



## **Unbreakable Links: International Women's Day, 1993**

Racism and sexism recognize no borders. Neither can we, therefore, in our struggle against them. What better time than March 8, International Women's Day, to remind ourselves of this principle, and to pledge ourselves to effective action?

Recently we have been sickened by confirmed reports from Bosnia-Herzegovina of the use of mass rape as a weapon of war. This is, of course, hardly the first time for such atrocities. But the sheer scale of it, combined with the seeming inability of other nations to act, has thrown into relief the fact that in the final years of the 20th century, women are still collectively persecuted and abused, in this case as a deliberate element of state policy.

And while we are responding in the labour movement to protest this organized barbarity abroad, we must equally address ourselves to sexist and racist policies here in Canada which re-victimize women fleeing such persecution.

80% of the world's refugees are women and children, and yet 2/3 of the refugees Canada accepts are men. Our refugee policy still does not officially recognize that women can be forced to become refugees solely because they are women. Women abused by their partners, even threatened with death, have been denied refugee status in Canada. Women who have refused to submit to inferior status in their countries, and who have been forced to flee legally mandated punishment such as flogging as a result, have also, incredibly, been turned down. At this very moment, twelve women who have fled this kind of brutality are facing deportation!

Have we learned nothing from the days when we turned back boatloads of Jews attempting to escape the gas chambers? Is "none is too many" again Canada's unwritten immigration policy?

Vigorous mobilization of refugee, immigrant and women's groups, unions and churches has managed to rescue some women from this fate, winning special ministerial intervention to allow their refugee claims. As a result of this kind of pressure, we have now been promised that guidelines will be issued to address the claim to refugee status of women fleeing persecution based on sex. Clearly, any immigration system which requires the intervention of a minister in such cases is desperately in need of reform. But the promise of vague policy directives is not enough: we must demand gender oppression as a clearly enumerated category for refugee status. And we must demand a moratorium on any further deportations of women to countries where they face such persecution. Their lives depend on it.

Our collective action at home is creating powerful links with women from other parts of the world. We are recognizing that our commitment to the struggle of women can be nothing less than international in scope. Confronting our sexist and racist immigration system is an essential part of that commitment; for the struggle goes beyond a humane refugee policy.

The physical relocation of women to Canada, either as refugees or as immigrants, does not magically resolve the problems which have faced them in their countries of origin. In fact, in many instances, the same problems re-surface, now linked to an all-pervasive racism. Our international outlook, then, must also be turned inward, to the profoundly difficult situation of these sisters within our own borders.

To be blunt, Canada is not a very welcoming place for refugee and immigrant women. Getting here is hard enough, and it is meant to be; there are numerous immigration offices in white Europe, but only a handful in all of Africa and India. New regulations have ensured that domestic care-givers will from now on be white Europeans. Wealth can buy permanent resident status, but most women must beg for admittance. And once in, they can continue to be subject to systemic racism and sexism from which there often appears to be no escape.

**Imagine:** you want to leave an abusive relationship but you can't call the women's shelter because no one there knows your language. You can't call the police either. You are invisible.

**Imagine:** somehow you do manage to communicate and to lay charges. Your partner withdraws his sponsorship and you become immediately eligible for deportation. The system is working to make you invisible again.

**Imagine:** you arrive with your husband, claiming refugee status. The claim will be accepted on the basis of your husband's story. If he is not accepted, you will probably be rejected too. The process is happening all around you-- but you are invisible.

**Imagine:** you tell your story of rape and torture before a refugee board whose political appointees snicker in disbelief. They look right at you, but see nothing but their own racist stereotypes. They can't see you. You are invisible.

**Imagine:** because you are not the primary breadwinner in your family, you are denied access to language training. Or perhaps it is because you are considered fit only for low-paid, unskilled work where language proficiency is determined to be unimportant. You find yourself in a job ghetto where you and your co-workers cannot communicate, and are ripe for exploitation. You cannot be heard: you are invisible.

**Imagine:** you are a domestic worker, at the mercy of your sponsor-employer, in semi-slavery. You are not allowed to leave the house, nor to have friends. You are invisible.

**Now imagine:** your sisters catch sight of you, hold you, work with you. Your voice joins with theirs, your strength and their strength are one. Invisible no longer, but determined and confident, you and they become-- we.

And we have much to do. We face many challenges, even within our own movement, in promoting meaningful employment equity, for example, and in knocking down the systemic barriers which all too often continue to exclude immigrant women from active union involvement.

We have much to do. And for those of us who are white, the first challenge is to confront our own racism, our own lack of understanding which makes us blind

and hence makes our sisters invisible. As all of us commemorate March 8, we have to keep in mind that genuine liberation cannot be achieved for some and not for all. We are realizing, more and more, that, 'as we go marching, marching' no one should be left to watch from the sidelines as the parade passes by. This, after all, is the true meaning of International Women's Day.

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