and her manuscript was short listed for the Best New Canadian Christian Author Award in 2008.