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# SWAG

# SPECIAL EDITION

Status of Women Action Group  
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This special edition has been prepared to inform SWAG members of the summer project being carried out with the help of a Secretary of State grant. The project title is "Reaching Out"

### What is the project?

The aim of the project is to reach immigrant women of various ethnic backgrounds - in their homes at their place of work through friends and organizations. Topics

That we talk about include:  
What their first immigration was like  
How do they cope with very ordinary things like finding a doctor with whom they can communicate and how they deal with more abstract problems like loneliness isolation and loss of culture.

We've learned a great deal from a variety of sources :

1. The women and their organizations
2. Government agencies
3. Volunteer Organizations

and

Two especially valuable reports: one from the National YWCA and the other from the Status of Women (Vancouver)

The following facts emerge over and over again:

- A) Immigrant women are often an exploited and oppressed group
- B) Very little is known about immigrant women by women actively participating in the Women's Movement
- C) The needs of immigrant women are inadequately met by government agencies.

# METHODS

Our methods of contact have been:

1. Through schools
2. Through a neighbourhood centre.
3. Via individuals.
4. Through ethnic organizations affiliated with the intercultural Association, using bilingual women as go-betweens.

The first method met with limited success and the second less so, yet both served as a pilot project and showed us the necessity of working on a more personal basis.

The third and fourth methods have proved extremely successful. Thus far, we have had eleven meetings with individual ethnic women and four meetings with much larger groups.

# WHAT NEXT?

We hope to meet with East Indian, Ukrainian, Croatian, Swedish, Greek, Irish, Portugese, Phillipino and Norwegian groups in the next few weeks.

We are also planning a visit to Vancouver to tap the resources and experiences of women working on outreach projects such as:

## Mary Barretto

..of the Multicultural Women's Group. They planned and organized a conference on "Intercultural Understanding" specifically for women. They now have a steering committee of twenty women from various minority groups - some of whom we hope to meet.

## Sharon Yandle

.. of the Hospital Employees Union. Sharon has spent many months attempting to organize women in the private hospital sector in Vancouver.

## Vancouver YWCA

.. which did a project on immigrant women in the work force. This organization was referred to us by Kathleen Ruff of the Human Rights Branch.

We also plan to continue our in-depth research programme. This contributes greatly to our knowledge of and sensitivity to the needs and feelings of women from different cultural backgrounds.

HOPEFULLY.....

The project will lead to the establishment of an on-going support group for immigrant women, which would have several aims:

1. To put immigrant women in touch with other women who have been through similar experiences and whose caring will ease their loneliness and isolation.
2. To direct women to services available to them in the community which they might not be aware of. eg. Childcare subsidies, language classes which also provide childcare etc.
3. To inform them of their rights as employees and of the current rates of pay, hours of work, etc.

# WOMEN AT WORK

As stated before many immigrant women work in non-union or weakly unionized occupations. For example the private hospital sector in Victoria is partially organized by the Service Employees Union, an international union with one of the highest female memberships in Canada - (membership in Victoria is approximately 500). Women members of this union are paid minimum wage or just above. Graduate nurses for example are paid \$3.75 an hour.

The S.E.U. is proud of the fact that the women in its union have not struck for over 30 years and that it intends to stick to Federal wage guidelines of 10%

Yet the women in the union are grossly underpaid and heavily exploited

The other two unions C.U.P.E and the Hospital Employees Union seem unwilling to organize small and weak units because it is not a paying proposition. The union has to pay more out in organizers' salaries than it gets back in union dues. Hence these sections remain non-union.

"The proportion of working immigrant wives exceeds that of Canadian wives in general."

"For 80% of these working wives the husband's income was under \$10,000 three years after arrival."

-from "Three Years In Canada" - The Green Paper on Immigration p 8

Many immigrants work initially in low-paying poorly organized or non-unionized occupations. In Victoria that means motels hotel and restaurant work domestic work in private homes and in the private hospital sector - as dishwashers chamberpersons cooks and nurses aids. They often work for minimum wage or below and are often unaware that they are entitled to over-time pay proper lunch hours and decent washroom facilities.

We were told of a case where a woman at a local hospital some years ago approached a union organizer because the women at her hospital wanted to unionize. For several months two unions fought over who should organize them. Eventually neither did. But the union organizer resigned and attempted to organize them unaided.

It is quite clear that efforts should be made to unionize women in these sectors. Women organizers should be sought by concerned trade unions. Basic information should be conveyed to these women and once solidarity has been achieved the fight should be on for higher wages and better working conditions.

## FINDING A JOB

is difficult at the best of times but it is complicated if your knowledge of English is poor or if you have no marketable skill. Visa or citizenship requirements which are difficult to meet add to possible job discrimination. Add to this the acceptability of many conventional qualifications to the Canadian authorities and the situation becomes a very difficult one.

# MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

In the process of becoming Canadian, the children of immigrant women may reject their mother's language, culture, country or even the mother herself.

The school system with its emphasis on assimilation may accentuate the gulf between mother and child.

Many women feel, in fact, that the schools actively encourage Canadianization at the expense of the old culture and language.

Mothers are frequently very intimidated about approaching their children's school, so this duty often falls to the father. In consequence, the feedback the schools get has a male bias, and does not represent accurately the mother's point of view.

Many women would like to see their native language taught as a subject in school, and have the children be granted academic credit for this work. Other women have suggested that correspondence courses be made available to meet this need.

There are numbers of immigrant women who are not getting adequate pre and post-natal care and whose children are not receiving the recommended immunization shots in the pre-school years.

## AVAILABLE INFORMATION

### Existing

There are only three translated information leaflets in Victoria (to our knowledge)

"What to Do Now", published by Manpower and immigration. It briefly covers S.I.N., U.I.C., schools, hospital, credit facilities, driving, money & assisted passage.

"Your Rights as an Employee in the Search For Work" published by the Department of Labour (Provincial). It is out of date on minimum wage.

"Your Rights as an Employee in B. C." by the B.C. Federation of Labour.

### Proposed

"Your Rights" published by the Dept. of Labour, Human Rights Branch. Points on the Human Rights Code. How to complain, action taken & people to help.

"George Jay School" published by the school, given to us by Bryan Hec, vice-principal. The school, its history, school hours, report cards, lunch hours, special programmes such as counselling. (Still in the process of being translated.)

# BEING IMMIGRANT AND FEMALE - THE EMOTIONAL BURDENS

"She assumes that her way of life is inferior to that of Canadian society and she has too little knowledge of the language to test the correctness of her assumptions. As her children begin to integrate into their school activities she experiences a sense of loss, here too. A sense of "being left behind" develops in being no longer relevant in her accustomed values and position of centrality in the family."

"These barriers to her personal growth put her physically and emotionally in a situation where she cannot be reached by ideas about women's rights. Indeed they are frightening to her. The rate of nervous breakdowns of immigrant women is high in Canada and yet relatively undetected because these women are isolated. The cases which do come to public attention can hardly be dealt with adequately since the norms of mental and emotional stability in Canadian society rest on different assumptions. If her ability to speak English (or French) is poor her prospects of being adequately treated are slim."

— YWCA National Report on Immigrant Women  
1974

Being immigrant and female involves a double discrimination. Yet little attention has been given to the special difficulties of this group in either the academic or the popular press.

Some of the many problems that immigrant women face are:

1. Loneliness
2. Language difficulties
3. Culture shock
4. Fear
5. Discrimination

There are many anecdotes that one could tell to illustrate these problem areas. More important however is that steps be taken to ease their transition

For Example:

- personal support counselling
- orientation and social adjustment counselling
- special programs for the non-working dependents of male immigrants
- education of Canadians in attitudes of racial tolerance and acceptance.
- on-going support groups for immigrant women in which fears and concerns can be shared in an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance.

# DEALING WITH BUREAUCRACIES

For many immigrant women particularly those who come from rural backgrounds dealing with big government and big business can be a humiliating or frightening experience and one in which the immigrant woman usually "loses".

Many immigrant women must keep their children out of school to act as interpreters when they have to visit government agencies, medical clinics, a dentist etc.

Real hardships may result from language difficulties for example, the woman who cannot attend a U.I.C. interview because she cannot bring her interpreter at the appointment time named. Because of this she may be denied further benefits.

Again the immigrant woman who is discriminated against in the labour force may either lack the knowledge of the Human Rights Branch or may simply be too fearful of reprisals to actually lay a complaint.

\*A system of citizen advocacy specifically for immigrant women and run by women from the different ethnic communities must be set.

\*Education both in Human Rights Legislation and in available public services must be offered to immigrant women.

\*Sympathetic and concerned female public servants must be recruited and trained to occupy positions involving dealings with immigrant women

# LANGUAGE TRAINING

Of all the problems that immigrant women face the main one is language. The husbands usually have opportunity to learn some English through the people they meet on the job, and children pick it up quickly in order to fit in with their school mates, but the mother, in many cases may be either isolated at home or working in a job that requires little or no use of English.

The Green Paper on Immigration and Population states that "the language spoken

at home is a major factor in preserving an immigrant's cultural identity or adopting a new one". It also says that "a substantial majority of the immigrants using a language other than French or English in the home were still the less educated" but that "an improvement in the knowledge of English or French particularly by women may indicate a displacement of another language in use in the home and to that extent a change in the culture with which the immigrant identifies."

## LANGUAGE TRAINING CONT.

However, if the working use of English could be obtained in a warm, sharing atmosphere where the student feels welcome and the teacher is interested in helping the student adapt to a new life the immigrant may be able to include the aspects of new Canadian culture in their identity.

In our research we have discovered two organizations which offer classes in this atmosphere. One is Camosun College which runs a summer program of approximately thirty sessions and a winter program which lasts from thirty to forty sessions. Before being placed in a class the prospective student is interviewed by the head of the department (a woman). This

interview determines the level of instruction which would be the most comprehensible to the student. Time scheduling is flexible as classes are held mornings, afternoons and evenings.

The YM-YWCA also has an excellent program. They offer childcare while the classes are going on and there is a high level of personal involvement in the classes. There is no clear-cut pupil-teacher relationship, but rather more of a sharing of information where the teacher learns from the student as well as the student from the teacher. The classes are small and in a location that is easy to reach using public transit.

WHERE DO WE  
GO FROM HERE?

1. Alert the Womens' Movement to the situation of immigrant women.
2. Form on-going support groups which will draw heavily on the resources of less recently arrived immigrant women.  
These are women who are now established in Canada and who are bi-lingual in both English and their mother tongue.
3. Agitate government agencies (at all levels) to fulfill their responsibilities to immigrant women.

