

Today, I have been asked to speak on behalf of immigrant women. To attempt to speak on behalf of immigrant women in general, is an almost impossible task. It would be the same for any of you, if you were expected to speak on behalf of all Canadian women. Trying to speak on behalf of all immigrant women, would be to deny that differences exist within these groups, and there are differences.

The first group of whom I will speak are those immigrant women who, because they belong to a certain socio-economic class in their countries of origin, have access to education, to better jobs, the potential to have a better standard of living, and the possibility to achieve a more meaningful life.

The second, and by far the largest group, are those immigrant women who belong to a lower socio-economic class in their countries of origin. These women have had little or no access to education, they are not part of what is technically defined as "the labour force" and the potential for them becoming marginal to this society is great. These are the women who work here as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, in two main areas of the labour force:

- a) in the manufacturing industries, they work in garment and textile factories, in plastics, shoe and rubber factories.
- b) in the service industry, they work in laundries, hotels and restaurants; they work as cleaners and domestics.

These are the women who take the jobs that Canadian women won't take. These are the women who are not present here today, in spite of the fact that they represent the vast majority of immigrant women. These are the working class immigrant women, and these are the women that we will try to represent at this conference, in the best way we can.

Working class immigrant women suffer three main types of exploitation in this society:

1. They are exploited as workers, because they are forced to work, through necessity, 8 or more hours a day for the minimum wage (or often less). This, in effect, represents the smallest fraction of the profit that the owners of the factories extract from their labour power.
2. They are exploited as women, because as Canadian working class women, they work a double day. After 8 hours a day at the factory, they go home to start another shift, cooking, cleaning, taking care of their children and husbands, and they do it all for free. This benefits the society in general, and the employers more specifically, because what they are in fact doing, is raising a new generation of workers.

3. They are exploited as immigrants because, besides working under the worst conditions and being paid the lowest wages, they are humiliated, discriminated against, isolated from families and society, by being denied the basic tool for communication: language.

They are also forced to remain in what are called job ghettos, and on top of all that, they are blamed for all sorts of problems such as unemployment, inflation, social services cut-backs, etc. These problems are in fact, the result of economic crisis and government policies.

So we can see that working class immigrant women are exploited as workers, as immigrants and as women. All these types of exploitation are inter-related and cannot be separated from each other, and will exist until structural changes are made within this society.

What I would like to do today is to further examine this exploitation and to analyze how this exploitation is expressed in terms of structural discrimination, within three main areas that I will use as examples. These areas are immigration, employment and education.

In order to fully understand the reality that immigrant women face, we have to start from the point of first arrival in Canada. Therefore, the first issue that we have to deal with is Canadian Immigration Policy, and within it, some assumptions that seem to us unfair or inadequate. One of these underlying assumptions is that our existence starts when we first put our foot on Canadian soil. Our past, our background, our culture, count little when it comes to the point of becoming part of Canadian society.

Our existence does not start at the port of entry at the Canadian airport. Life does not begin for us when we first face a Canadian immigration officer. We have a past; we have a history; we have a culture that are as worthwhile for us, as Canadian history and culture are for Canadians, and we want respect for them. To assume the contrary is chauvinistic and leads to unfair practices.

Within the Immigration Policy, there is an issue that we must analyze. This is the link between the Immigration Policy and the economic interests of those who are in power.

Immigrant labour has been, and still is, very crucial for the development of Canada. When Canada needed workers to help build the railroad, thousands of Chinese people were brought into the country. After the project was finished, the doors were closed to them, and those Chinese who remained here were forced to live in the most deplorable conditions.

When Canada needed lightly-trained professionals and technical workers during the fifties and sixties, thousands of both male and female workers were brought in to fill these vacancies.

When Canada needs today unskilled and semi-skilled labour, immigrants, including women, are brought in to fill the needs of the Canadian labour market in that field. As a result, we find today a huge concentration of working class immigrant women, working in the poorest paid sectors, where they are exploited and isolated from family and society. Worst of all, they are forced to remain in these ghettos, without possibilities of getting out, because that would go against the interests of those who own the industries which employ them.

Unfortunately, the owners of these industries are the ones who have the political power to influence such things as the immigration policy. That is why these policies reflect the interests of those groups. This is also the reason why immigrant women who want to get out of the factory ghettos are often frustrated by contradictory practices of the Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission.

Some examples of these contradictory practices are the following:

- When we first arrive in Canada and request language training, we are denied it on the excuse "you won't need it for your job"... Of course, these jobs which require no English or French are on factory assembly lines, where almost every language, except English or French is spoken. In trying to get out of these ghettos and again later asking for language training, we are told: "Sorry, it is too late now. After being here for such a long time you should already speak the language."
- A woman who wanted to take an English course in order to continue working at a day care centre as she did in her country for ten years, was told by the counsellor that she should remain in the factory. "That even though she could learn English, she would always have an accent and that would not be good for the children that she would be working with."

These situations are just two examples of how government policy and practices keep immigrant women in job ghettos. The reason for that, as was mentioned before, is because as long as working class people remain isolated and uneducated, the owners of industry will be assured of receiving continued profits, extracted from the working class labour.

Going back to our starting point, we mentioned that working class immigrant women were exploited at three different levels: as workers, as immigrants, and as women. We can conclude now that Immigration policy and practices reinforce these three levels of oppression, by protecting the interests of the policy-makers rather than the interests of working class immigrant women.

We will now go into the area of employment and briefly describe the situation of working class immigrant women in this field.

We already spoke about the fact that working class immigrant women work as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in order to fill the needs of Canadian labour market. We know that they are the poorest paid sectors of the working class; that they work compulsory overtime without being paid for it; that they work under bad working conditions; that they cannot communicate properly with their employers or fellow-workers; that they do not enjoy fringe and other benefits; and that they do not have many possibilities of getting out of these job ghettos.

What is left to describe now is:

- 1) what does it really mean to be a working class immigrant woman, and
- 2) why do working class immigrant women stay in their jobs if the conditions are so bad.

To be a working class immigrant woman means to get up at 6 a.m. in the morning or earlier; to prepare breakfast for the husband and children; to prepare the family's lunch; to have a sip of coffee; to do the breakfast dishes; put the house in order; and run to the bus stop swearing in her own language at the Canadian winter and at the bus that never comes on time.

At the factory, an old, dusty and damp shop, she will go up the stairs and meet her fellow workers. She will pay 5 cents for a cup of hot water and she will pour herself a cup of coffee while she takes her coat off. Then she will sit in front of the sewing machine and she will start working, without stopping, not even to go to the washroom, because that is not allowed during the "employer's time". At 10 a.m. she will have a coffee break - then back to her sewing machine until lunch time. All the workers gather around the electric kettle again. There is not enough time and not enough money to go out for lunch. As no lunch space is provided, they eat over their work tables, trying not to spill food or coffee over their work. After half an hour, they are back to their work again - no talking, no standing, no stretching, no going to the bathroom because the supervisor is always there watching them.

If the machine breaks down it is always the worker's fault and for that reason, the supervisor yells at them, insults them, or hands them humiliating notes like this one that I have here which was given to Isabel - a sewing machine operator. It says:

Every time you break the machine you lose production time, and as you are on a piece rate income you suffer. Therefore you must allow the machine to finish the cycle before you remove the garment. This is most important.

This note was given to Isabel after fruitless efforts of her supervisor trying to tell her that she had broken the machine and that she was going to be held responsible for that; and

equally fruitless efforts on the part of Isabel, trying to tell the supervisor that she did not break the machine and that she did not like to be yelled at by anyone.

Isabel's day, or any other working class woman's day, ends at 5 p.m. at the factory, if she doesn't have to stay to work overtime. She will then go home, pick up some groceries for supper and once at home, she will start with her second shift. When her children come, they will talk to her and she will have to keep reminding them to speak in their native language because she does not understand them when they speak to her in English or French.

After supper, same routine - doing the dishes and cleaning. Maybe she will get some help but those chores are her responsibility anyway. By then she is too tired to talk but still she has to spend some time with her family while they watch TV or talk about the interesting events which happened to them during the day. She listens to them but she has no interesting events to speak about, so she goes to bed thinking about all of that and thinking that to-morrow will be the same as to-day.

We have roughly described a day in a working class immigrant woman's life. Through that day we can observe that she is being oppressed as worker, as immigrant and as woman. We recognize the fact that many working class Canadian women suffer the same kind of exploitation. All that we are saying is that immigrant women suffer an additional kind of exploitation simply because of the fact that they are immigrants. They have special barriers in terms of communication and in terms of participating in society, and in family life. This leads us to our second question; if they are so badly exploited why do they stay in those jobs? They stay because:

- 1) they must work;
- 2) these are the only kind of jobs that they will get because they don't speak an official language;
- 3) they have no possibilities of learning the language by themselves because they don't have either the financial resources and/or the facilities to do it (day-care for example);
- 4) they are denied the possibility of getting language training through government agencies because the Canadian labour market needs them where they are, in the job ghettos.

In other words, we are back to what we stated when we analyzed what the Immigration Policy meant for working class immigrant women: the economic interests of those who have the power to influence such policies need to maintain working class people, isolated and uneducated because it will assure them of profits from that labour force.

We will now refer to the third area that concerns working class immigrant women, and this is Education.

The concept of education cannot be separated from the concept of culture and official language acquisition. In respect to culture, we have to say that too often Canadians in general, see themselves as "givers" to the immigrants and do not perceive the totality of the immigrant person as participant and enricher of Canadian society.

The people who elaborate Immigration Policies ought to understand that we do not come here to be "civilized", that civilization is not synonymous with North American standards of living. That even we - third world immigrants - have a culture, and in fact a very rich one.

We are willing to share what we have, to be participants and enrichers of Canadian society on the condition that we are respected; that our history, our background and our culture are respected.

Language is one of the main barriers that we face - in order to communicate and participate in society, official language acquisition must be a fundamental right. It is inhuman to encourage and entice people to come to Canada for a "better life" if the most essential tool for communicating and fully participating in society, is denied to them.

If it is true that the economic needs of this country are met in part by maintaining an unskilled, illiterate and isolated labour force, it becomes clear then that it is not in the interest of the policy makers to provide easy access to language skills.

As it was shown when we referred to the Immigration and Employment Policy, the training and language education policy reinforces the three levels of exploitation that working class immigrant women suffer. Because they do not have access to education and re-training they are exploited as workers, as women, and as immigrants, and they are not given the tools to overcome this exploitation.

Given that fundamental structural changes are needed in economic, social and political institutions before qualitative changes can be realized in the lives of working class people here, what can we realistically expect to achieve at this conference?

WWIW believes that reforms can be initiated within the government policies, within the areas of education, health, employment opportunities, language acquisition, and social services.

If it is the purpose of this conference to address the needs and concerns of immigrant women, then let us begin by recognizing that it is not the immigrant woman who is the problem, who is the helpless or the "needy"

We know who we are

We know what we want

We know what we need

and we also know that what we are demanding ARE OUR BASIC RIGHTS.