Situating South Asian Immigrant Women in the

by Amina Jamal

Il s'agit ici de la socialisation des femmes de l'Asie du Sud en tant que travailleuses et épouses à travers les processus de l'immigration, des structures patriarcales et de l'idéologie raciste et coloniale.

Different groups of women become different categories of workers and in this process race and gender are as much a constitutive element as class in determining what work they will do—indentured labour or wage labour or unpaid reproductive labour.

Feminist efforts to understand the gendered meaning of current global political, social, and economic restructuring have revealed the centrality of immigrant and "Third World" women's labour in these processes. It is increasingly becoming apparent that the ideological construction of these women together with their socio-economic conditions and politico-legal situation makes them particularly suitable for the "flexibilization" requirements of capitalist transnational corporations, i.e., casualized part-time work in sweatshops, garment factories or homeworking, as well as "cheap" labour in the growing service industries of advanced capitalist states, including Canada.[1]

Emergent feminist material on women's labour shows important similarities in the ways in which immigrant women's work as waged and unwaged labour is organized within the economy: dependence on family and kinship networks rather than direct induction into the labour market which affects the way in which wages, hours, and terms are negotiated; the operation of patriarchal ideology as the "male breadwinner norm" or "family honor" which favours work in "protected" places within the community or family; real or perceived constraints of child care/family obligations, language barriers, cultural preference and skills which preclude many work options; loyalty towards the employer or family which increases the isolation and casualization of women workers; most important, the construction of immigrant women as a class of invisible workers by ideological constructions of their role as primarily wives and mothers (see, for example, Phizacklea; Mitter; Morokvasic). Moreover it is important to remember that immigrant women are not all similarly located in the production process.

Different groups of women become different categories of workers and in this process race and gender are as much a constitutive element as class in determining what work they will do—indentured labour or wage labour or unpaid reproductive labour. Racist ideology rooted in colonial ideological constructs, assigns differential skills and cultural characteristics to particular women at different times. The point I am making is that the work done by a large number of immigrant women is racialized and gendered by the very processes through which it is organized (unorganized?). Understanding these processes, therefore, can help explicate the material and discursive links between women's unorganized labour in the family and economy and the relevance of their specific social location to the new global organization of labour.

More specifically, in this article I seek to examine the situation of South Asian women who have historically been and continue to be brought into western society mainly as "family class" immigrants, that is, as dependents of South Asian male workers. In truth, however, this officially constructed category contradicts available evidence that South Asian women are active participants in the labour force. Their stereotyping as wives, dependents, and mothers has been blamed by some sociologists on various methodological and conceptual factors such as the sex bias in both immigration policies and the data collection procedures of employment and immigration commissions (e.g, Boyd). However, drawing on the theories of feminists of colour regarding minority women in the West I would suggest that there is a history of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and capitalist exploitation that combine in discursive and material ways to subordinate South Asian women and undermine their labour power. I aim to re-present these women not only as a specific class of workers who provide reproductive/productive labour for the family and cheap labour for the capitalist economy, but who occupy specific social and cultural places allotted to them in Canadian society as a result of the interaction of race, gender, and class.

Some theoretical considerations

I will attempt to provide an understanding of the social class position of South Asian immigrant women in Canada by drawing on Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, and postcolonial feminist accounts of the ways in which Third World women are being produced as a particular category of "cheap" labour in the current phase of global capitalist development. I suggest that immigrant women of colour in advanced capitalist western societies are a *paradigmatic example* that defy solely materialist, patriarchal, or culture-based definitions of the concept of worker. Immigrant women's labour power in the household and

waged economy can be best understood in terms of the interaction between capitalist economy, male dominance (patriarchy), and colonial/racist ideology which cuts across state, economy, and civil life in postcolonial western societies.

First, we need to understand these women's labour force participation, their work within the family, and their gender relations within the context of capital penetration on an international scale and the related process of immigration. In this perspective immigration is seen as a constitutive feature of capitalist development particularly policies and practices whereby certain groups of immigrants are constructed as "dependent," "unwanted," "surplus," or "illegal" thereby devaluing their skills and abilities.

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Second, we must consider the effects of both the capitalist mode of production and the western state on gender relations and families living in subordinated minority ethnic and racial groups in western metropolitan centers. This entails taking into account histories of colonialism and imperialism with different ideological constructions of different groups of racialized women since this permeates immigration policy and shapes how South Asian women in Canada are defined and eventually the terms on which they become workers.

Third, we need to be cognizant of contradictions at the material and discursive levels that are integral to the lived experiences of women of colour and which challenge socially and historically constructed ideas about them. Here, we need to consider how family and kinship ideologies are deployed as well as how immigrant women are incorporated into the economy and society which increases their dependence on individual men or social services in ways that perpetuate their dependency. Such a framework is based on the analysis of Avtar Brah who points out that

> gender relations do not simply articulate with labour markets but rather are part of the very fabric of labour markets as they have developed. That is, gender is a constitutive element in the formation of labour markets. (151)

Her call to foreground the interconnectedness of the "macro" and "micro" is relevant because the constitutive features of immigrant women's lives defy demarcating "public" and "private" as analytically separate domains though these are socially constructed as distinct social spaces divided into work and home. Therefore, in understanding immigrant women's labour as both constitutive of and constituted by economic and social processes we need to examine how it is socially constructed, represented in discourse, constituted by and is constitutive of labour markets and framed within personal narratives and collective histories (Brah).

Theoretically this framework can be located in the attempts by feminists of colour (e.g. Mohanty; Anthias and Yuval-Davis; Brah) to expand the Marxist notion of class by insisting that we must look not only within the economy but also beyond it in order to understand the social location of immigrant women workers in the advanced capitalist system of production. Thus, Anthias and Yuval-Davis, who have looked specifically at the relation between race and class as well as between race and gender note: "It is increasingly seen as inadequate to understand other social divisions like sex or race as epiphenomena of class, as incipient classes or as functional for capital" (92–93).

They point out that although race, gender, and class each have differential ontological spheres, race and gender are involved in the process of class formation while practices and representations around gender and race originate in social relations that include class. The construction of difference and exclusion on the basis of gender and class are seen, in this view, to be intertwined with processes of racialization and in producing racist discourses so that an adequate analysis of race must include its intersection with gender and class. Anthias and Yuval-Davis therefore see race not merely as a derivative of class but as a component of class formation. In addition they

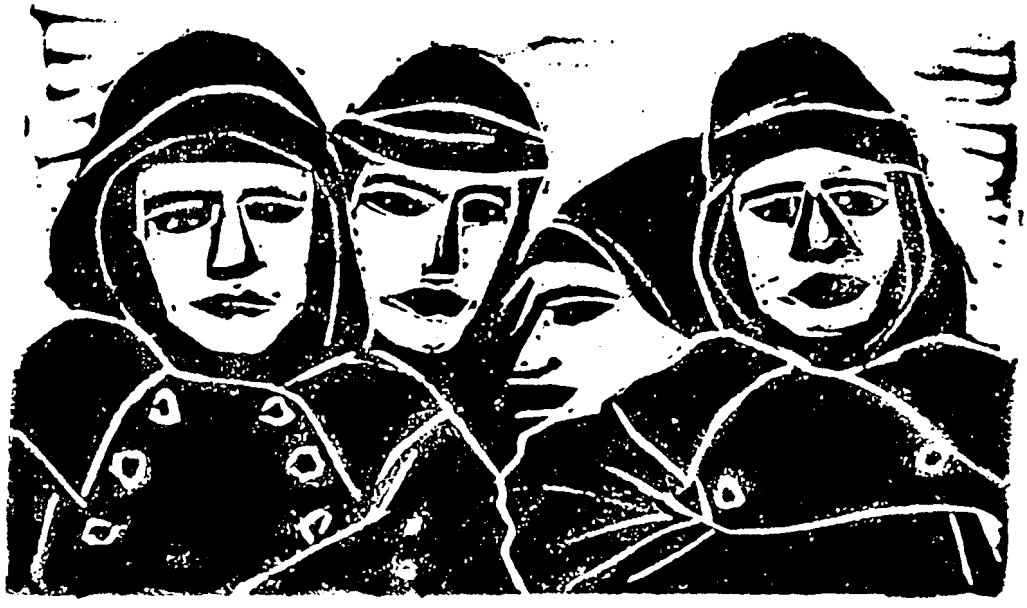
> reject the view that the social structure is composed of "places" that are merely to be filled by individuals in a mechanical way. The individuals who fill the places are essential formative subjects in the reproduction or transformation of the positions they fill, for there are no empty structures at the level of the determinate social formation. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 93)

I believe this to be an important theoretical position that rejects according fundamental place to either race, gender, or class but entails an inquiry into all these processes in order to understand any one of them. More-

over, with regard to immigrant women and their place in the economy, this approach leads us to consider the importance of race and gender in allotting specific spaces to workers so that it becomes necessary to think about constructions of identity, history, and agency in any analysis of immigrant women's labour as a social relation in the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production.

Immigrant women: a specific social category

Immigrant women experience the disadvantages of both immigrant workers and women. Like immigrant men, they face racial, and in many cases, legal subordination which act to confine them to certain types of work and reinforce their exploitation as workers. But this exploitation is shaped in a particular way because they share with all women subordination as a gender (Phizacklea). Due to this interlocking of race, gender, and class there are certain characteristics of immigrant women's work which defies their categorization as either "workers" or "women."



Rubber-stamp print, Rochelle Rubinstein

As the literature shows, most of the jobs done by immigrant women fail to fit into the dominant ideology of work but are rather seen as an extension of women's domestic roles (Mitter; Morokvasic; Phizacklea; Westwood and Bhachu). The conception of women's paid work as a subsidiary of their "primary"—that is—domestic role justifies their consideration as subsidiary workers and segregation into activities that are supposed to be suitable to their gender and thence the justification of low wages. Furthermore, ideologies of racism act to construct very specific positions within the global labour market for women of colour. For instance, Westwood and Bhachu have demonstrated that the postwar recruitment of immigrant women into full-time low-paid manual work in the West reveals racist overtones which prevents certain groups of immigrant women (e.g. women of Afro-Caribbean descent) from being seen as mothers while others (such as South Asian women) are seen primarily in their role as mothers. Thus while some women have consistently been recruited as single women and separated from their domestic lives and their children, others have been subsumed within the family class as dependents (Westwood and Bhachu; Anthias and Yuval-Davis). Moreover, immigrant women in industrialized countries are also subjected to politico-legal control of the state in ways which underlie ideologies of racism and sexism along with class exploitation. In Canada, for example, the immigration system defines people into: independent, family class, and business. In most immigrant families only one person is granted independent status, usually the husband because he is perceived to be the head of the household while the wife's education or work experience is ignored.

Women immigrants, therefore, from the beginning are confronted with the dominant western ideology where the breadwinner is a man and the woman a dependent. "Female migrants have been assigned to this status of dependent whether this dependency was real or not,"(Morokvasic 888). Anthias and Yuval-Davis point out that high rates of labour force participation of immigrant women compared to white women in Canada, the U.S., and Britain reveals the culturally and racially bound nature of notions of female financial dependence on male wage earners and implications of patriarchal gender relations for labour market participation and provisioning (Anthias and Yuval-Davis).

In many cases, even if immigrant women find paid work they are still within the same gender/power hierarchies which instead of leading to greater independence increase their dependency and vulnerability. It is necessary, therefore, to understand such economic relations as being embedded within gendered and culturally specific relations which offer minority women, as daughters, wives, and mothers, particular economic roles (Westwood and Bhachu).

By far the most significant aspect of immigrant women of colour's experience of capitalist development is the role of the state with relation to family and women's work in such a way as to explicate its different impacts on immigrant and native-born white women (Ng 1989; Yuval-Davis). Ethnic minority women, who are constructed as having limited rights to citizenship and who are construed as outside the proper boundaries of the nation due to racialization can be disadvantaged both in the labour

market and in family life. Yuval-Davis points out that issues of citizenship mainly relating to questions of race and immigration concern the civil, political, and social arenas in western societies where ideological, often racist, constructions of boundaries and class and gender divisions grant or deny entry, or accord citizenship rights and social rights differently to some groups than others. Moreover, the ideology of male support, underlined by racist and colonialist assumptions, is usually associated not only with immigrant men and women but also to their countries of origins and cultures in ways as to shape or limit the job supply for immigrant women and limit their access to the labour market (Morokvasic; Phizacklea).

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Finally, patriarchal and sexist attitudes pervade state and employers' attitudes about Third World women and these appear to shape decisions about which women will fit certain categories of work. In the industrialized countries, colonialist and racist ideology is employed in the categorization of particular groups of women in particular ways which eventually shape which women are allotted to particular spaces in the economy.

A review of the historical construction of South Asian women and their labour power in state immigration policy, their lived experiences in the household and workforce after migration and their ways of negotiating or organizing their work in different sites provides a glimpse into some of the interacting effects of colonial and racist ideology, patriarchal domination, and transnational capitalism.

South Asians in Canada: an immigrant worker community

South Asians are not a homogenous group but come from different countries—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—social classes, religions, and linguistic groups with wide variations in customs, diet, and cultural habits and traditions. However, the term South Asian is generally accepted by the community because of the political connotations it has acquired as a result of the efforts of community activists and workers who in the struggle for social, political, and economic rights, use the notion of a collectivity not to denote an inherent commonality but "a common context of struggle."[2]

A defining feature of this political context has been the history of South Asian immigration to Canada which has shown a sex, class, and race bias being shaped differently by capitalists demand for cheap (predominantly male) labour and the ethnocentric attitudes of society towards non-white people (see Chandrasekhar; Agnew; Naidoo; Ralston 1988, 1995; Das Gupta 1986; Ghosh). Das Gupta (1986) notes that the initial Immigration Act in the early twentieth century marks "the intervention of the Canadian state in the capitalist production process by regulating labour supply, by regulating markets and by using its coercive force during strikes" (60). However the history of immigration policy and the South Asian experience can best be understood in terms of state attempts, (mostly in conjunction with capitalist demand for labour but often apparently sacrificing material interest to racist and colonial ideology), to limit immigrant numbers and categories to what is deemed desirable for Canadian business and society and minority attempts to resist these quotas and eligibility criteria either by direct protest or other efforts to "fit" themselves into these categories and regulations. Immigration policy towards South Asians has continued to regulate both the numbers and types of immigrants by fixing quotas according to country of origin, setting sponsorship requirements, and changing eligibility criteria in accordance with the economy's need for manual labourers or technical and professional workers (Das Gupta 1986; Chandrasekhar). Immigration in the experience of most South Asian women has been a process of following a spouse to the West after marriage or a male househead who migrated as a worker—a pattern of waiting until the husband or father had found suitable income, housing, and completed the documentary sponsorship process.

South Asian women were not legally allowed to enter Canada until 1919 although Indian men started coming to Vancouver around 1904. These early immigrants, for the most part, ex-employees of the British colonial army in the Far East and peasant workers from India's famine-plagued regions, were recruits of Canadian steamship companies trying to make up for loss of revenues following the decline in Chinese labour after the imposition of a $500 head tax on Chinese immigrants by the Canadian government (Das Gupta 1986; Chandrasekhar). As the number of Indian immigrants rose—from 45 in 1904–5 to over 2,000 in 1907—so did racist protests at their presence in Canadian society. The Canadian government responded to this public opinion by imposing discriminatory measures to restrict the entry of South Asians: possession of $200 for each immigrant at the time of arrival in Canada and furthermore arrival only by "continuous journey" from the country of their birth or citizenship. When South Asians merchants tried to defy these restrictions by chartering a Japanese vessel, *Komagata Maru,* to make a direct landing from Hong Kong to Vancouver, Canada virtually closed its doors to Indian immigrants with only some wives and children allowed in as dependents of Indian men (Chandrasekhar). It was only in an attempt to ease pressure against British colonial rule in India that the Canadian government agreed in 1919 to relax anti-

Indian immigration restrictions. Even then, few women and children were able to migrate because of formal requirements to be registered as "legitimate wives and children" and the lack of acceptable registration procedures until 1924. The banning of women and children aroused intense anger and organizing among South Asian men who until then lived in bachelor societies, sharing households, cooking, shopping, and caring for the sick and unemployed (Das Gupta 1986). On the other side, the Canadian government resorted to denying immigration to women and children in the 1930s as a punishment for the rise of illegal immigration of South Asian men. The ban on South Asian women ended when India became independent from British rule in 1947.

Despite availability of official data about the professional and technical qualifications and skills of South Asian women and their high labour force participation, the notion of South Asian women's dependency has dominated immigration policy.

South Asian women historically and at present find it almost impossible to enter Canada as independent immigrants and continue to come as wives, daughters, and mothers. Despite availability of official and unofficial data about the professional and technical qualifications and skills of South Asian women and their high labour force participation, the notion of South Asian women's dependency has dominated immigration policy and the community's responses to it. The current "point system," which arbitrarily accords different values to education levels, income, "personal suitability" etc., is believed to be sexist and racist because it sets criteria that are hard to meet by most Third World women, especially those from the working classes (NAC; Das Gupta 1986; Agnew; Ralston 1988, 1995).

South Asian women's work experiences

In the present mode of production in Canadian society, the labour power of South Asian women is organized at three sites which often overlap the wage economy (paid labour), the household (unpaid labour), and in "ethnic enclaves" (as paid or unpaid labour). Although the vast majority of South Asian women historically and at present come to Canada as housewives or family dependents, their participation in the economy is remarkably high compared to women as a whole. In 1981, according to Census Canada, the number of South Asian women in Ontario's labour force was 64.1 per cent compared to 55.2 per cent of all women combined (Das Gupta 1994). Across Canada, compared to the participation rate of women of northern European origin which was 61.6 per cent in the 1986 census, South Asian women's rate of labour force participation was 64.1 per cent (Das Gupta 1994).

Paid work outside the home which many South Asian women experience after migration has had contradictory effects on their lives in terms of experiences in the home, relationships with family members, and household activities. Most women started working for economic reasons—either because the family income was insufficient for subsistence or to improve the economic status of the family, although a small number of upper middle-class housewives and elderly working-class women worked to escape the loneliness and isolation of their environment. For middle-class South Asian women work outside the home, as Ralston points out, brought both economic benefits in the form of financial independence, social advantages in the form of more control over their own lives, and psychological benefits in terms of positive self-identity and esteem. While some studies suggest that wage work had accorded a measure of independence to women or provided material advantages in terms of purchasing power and access to family resources (Ralston 1988; SAWG; Ghosh), on the whole wage work outside the home was not a liberating experience for South Asian women.

In fact paid work in the experience of most South Asian women, particularly working-class women, has meant backbreaking work in the worst and lowest paid jobs in factories and on farms in Canada, often in conditions that are harmful to their health and safety and with no prospects for upward mobility (Das Gupta 1994; Khosla). Many women of all ages are confined to low-paid, exploitative, and dangerous work with no adequate living or child care facilities, mainly because of lack of English language abiltity, no access to education or training facilities, and isolation from the society and organized work sector. Khosla found women working for as little as $3.50 per hour in sewing or paper bag factories and even less while engaging in farm work such as strawberry, cabbage, or broccoli picking.

Even those women who come with professional or technical qualifications face exclusionary criteria for certification and experience due to which they are forced to work in factories or in clerical positions and feel undervalued and underemployed (Ghosh; Ralston 1988). It appears that although South Asian women have some of the highest education levels among immigrant women, they also receive the lowest income among all university-educated immigrant women. Women in professional qualifications are of course in small numbers while the majority are in manual and service occupations. According to Das Gupta (1994), in 1986 21.7 per cent of South Asian women were in managerial and professional jobs, 39.1 per cent in clerical work, and 10.6 per cent in the production, fabricating, assembling, and construction sector. One concern that predominated all studies that I reviewed was the impact of institutional and systemic racism and discrimination faced by South Asian women of all classes during their work outside the home. "It is difficult to express my feelings but we are not treated as equals,"

Ghosh quotes a respondent in her study saying.

Therefore, although degrading images of South Asian women pervade the media, social policy, and western civil society at large (Trivedi; Amos and Parmar), it is in the paid work force that the experience of "being different" is most marked (Ralston 1988). Liddle and Joshi (qtd. in Ralston 1988) argue that this notion of South Asian women's inferiority to western women is to be understood in the context of cultural imperialism and the unequal power relations between the First and the Third worlds.

South Asian women's experience of work in the labour force under these conditions has not, however, been without its benefits. Their experiences have provided a major impetus to South Asian women in terms of political organizing for their rights (Agnew; Das Gupta 1994). Women have led community efforts to create alternative organizations to meet their own needs when mainstream institutions were found inadequate—in the areas of social service delivery, language and labour market training, advocacy for pay equity, access to government funding, racism in the school system, daycare provision and shelters, to name a few. Das Gupta (1994) points to at least three instances in the history of working-class struggles in Ontario when South Asian women engaged in organized protests for their rights in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Das Gupta the impetus for such actions came out of a sense of human rights and equity rather than in search of gender equality or women's rights, and that the support of male relatives and community members is considered important in South Asian women's political organizing.

Some skills they possessed were recognized in their previous environment as specialized but were difficult to market to the Canadian economy and too expensive to be in demand in the family and neighbourhood networks.

In the household, despite their high labour force participation, South Asian women continue to bear primary responsibility for housework and child care. Studies on the experiences of South Asian women in housework show that migration and wage work outside the household have affected their lives differently often in articulation with the types of household in which the women live after migration. One of the most recurring difficulties expressed by South Asian immigrant women in the household is one of loneliness and isolation (SAWG; Ralston 1988, 1995). Some scholars, such as Ralston have resorted to culturalist explanations of a South Asian "gender ideology" and notions of "women's subservience" due to which these women develop an intensified sense of responsibility for housework and family when deprived of the support of other females in an extended family households. However, although many women do feel the loss of social support provided by joint families, other evidence suggests that their isolation is intensified by a combination of social exclusion and the pattern of settlement followed by many South Asian families which prevents close relationships with women outside their own racial group, especially in the case of urban centers.

Wives or workers? a case study in Toronto

In my own experience, working with a group of low-income South Asian Muslim women in Toronto revealed a complex of social, economic, and emotional problems arising from a lack of little English language skills, formal education or professional training, isolation, racial harassment, sexual assault, and economic marginalization. One informal focus group that I met with in an English-as-a Second-Language class in east Toronto in the winter of 1996–97 was comprised of about 18 South Asian Muslim women ranging in age from 21 to 52 years. One had been in Canada three months while the longest resident had been here for the past 16 years. Most of the women came as refugees or dependants and wives of refugees who had acquired immigrant status. Although they described themselves as housewives, most of the women had experience of paid work, in their countries or after coming to Canada. Two women had worked in factories packaging clothes, socks etc., three had catering jobs, another three women worked as tailors from their homes, and one was trained as a female health promoter though she had not been able to re-certify in Canada. Others had experience in baby-sitting, teaching Urdu or the Quran to small children in the neighbourhood in their home countries. All but two of the women said they were desperate to get work and would be willing to travel long distances if they could do so with another woman or in a group. Most of the women said they needed to generate some "extra" income because their husbands were unable to provide adequately for the family's needs out of their low earnings from jobs mostly in the ethnic meat, food, or garment industries.

As the women described their skills and their previous experience of paid work, it was easy to trace the disintegrating impact of migration, cultural imperialism, and insertion into a more advanced capitalist mode of production than in their home countries. Some of the skills they possessed would be recognized in their previous cultural and economic environment as specialized work but were likely to be difficult to market to the larger Canadian economy and too expensive to be in demand within the family and neighbourhood networks to which their access was limited.

For example, one woman was an expert in *karchobi,* an intricate type of hand embroidery requiring the use of golden and silver threads and sequins, which was in great demand by garment traders in India. The woman said she had no idea how to get in touch with merchants or

designers in Toronto who would be interested in this kind of work.

Another participant said she had been able to achieve some success in her effort to get catering jobs by supplying South Asian snacks such as *samosa*. She started this business when friends or business acquaintances of her husband complimented her on her cooking. She offered to cook for them and managed to get some orders but they were mostly small-scale and sporadic since her contact was limited to friends and relatives.

It seems therefore that many of these women generally perceived as dependants of their husbands or fathers or on social assistance, are, in fact, workers forced out of the paid economy due to migration, severed from the traditional networks that supplied them with work, and in discord with the requirements of a eurocentric culture. Due to their immigration status as "family class" they did not enter Canadian economic system as workers but as "wives," or "daughters," or "sisters" who could not be directly incorporated into waged work. They were made dependent on individual men, husbands, relatives, or at best on community agencies as social service "cases" who had to be settled or helped to be adapted into the society rather than workers whose skills needed to be developed, modified, or marketed in the economy.

Conclusion

As we have seen, immigrant women are a particular category of worker that is important for capital not solely as surplus labour or a reserve army that can bring down wages of the organized workforce but because their race and gender constitute them ideologically and politically as the lowest paid and most exploited worker. The above discussion has tried to make visible the situation of immigrant South Asian women in Canada as such a group of workers: on the one hand, colonial and racist discourses which pervade both state and civil society continue to construct South Asian women socially and economically as passive dependants of men; on the other hand, the capitalist economy uses the same discourses to exploit them as workers.

I have tried to explicate how these structures and discourses articulate with each other in such ways as to subordinate South Asian women and undermine their labour power despite overwhelming evidence of their high labour force participation. The result is that South Asian women are commonly perceived as "unproductive housewives" which tends to disguise the fact that most of them are in actuality unpaid, unemployed, low-paid, or underemployed workers. However, it is obvious that in the face of these exclusionary and undermining forces, South Asian women have been able to organize and struggle for their rights both in the "public" and "private" spheres of their lives and to ensure that the effect of capital penetration on their family and work lives is not always to their disadvantage.

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[1]According to Das Gupta (1996) new immigrants, non-English speaking women and women of colour accounted for 76.7 per cent of total garment industry workers in Canada.

[2]I have borrowed this concept from Mohanty (1991) in the same sense in which she describes the collective struggle of women of colour.

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