

# Managing Female Immigration

## *A Case of Institutional Sexism and Racism*

**By Roxana Ng**

*Les décideurs politiques considèrent la loi sur l'immigration comme étant neutre et objective. De prime abord, la loi ne semble pas faire preuve de discrimination contre les personnes sur la base de leur sexe, leur race, leur culture ou leur classe. Cet article, basé sur la perspective des immigrantes, nous révèle les tendances sexistes et racistes implicites de la première politique canadienne en matière d'immigration. L'article conclut en disant que si nous voulons sérieusement respecter les droits de la personne, nous devons réexaminer l'esprit de la politique et tenir compte du contexte social au moment de sa mise en place.*

One of the major areas of my research interests is "immigrant women." My concern began over ten years ago, when I worked as a community researcher in Vancouver and discovered that there was no attention given to immigrant women as a group. On the whole, their situation was ignored by government officials, social workers, and community workers alike. If on rare occasions their problems came to the attention of the social services delivery system (as in the case of wife beating), their problems (e.g. depression, isolation, family violence) were seen to arise out of cultural difference or the adjustment process.

Things have changed a great deal since then. This was due partly to the women's movement, which put women's problems in general in the foreground of Canadian society, and partly thanks to agitation by immigrant women themselves. They are no longer "seen but not heard." Riding on the momentum created by the women's movement, immigrant women have come forward to verbalize their problems, and demand that appropriate measures be taken to address their situation. The mushrooming of immigrant women's groups across the countries, the launching of two

national conferences of immigrant and visible minority women, and the formation of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women attest to the increasing visibility and militancy of immigrant women.

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But this increased notoriety of immigrant women, as a social group, is not unproblematic. All of a sudden all kinds of women, who previously refused to be associated with immigrant women, have come out of the woodwork to carry out all kinds of activities in the name of immigrant women. If the term "immigrant women" was once problematic, it has become more so with this increased attention.

I want to use the problematic character of the term as a starting point for investigating the legal, social and economic relations which produce "immigrant women" as a visible social group in Canada.

As I already mentioned, immigrant women's problems are commonly seen to arise from cultural differences and adjustment difficulties. Here, I will argue that their problems are the products of Canadian society, and have little to do with their cultural backgrounds. The institutions of Canada, notably our legal system, are important determinants of the unequal

status of immigrant women. In particular, Canada's immigration law curtails visible minority women's access to institutional and other resources available to other members of our society. As such, it serves to reproduce racism and sexism. I want to make very clear here that when I speak of sexism and racism, I am going beyond the notion of sexism and racism as attitudes of individuals, to show that they are systemic features in our society. This understanding of sexism and racism has implications for our work as analysts, policy-makers, and front-line workers.

### **The Social Construction of "Immigrant Women"**

Technically, the term "immigrant women" refers to women having a certain legal status in Canada, that is, women who are landed immigrants, rather than citizens. This technical definition is deceptive, however. In everyday life, only certain groups of women are seen to be "immigrant women" by other members of society. They are women of colour, including women from southern Europe and the Third World; women who do not speak English or who speak English with an accent other than British or American; and women who have certain low status jobs (e.g. a cleaning lady or a sewing machine operator). In other words, the common usage of the term presupposes class and racist biases. The purpose here is not to redefine the term "immigrant women" to include all women who are landed immigrants. Rather, it is to preserve the common sense usage and aim to understand *how* this usage of the term arises. In so doing, we will see that this understanding is rooted in the legal and economic processes of our society which contain certain sexist and racist assumptions.

For the purposes of this discussion, I

will confine my examination to Canada's immigration policy. I will review the history and purpose of the policy and show how its implementation systematically reproduces gender and racial inequalities for certain groups of people, namely, women, children, and the elderly from less "developed" parts of the world.

### **Immigration Policy: Its Assumptions and Implementation**

Canada's immigration program has always been designed with the express purpose of directing demographic growth on the one hand, and meeting economic needs and labour market demands on the other. We see this very clearly in our immigration history: people from northern and eastern Europe (e.g. Scandinavia and the Ukraine) were encouraged to immigrate to populate and open up the agricultural west; Chinese men were brought in as indentured labourers to build the railway; British and other white European immigrants entered to fill the bureaucratic, professional and technical strata of the labour market; more recently, South Asians were brought in as farm labourers and West Indian and Philipino women as domestic workers. While Canada's immigration policy has always been racist in that white English-speaking immigrants are preferred, non-white immigrants have been allowed to enter the country when there are demands for particular kinds of skills, and as Canada has established trading relations with non-European nations. Thus, the Canadian mosaic is a direct result of its history as a land of colonization and immigration.

As immigration policy developed historically, efforts were made by the federal government to tie immigration closer and closer to economic and labour market needs. Thus, a "points system" was introduced in 1967 as a labour recruitment strategy. Since that time, immigrants have been selected on the basis of points they earn in nine areas such as education, language and occupation. The points given to occupation, in particular, are constantly revised to reflect changing occupational demands. Immigrants are admitted into Canada under three categories: "independent," "family class," and "business class," although these categories appear

to be subject to a great deal of discretionary power on the part of immigration officers.

There are two categories of "independent" immigrants: self-selected workers and assisted relatives. The eligibility of potential "independent" immigrants is measured by the points system. The former group is granted landed immigrant status on the basis of the accumulated points for education, work experience, occupation, and economic resources under a points system which reflects the needs of the economy at a particular point in time. Those in the assisted relatives category are granted landed immigrant status through the nomination of a relative other than an immediate family member. By contrast, a "family class" immigrant is one who cannot qualify to enter Canada under the points system: s/he is granted this status strictly through the sponsorship of an immediate family member who is either an independent landed immigrant or a Canadian citizen. The "family class" category usually includes the spouse, children under 21, or parents over 65, of the independent immigrant. "Business class" immigrants include entrepreneurs, the self-employed, and investors, and are assessed by different criteria. We will confine our discussion to the first two classes of immigrants because it is the relation between these two groups which largely contributes to immigrant women's experiences in Canada.

The system of independent, assisted and family class immigration does not ostensibly discriminate against people on the basis of their gender, race or class. It is when we examine how the selection of immigrants and the designation of classes of immigrants are carried out that the sexist and racist assumptions implicit in the policy come fully into view.

Usually in an immigrant family, particularly those from Third World areas, only one member is granted the "independent" status. In most cases, it is the husband who is designated, because he is perceived to be the head of the household, and the wife is categorized as "family class" immigrant along with the children. This system ignores the fact that the wife may have comparable education and work experience, and that she may have made essential contribution to the family income before immigration. Moreover, once

immigrated, the financial security of many immigrant families often depends on the labour force participation of the *wife* initially, and later that of the husband as well. This has to do with the structure of the Canadian labour market where there are more demands for cheap female labour in the marginal sectors of the economy. This, coupled with the increasing necessity for Canadian families to survive on at least two incomes, means that in fact, most immigrant wives have to join the paid labour force as wage earners. Yet, the assignment of family members according to the classification of "independent" and "family class" negates this reality. The official view of the immigrant family, according to immigration procedures, is that of one "independent" member on whom others depend for their sponsorship, livelihood, and welfare. Thus, the immigration process systematically structures sexual inequality within the family by making one spouse (usually the wife) the legal dependent of the other.

The sponsorship system places many immigrant women in a totally dependent and subordinate position vis-à-vis the sponsor, who is legally responsible for their financial welfare for a period of five to ten years. Thus, prior to an immigrant woman's entry into the country, her legal status as a dependent is already established. This dependence is rooted in the institutionalized sexist practices of our legal apparatus, with tremendous implications for immigrant women's status and self-concept in Canadian society.

Once she is classified as a dependent immigrant, a whole series of consequences follow which place a woman in a progressively disadvantaged position. Despite its responsibility for immigration, the Canadian government is minimally involved in the provision of direct services to immigrants. Traditionally, it has relied on the voluntary sector (e.g. family networks and ethnic communities) to provide the assistance and services needed by newcomers. Even today, state responsibility for services to immigrants is largely interpreted to mean support for voluntary organizations through funding to community groups and ethnic organizations. Apart from a few statutory services, social assistance is the responsibility of provincial governments; eligibility criteria for various programs thus differ from province to

province.

In general, "family class" immigrant wives are ineligible for most forms of state assistance during the sponsorship period. They cannot obtain family benefits, welfare, and other benefits unless there is a break in the sponsorship. For an immigrant woman, this may involve proving that she and her husband are legally separated; or, in the case of a relative, that the sponsor is unwilling or no longer able to support her and her children. In either case, the procedure of legally terminating this relationship is degrading and painful for both the woman and her family.

The major statutory service to immigrants is full-time training in one official language and employment training to the household head. These kinds of educational programs are available free of charge. The household head obtains an allowance from the federal department of Employment and Immigration while taking a program. Since the husband is usually designated as the household head, most immigrant women are denied one important resource which could potentially open the door for them to better employment and educational opportunities. According to a study conducted in Saskatchewan (IWS, 1984), many women were told by immigration officials that they did not need to learn English because they were housewives. *In fact*, these women worked in garment factories, food processing plants, janitorial work and other low-paying jobs while their husbands went to school. In this way, institutional discrimination against immigrant women is built into the statutory services for immigrants.

Jobs open to immigrant women have been described as "unskilled" and "dead-end." But in their study on the organization of job ghettos of immigrant women, Ng and Das Gupta (1981) found that in order to procure these jobs, immigrant women must have a variety of general, interchangeable skills which they have developed from housekeeping and childrearing. They are available on short-term, temporary, or even on an emer-

gency basis. Working hours are also extremely irregular, ranging from a temporary, on-call basis in domestic and kitchen work to shift work in factories and hotels. Very few of them, with the exception of those in the garment and textile industries, are protected by labour standard legislation and union contracts. Fringe benefits, such as medical and pension plans, are not provided.

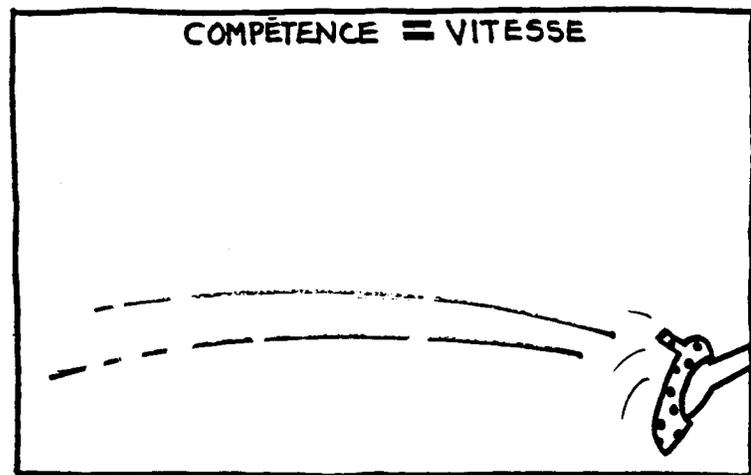
As "dependants," if women wish to take language and job training programs, then they or their sponsor have to pay. Frequently, the high costs of these programs make them inaccessible to immigrant women. In terms of job training programs, a minimum of Grade 8 English, or equivalent, is required. Most immigrant women from the non-English

country of origin is an important step in: a) seeking jobs in the labour market, especially in professional and managerial work, and b) upgrading their training and skills in Canada. While it is relatively easy for women to obtain recognition for lower levels of education, such as elementary or secondary education, gaining recognition for university, post-graduate and professional training is much more difficult. Women wishing to take graduate classes are expected to take some, or all, of their undergraduate classes again. Women with professional degrees and considerable expertise in their fields are denied the opportunity to work until they pass expensive examinations that were designed to limit the

take of foreign graduates into Canadian professions.

When I suggest that Canada's immigration policy is "racist" and "sexist," I do not use the terms to point to the intentions of the individuals involved. I want to draw attention to sexism and racism as systemic features of our society. The provisions in the immigration law are ostensibly "objective" and sex-blind. However,

when an immigration official follows the letter of the law, he or she contributes to the reproduction of gender and racial inequality because of the biases and assumptions contained in the law. The provisions in the policy both contribute to and dovetail with other forms of gender and racial inequality: in the welfare system and in the market place (notably the labour market). Together these legal, social and economic relations hold certain women (women of colour from the Third World, women who don't speak English or who speak limited English, women who don't have the skills and qualifications seen to be relevant to the Canadian economy) captive in a seemingly democratic and free society.



FEMME COMPÉTENTE VENANT DE PASSER

Andrée Brochu

speaking world are automatically excluded by this admission criterion. This is typical of the sexist and racist assumptions manifested in the institutional processes of our society.

The common sense stereotype of the "immigrant woman," therefore, is both a cause and an effect of immigration policy which creates barriers and multiple disadvantages for these women.

The lack of recognition by Canadian institutions and employers of women's previous education and training, is a barrier against their participation as equal members in society. Since immigrant women lack the Canadian work experience required by employers, gaining recognition for educational levels and professional qualifications acquired in their

## Conclusion

But immigrant women are not passive victims of the legal, economic and social processes which affect their lives. Along side the feminist movement, immigrant women, including domestic workers, have organized and are demanding for their rights to equal treatment. Their efforts have led to changes within Canadian institutions.

For example, as a result of agitation by ethnic communities, immigrant women and other human rights groups in 1986, the federal government has set aside special funding for English language training for immigrant housewives. Childcare is provided as part of this special grant program. English classes funded under this program are run by community organizations. However, while this is one avenue of free language training for immigrant women who are full-time homemakers, it is inadequate to address the labour market needs of immigrant women.

Another gain made by women who are in Canada on temporary work permits as domestic workers is the Foreign Domestic Worker (FDW) program. Whereas prior to 1981, women on work permits were forced to return to their home countries after two years, they are now able to apply for landed immigrant status after the two-year period if they can prove self-sufficiency. This change is the result of years of lobbying and organizing efforts by groups such as INTERCEDE, a Toronto-based organization advocating on behalf of domestic workers.

As immigrant women become more strident, however, other forces are at play to undermine the gains they have made in the past two decades. For example, there is a recent legislative proposal that nannies entering the country should have a minimum of Grade 12 education. This legislation, if passed, would prohibit many women from the "Third World" from coming to Canada as domestic workers, thereby rendering the FDW racist in the way in which I described systemic racism above.

The free trade agreement between Canada and the U.S. while promoting trading relations across borders, may have detrimental effects on women. According

to Marjorie Cohen, a leading feminist economist, the sectors affected the most are manufacturing (especially the garment industry) and the service sector. These are sectors in which immigrant women are concentrated. Although it is impossible at this stage to assess the direct impact of free trade on these sectors, we know that there have been bankruptcy and plant closures in the textile and garment industry which are affecting the livelihood of immigrant women.

It is important to see that the experiences of immigrant women are continually transformed in response to changing legal, social, political and economic realities. This requires that immigrant women organizing be dynamic and constantly attentive to changing economic and government priorities, because they both pose limits on and create new possibilities for immigrant women's livelihood.

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## CHARLENE JONES

### Taken for Granted

Just because I have breasts  
does not make me a shopping  
list.

My two front teeth are  
aligned,  
I sing alto  
sometimes tenor.

Just because I bleed  
does not mean ironing's in  
my blood.

I have a closet full of shoes  
and sometimes go barefoot.

Just because of my pubic hair  
doesn't mean I take phone  
messages,

or the dial tone  
that rings all night is for me.

Just because I nag,  
doesn't mean you stop  
listening.

Just because of the extra  
entrance  
doesn't make me a doormat.