

# Poverty: The South Asian

By Usha George

*Au Canada, la pauvreté parmi les immigrantes de l'Asie du Sud est « invisible » en raison du manque de statistiques et de documentation. Les particularités linguistiques et culturelles, la dévaluation des antécédents scolaires, la formation, l'incapacité de recevoir une formation au Canada et la discrimination systématique contribuent au niveau élevé de pauvreté parmi les femmes originaires de l'Asie du Sud au Canada.*

South Asian immigration to Canada started in the early 1930s, peaking in the 1970s and 1980s. To most people from South Asian countries, Canada is a land of opportunities. A minimum standard of life is guaranteed and often refugee groups find immediate State provision of the basic essentials of life as well as political security.

South Asian immigrants to Canada come mainly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The geographical spread is vast, as are the culture differences and religious beliefs. India has a population of about 850 million people, mainly Hindus. Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains form the other religious minorities in India. Pakistan and Bangladesh are mainly Muslim countries. Sri Lanka has both Hindus and Christians. The characteristic they share in common is that they are all tradition oriented patriarchal societies with strong extended family ties.

Almost all South Asian immigrant women are "family class"

immigrants along with their children. Parents are usually reluctant to send unmarried women alone to foreign countries. A notable development in recent years has been the large-scale immigration of refugees from Sri Lanka. A source at Ontario Welcome House (a referral centre for refugees and new immigrants) explains that many of these immigrants are single mothers. They have either lost their husbands in the long and violent civil war that is ravaging Sri Lanka, or they have been sent away because of safety concerns, while the husband stays.

South Asian women immigrants in Canada come from varied socio-economic backgrounds. The variety of economic, religious, social, education and occupational backgrounds represent a microcosm of their countries of origin. Poverty among South Asian immigrant women remains "invisible" mainly due to the scarcity of statistics on the various dimensions of poverty, the lack of documentation on the experiences of the poor and the inability

of the women to articulate their deprivation in a collective voice. This lack of politicization has been a major impediment in expressing the many concerns of South Asian women in Canada.

Generally, many of the causes of poverty for South Asian women are similar to the ones experienced by other immigrants or perhaps mainstream Canadians. However, the specific manner in which these factors impact on these women are unique to the circumstances and realities of their existence as immigrants from South Asia. Some of these factors are discussed below. They are not necessarily in order of importance. Moreover, they do not operate in isolation. There is a complex interaction of these factors in creating and sustaining poverty.

## Cultural factors

*I have never worn Western-style clothes. I don't think I ever will. I am also certain that my traditional clothes will not help me get a job. I am not used to going places by myself. My husband cannot come with me to look for jobs. I don't know anyone who can come with me. My husband is on welfare. However, when I tell him that I will look for a cleaning or restaurant job, he feels that it is because I don't want to do the housework (I never had to do any housework in Sri Lanka). He is afraid that if I go out to work, he may have to look*



Colette Whiten, *Faces of Despair*, 1991.  
6.4 cm x 8.3 cm

Photo: R. Rhodes

# Woman's Experience in **C**anada

*after the children. He also feels that I may become independent.*

The complexities of the dynamic between various cultural factors in the South Asian context is difficult to explain. It may vary from country to country, region to region, group to group or within groups. Common factors relate to the husband's inalienable right to control the wife and children and the wife's primary role as the homemaker. There is strict gender differentiation of roles. Religion plays a major role in the lives of immigrants. So, too, does "public opinion." Family ties are very strong. Many South Asian immigrants still have financial commitments back home. This puts extra strain on the resources here. My strong feeling is that for the first generation immigrant women, the non-material aspects of life have not changed in any significant manner.

Separation and divorce rates are relatively low among South Asian immigrants. However, these two experiences subject most women to extreme levels of poverty. The women feel very lonely, isolated and dejected. Obtaining paid employment is an impossible task for most women at this point. Until recently, child support payments were also not paid regularly. Single mothers face the greatest threat of poverty because a lot of them have no jobs and are on welfare.

*My parents immigrated to Canada when I was six years*

*old. I completed grade 12 in Toronto. My father wanted me to go back to Pakistan for my undergraduate work because he felt that it will give me an opportunity to know my own country. When I was in my final year of university in Pakistan, just before my examinations, my father married me off in the traditional way. We came to Canada. My husband abused me so much and tried to kill our baby. I got a divorce. I am 22 years old. Now I am on welfare. I have no degree and no skills that will enable me to get a job. Who will look after my baby when I go to study? I have wasted the best part of my life.*

## Discrimination

South Asian women looking for jobs



Colette Whiten, *Overcoming Indifference*, 1990-91. 6.4 cm x 7 cm

Photo: R. Rhodes

face sexism and racism. Employers generally tend to prefer men to women. Women are considered bad investments. With employment equity, immigrant and visible minority women are encouraged to apply. This guarantees only equality of access. Is there equality or equity of outcome? Any number of examples can be shown to demonstrate that there is a definite bias among employees both in the public and private sector. A Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto study showed that "mainstream" candidates had more chances of getting job interviews and that they were screened less at interviews than immigrants.

Renu has a Masters of Science degree in Analytical Chemistry from Germany. She lived and worked in Germany for eight years before she and her husband immigrated to Canada in 1984. Her special area of interest is DNA research. She has published a number of papers in scholarly journals in Germany. In the last eight years in Canada, she has applied for about sixty-five jobs. No-one has called her for an interview. After months of persuasion Renu was able to get a temporary part-time research position at a university. She earns \$500 a month. It is all the income she has. A divorce has added to her problems. Every day she anxiously waits to hear if she will be retained at the lab on a full-time basis. In the meantime, the results of her research are published by "others."

## Lack of marketable skills

A good number of the South Asian women immigrants are not able to complete university degrees in their home countries because of early marriage and the lack of emphasis on women's education. The education a South Asian immigrant woman does have is often not recognized. While lower levels of education are easily recognized, higher levels like Bachelors and Masters degrees, along with other professional qualifications, are not readily accepted. The "evaluation process" usually devalues these credentials to their barest minimum. At times immigrant women have to hide their higher qualifications to get into jobs where they may be considered "over qualified."

Whatever the case, sheer economic necessity forces new immigrants to look for any job (restaurant, factory, retail) that they are able to get. These dead-end jobs often become their life. Many are laid off periodically depending on the vagaries of business trends. On the job training or job related training are hard to obtain. The lack of any career guidance for specific jobs presents insurmountable difficulties for South Asian women hoping to be gainfully employed in self-fulfilling jobs.

*I have a Bachelor's degree in Science and Education from Sri Lanka. I was a high school teacher. After I got married we came to Canada. Getting a job was my first priority because my husband had only a part-time job. I worked in a restaurant for five years. Then I was laid off because business was bad. I walked from factory to factory to get a job. In the meantime I enrolled in a "Teacher's Assistant Course" but completed only one year due to financial problems. I went on unemployment and finally when I simply could not get a job applied for welfare in 1989. I hate being on welfare and so I took a part-time job. My three children work part-time and we pull through with \$1500 a month. You can imagine what kind of balancing act that is.*

The length of time in Canada doesn't seem to make a difference in having a job or increasing the earning potential of many South Asian women.

Veena used to own and run a nursery school in India. She got married and came to Canada in 1969. Two sons were born. Her marriage went sour and she went through a difficult divorce in 1975. She stayed single for the next eight years, working two shifts from 11:00am to 7:00pm and from 11:00pm to 7:00am in two different factories. She earned \$600 from both the jobs while her bills came to \$700 a month.

## Language barriers

Most South Asian countries have a number of languages. For example, in India there are about twenty seven languages in addition to English. In a wave of post-independent nationalism, most of the South Asian countries encouraged compulsory education in the mother tongue.

A study based on the 1986 census showed that 11 per cent of [women] immigrants from India did not know English or French as opposed to 3 per cent of immigrant men. It has been pointed out that women who did not know the official language were exploited by employers into working long hours for low earnings as sewing machine operators and factory workers. (*Women and Poverty Revisited*, 1990).

Meena has been a landed immigrant in Canada for the last five years. She speaks only Urdu. She has not been able to acquire a working knowledge of English. There is no way she can respond to a job advertisement, fill an application form or attend an interview. Her son is ten years old now and is very fluent in English. Meena is picking up a few simple sentences from him, but she has a long way to go before she gets the courage to face the outside world.

The language programmes run by the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) are good, but they often have built-in biases. For example, the Canadian Jobs Strategy benefits mostly men, whose language difficulties are often less severe than those of women. Another example is the Settlement Language Programme, which is aimed at immigrant women who are not immediately destined to the labour force. What, however, happens to a woman who wants to learn some English to enable her to get a job? These problems are being addressed by a new

CEIC programme, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC). With LINC, all immigrants are eligible for language instruction which matches their level of competency (determined according to four levels established by the CEIC).

Even when a South Asian woman is fluent in English, her accent, intonation, pronunciation and syntax are very different from the mainstream use of the language. Sometimes this means that South Asian immigrant women who can speak fluent English are not hired for "high visibility" jobs like that of secretary, public relations officer, or personal assistant.

South Asian immigrant women often feel helpless in the face of factors mitigating against them. In addition to empowering South Asian women, it is equally important to alter the structures that place heavy burdens on them. In searching for solutions, the diversity of women's experience of poverty cannot, and must not, be ignored.

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