

Women Working with Immigrant Women (WWIW) March, 1983 (1)

## INTERNACIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

In order to analyze our role on this International Women's Day, we have to look back at our participation in the past two years. We must also take a look at what our goals and expectatives were for this International Women's Day.

### First, our role in the past years.

1981- We went into the coalition with a profound ignorance of what it was. We had a general feeling of what the canadian women's movement was and we identified the canadian women's movement with radical feminism.

As a coordinator of WWIW, I attended the first meeting of the coalition and all the organizing meetings that came afterwards. I was amazed to see that radical feminists, progressive women and socialist feminists would work together to organize the same International Women's Day. Coming from a Third World Country I couldn't understand how women with different class perspectives, with different ideas about what the women's movement was or it should be, could work together. What was the purpose of getting together once per year to organize a demonstration if these same women would be on different sides of the fence during the whole year? - In spite of these I thought that there was a place to put forward Third World Women's Struggles even when it was a limited possibility. These issues could be brought up provided that we would not question the privileges and positions that certain feminists have in society. I felt that radical feminists would let us "pass" certain positions and suggestions not because they would support us, but because they wanted immigrant women there, and we were not at that point damaging their own positions. That is also the reason why we were sort of ghettoized in our solidarity workshops.

Socialist feminists on the other hand were weak in terms of putting forward a class prospective, and the race issue, though they would support us. It was, as I understood it, that they put themselves as observers and supporters of these issues but they would not "stick out their necks" for these positions. That first year, WWIW organized a workshop on Third World Women's Struggles with a pannel of women from South America, Africa and Central America. The purpose of the pannel was to open a discussion between immigrant and canadian women around the woman question. Though the workshop created a lot of interest, the discussion was poor. The women from the pannel and us, with the exception of African women, did not handle the questions well and it became obvious to us that we needed to discuss and develop ourselves in terms of the woman question. In terms of the canadian women, I felt that with the exception of a few socialist feminists, women were still very closed minded in terms of what the women's movement was, what the issues were,

and they could not accept or understand that women's struggles would take different shapes or forms according to the specific historical or political reality that they are living.

In 1981 I think that I was the only "visible" immigrant woman working there.

1982- A few of immigrant women came to the coalition meetings. There were women working in solidarity groups that worked in our workshop the previous year or were present at the said workshop. Eventough when some of these women spoke in the coalition, we did not have a strategy or planned action to work in the coalition. Eventough when we had a clearer picture of what the coalition was and how did the politics work, we were still very weak to push for significant issues in the way we wanted to. We worked together with some socialists femenists, but we were very much lacking direction and consistency. Where was this movement going? We were still very proud of organizing "the biggest demonstration in town", but what for? what happened to all this energy after the demonstration? Women would show their "strenght and Commitment" their "anger" once per year. Once per year we would be "united", but as soon as we came home after the demonstration, we would forget about our sisterhood, about immigrant, native and oppressed women in society. One important step was taken that year though; we started to work in conjunction with IWDC around certain issues : Domitila's tour to Toronto, the event on Central America, educationals on the reality of Immigrant women in Canada (labour Force, Farmworker's workshop, immigrant women at home, immigrant women and the educational system, etc.) The other gain was that the organization was being exposed to other groups and many links were made through International Women's Day. We were invited to speak to universities, women's groups ( inside and outside Toronto), Church groups, etc. It was mostly middle class canadian women, but it was work that needed to be done and it has helped us to better achieve one of our goals, which is "to sensitize canadian women around the issues concerning immigrant women."

We had two workshops on that year, one on the reality of women in the labour force in Canada and the other on the struggles of women in our countries of origin (Africa, Philipines , Ireland, Central and South America ). The pannels were very good, the workshops were the most attended, the speeches were excellent but we needed more time for discussion. This time some people from the organization became involved in the organizing of the worksop and the actual implementation of it.

1983 was with no doubt the best year. There were 8 to 12 immigrant women involved in the actual organizing of the events. Women from the Peace movement were also very active, and then, the socialist feminists and us, immigrant women <sup>became</sup> were more and more active during the whole process of organizing for the event and together we were putting forward our positions, incorporating the class and racial issue into the women's movement, opening discussions and politicizing the coalition meetings so that we <sup>could</sup> could openly discuss and present positions.

Immigrant women from Philippines met with Gladys and me before the first meeting that we attended. We discussed our views on the Canadian women's movement, I talked about my experience in the coalition during the past two years and presented them with the sort of picture that I described before. I also met with other Chilean women, Salvadorians, African and Palestinian women. Our views on the Canadian women's were more or less the same.

We decided that we would try the following strategy:

- we were not going to be talked. We were going to brake the isolation of past years. We knew that different workshops were being planned on different days, one on Women in the Labour Force, one on Abortion and one on the Struggles of Women around the world. We also knew that WWIW was going to be asked to organize the third workshop and that we were not going to be expected to participate actively in the other ones. We decided, (the WWIW women) to brake the ghettoization of immigrant women into solidarity workshops and fight to have our speakers into the other workshops as well. We asked the other immigrant women to support us.

- We decided to try to open an ongoing discussion at the coalition on the issues of race, class and immigrant women in the Canadian reality and in the Canadian women's movement. We wanted to have political discussions at the coalition meetings rather than just preparing for a "once per year" event.

- We wanted concrete links to be created among us after the event was over.

- We wanted to have a real presence at the rally, either through a speaker or through <sup>some</sup> other way, but this presence would have to be a reality, not a talked gesture.

With these views in mind we went to the coalition and since the first meeting we started to work according to our plan. We had been in fact ghettoized into the solidarity workshop and we <sup>managed</sup> managed to change that. We took part in the organization and work for each one of the events, we organized in conjunction with other people the solidarity event, we had speakers on each one of the workshops (Ana Bodnar did an excellent work on the abortion meeting, Pravda Koshla an East Indian woman who have been involved in recent organizing drives was contacted and spoke for immigrant women and we coordinated the third workshop) There were good discussions on each one of the meetings. We also had a repre-

representative on each one of the committees and in the coordinating committee.

The balance for this year's participation was made by immigrant women who participated in the event and by the sub group composed of canadian socialist feminists, women from the Peace movement, WWIW ( Gladys, Carolyn, Edith and me). The results of this evaluation are as follows:

- we achieved most of what we wanted and more
- we developed important and permanent links within our subgroups and socialist feminists, women from the peace movement, women from solidarity groups, immigrant women and WWIW people <sup>are</sup> planning future action together around women's issues.
- we were able to brake trough the pattern of immigrant women in solidarity work only, and were able to make people understands through the process of working in the coalition that immigrant women are an active and vital part of the canadian women's movement.
- we were very consistent in putting forward our prospective and eventough when we didn't have too much time to meet or discuss between meetings we were all working in the same direction
- immigrant women were not only visible but vocal and stong and it was a tremendous difference from previous years when there was one or two talken immigrants raising their demands.
- there was a strenghtening of socialist feminist prospective within the coalition ★ (1)

- we did not have a speaker "per se" at the rally, but we made our views known at the rally through the position of master of ceremony. Also, Gladys, Carolyn and me were proposed to be the main speakers at the rally and the nominations didn't come from us.
- the workshop coordinated by the WWIW people was according to the majority, the most exciting and succesful one, tough it was "controvertial" to some people
- the evaluation meetings after the events themsels have been a continuation of the discussions initiated during the process of organizing, and they have been (as canadian women say) "an eye opener. We contributed very much to that.

#### Weaknesses:

- we needed more coordination among ourselves as a sub group
- the coalition work is to spontaneous, lacks of direction
- we need more contact among each other, to work together on specific projects all year long, not only for IWD
- we need a more solid analysis and understanding of the women's movement, both here and in our countries ¶
- we still need to reach out much more into our own community in terms of womens issues, this is an ongoing process, we need concret work and through the

the concrete work in our agencies and outside of it we can educate ourselves and our communities around women's issues. (5)

- for WWiW people we feel that more people should be involved, as women we need this education

- there were no blacks, no natives, and the class composition of the coalition, including immigrant women (with a few exceptions) is still very middle class.

It is good that we are there, but it speaks to the composition of the coalition and work must be done to incorporate other sectors or to work with other women around the issues that concern them or both.

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\* (1) socialist feminist positions means here women who incorporate the class and race analysis to our perspective on women's issues.