

REFLECTIONS:

As seen from the eyes of the Presidents.

Ten years ago on August 27, 1983, the Ontario Immigrant and Visible Minority Women's Organization was formed in response to the identified need to develop a voice to speak for and on the behalf of immigrant and visible minority women of Ontario.

For ten years the OIWN now known as the Ontario Immigrant and Visible Minority Women's Organization (OIVMWO) has worked to fulfil its goal to enhance the status of immigrant and visible minority women of Ontario by improving their social, economic, cultural and educational opportunities.

In celebration of its 10th Anniversary, the past and current Presidents reflect on the highlights during their tenure of office.

1. **Breaking Ground**
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(1984 - 1986)
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(1986 - 1987)
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(1987 - 1993)

BREAKING GROUND: SALOME LUCAS

1984-1986



It is difficult to separate the events that occurred during the time I was president of OIWO, as it was known at that time, from other political developments. OIWMWO played a significant role in the development of the Immigrant and Women's of colour movement as we know it today. To understand the impact that the establishment of OIWMWO had on the development of our movement, it is necessary to put it into a historical context. Following is a piece of our movement's history as I remember it.

OIWO was the first provincial organization of immigrant and visible minority women in Canada. There were numerous ethnospecific and Immigrant and women's of colour groups at the time, most of them funded by the government and most of them offering services to Immigrant women. The establishment of OIWMWO was an attempt to bring all these organizations together and to develop these forces into an independent political movement. The establishment of the organization was based on the findings of a feasibility study which defined the need for such an organization.

The founding meeting of the organization was held in the summer of 1983. I had started working with WWIW a couple of months ago that same year, and I attended that meeting. The following three years I was heavily involved in OIWMWO. Those first years were spent on developing the goals and the structure of the organization. At the time I was president of the organization, I remember

that there were little resources available and the work of OIWO was subsidized mainly by WWIW. The lack of resources, however, was not the biggest threat to the organization. There were other political interests and forces that were undermining our efforts.

In 1981, the first National conference of immigrant women was held. A follow up committee was appointed by the government to do follow up on the conference's recommendations. This committee had extended its mandate and was self appointed representative of immigrant women. It is needless to say that government reps were influencing the committee's work. Immigrant and women of colour in Ontario challenged this committee's mandate, and although Ontario reps would attend the national committee's meetings, they were pushing for the establishment of provincial organizations across the country which would elect representatives and form a national body.

In 1985, two years after the establishment of OIWMWO, a meeting between Immigrant and women of colour and different ministers was held in Ottawa. At that meeting, another national committee was appointed, the National Action Committee of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women. The conflict between Ontario members of OIWMWO and these National committees continued until the 2nd National Conference in Winnipeg in 1986. The conference was organized by the National Follow up Committee. Half way through the process, the NAC for immigrant and visible minority women got involved in the planning of the conference.

The experience of the Winnipeg Conference remains unforgettable. After we arrived at the conference, we found out that Women of Colour were not included in the planning of the conference. Women of Colour were not prepared to let the organizers get away with it. They rightfully saw their exclusion from the planning of the conference as an exclusion of the issue of racism from the conference's agenda. This issue dominated the first two days of conference.

Instead of taking responsibility for what was going on, some members of the organizing committees were telling us that we were not ready for a national organization. They were hoping that if a national organization was not formed, their role as representatives of immigrant and women of colour would continue.

Also, the Quebec delegates were divided. There were two delegations at the conference, one Anglophone and one Francophone, each claiming to be the legitimate elected delegation. According to the Francophone delegates, prior to the conference, a meeting took place in Quebec among the Anglophone immigrant and women of colour to elect the delegates. Francophone women were not informed about that meeting.

In Ontario, immigrant and women's of colour we had been organizing, sharing information and working together around issues for a long time. OIWO was the only provincial organization at that time and organized the Ontario delegation (30.) We had developed our own criteria to select the delegates. Many of these delegates were not members of OIVMWO. The Ontario delegation included representatives from immigrant and women of colour organizations, and it included ethnic representation as well as representation from all the areas of the work that the local organizations were involved in.

The outcome of the Winnipeg Conference was the establishment of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada.

Following the national conference, OIWO changed its name to OIVMWO to reflect the development at the National level. However, a change of name did not provide magic solutions to the issues that were raised at the National conference. Many of these issues pushed us to deepen our analysis and to develop our politics as a movement. It was, and still is, a painful learning.

We learned that the immigrant and women's of colour movement is not a homogeneous group and that we cannot be lumped together under one label for the convenience of representation. We learned to identify ourselves based on our experiences. We learned to respect our differences and our different experiences and use them to strengthen our movement and support each other. We also learned that each group develops strategies which meet the needs of the people involved in each group and we learned to respect and validate each others work.

Much of what we learned has been transferred into mainstream organizations and movements and has influenced the development of these movements.



EXPANDING THE NETWORK: LUCYA SPENCER 1987-1993

The 1987 Annual General Meeting marked a significant change in the development of the Ontario Immigrant and Visible Minority Women's Organization (OIVMWO), then known as the Ontario Immigrant Women's Network (OIWN). The delegates after much discussions and serious thought, decided to embrace a new name as this better reflected the racial representation of the membership.. The creation of a formal structure and the acceptance of a Constitution brought some stability and permanence to the organization.

The dedication and the commitment of a sixteen member Board of Directors, resulted in several achievements of the organization over the years. The following are some of the notable highlights during my tenure of office from 1987 - 1993.

* In 1988, the OIVMWO secured its own office in downtown Toronto. A small space was found on Bloor Street West, and a part-time Office Co-ordinator was hired to perform the day to day functions of the organization. Since then, the office has relocated three times, and recently returned to Bloor Street West in a bigger and better space.

BUILDING THE NETWORK: MONICA RIUTORT 1986-1987

Monica Riutort
President
Ontario Organization of Immigrant
and Visible Minority Women



June 1986 - June 1987

When I was reading the president's report of June 1987 Annual General Meeting, memories of that intense year came to my mind.

The executive committee that took over the organization in 1986, had the task of moving the organization from an incipient network to a full-blown group in the midst of the Second National Conference on Immigrant and Visible Minority Women.

Many pages will tell you the amount of work we produced that year. The following is a summary of the 1986/87's main accomplishments:

- A membership of two hundred member agencies was developed;
- A financial base was established that allowed to hire the first part-time coordinator, Raquel Rita and produce a surplus that helped to carry the organization during the year 1987/1988;
- A constitution was developed;
- A national organization was created with our active participation. We were able to secure funding to send 30 delegates to the Second Conference of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women that took place in Winnipeg on November 6 - 8, 1986. Two provincial delegates were elected to the National body.
- The initial stages of program planning were completed. This was the first year that election took place in every region and strategic plans were presented to the executives;

I believe that we accomplished the work that we had set up ourselves that year.

I had the opportunity to work with an enthusiastic and committed group of individuals in the Steering Committee:

Anna Malika, North West Region
Mila Chavez-Wong, North East Region
Ari Ariaratnan and Padmini Raju, South West Regional
Daniela Szado, Toronto

The network's Executive was formed by Daniela Szado, Secretary; Ari Ariaratnan, Treasurer; Salome Lucas, Past President; Carmencita Hernandez and Dorothy Ellis, National Representatives.

It was a hard-working year, but our organization was consolidated. I have always considered it a privilege to have the opportunity to serve the organization as president, and work with such a powerful team of immigrant and visible minority women.

* During 1987 - 1993, there has been a gradual increase in the funding base of the organization. Without the support of the many funders over the years, (most of which continue to provide financial assistance) it would have been impossible for the organization to carry out its work, and in retrospect I'd like to acknowledge the following

- Department of Multiculturalism
- Department of Secretary of State - Women's Program (the first funder in 1983)
- Department of Health & Welfare (as it was known then)
- Employment and Immigration Canada - ISAP
- Ministry of Skills
- Ontario Women's Directorate
- Canadian Women's Foundation

* In 1988, the organization became an incorporated body thus contributing to its permanence as a voice for immigrant and visible minority women in Ontario.

* In its efforts to define clear directions for the organization, the Board of Directors in 1988/89 developed a Five Year Plan of Action, which was later approved at the 1989 Annual General Meeting. Although we have experienced some constraints in our ability to accomplish the functions as outlined in the plan, we are pleased with the achievements to date, and is hopeful that the remaining functions will be completed in the next year.

* Board Development, Membership Outreach and Communications. Regional and Leadership Development, were the focus of the organization's work from 1990 - 1992.

The major highlights of this period were, the increased visibility of the organization not only within the regions, but at various levels of government, growth in the membership and the production of a viable communication tool - the Newsletter.

* The issues of Violence Against Women, the Health Needs of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women and Employment Equity were of major concern to the membership, and following a series of workshops and focus groups on the topics, two major conferences were held. Violence in 1991 and Health in 1993.

The results of the Violence conference led to the development of an organizational Strategic Plan of Action on Violence Against Women. Several recommendations emanated from the Health Conference, and it is hoped that these will be implemented in 1994.

The information gathered during the Employment Equity Workshops and Focus Groups are compiled in a booklet, and is available for distribution.

* The advocacy role of the organization has proven very effective in helping to bring about change towards the creation of a just and egalitarian society. Some issues addressed were: Social Assistance Review, Pay Equity, Employment Equity, Language Training, Federal Domestic Movement Program, Police and Race Relations, Child Support, the Human Rights Code and the Immigration Act.

Conclusion :

Looking back over the last six years , I am truly proud of the achievements made during my tenure of office as President of OIVMWO. However, I give credit to the member groups, staff and Board for their hard work, dedication and commitment to enhancing the status of immigrant and visible minority women of Ontario. I am fully convinced that the struggle is not over , and together as women we can make a difference . A difference which does not exclude a woman because of her colour or ethnicity .

Let us rise to the challenge!

Lives of great (men) women
All remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And departing leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

(unknown)