

# Immigrant and Racial Minority Women Organize

By Maria Y. Shin

***This article presents some of the approaches taken by immigrant and racial minority women/women of colour across Canada who have organized against violence against women. These approaches exemplify the alternative trends evident in the grassroots, community-based strategies and reflect the need to re-conceptualize violence against women. They are examined here in terms of the politics of race, class, gender and imperialism underlying our struggles against all forms of violence.***

Immigrant and racial minority women and women of colour in Canada who have organized against violence against women, particularly against wife assault, have been aware for some time that "mainstream" approaches to violence against women have failed to address the needs and realities of women from our communities. Many services and organizations which work with women survivors of violence have not been accessible to immigrant and racial minority women because of attitudinal and systemic barriers, e.g. lack of appropriate language and cultural context, racism, classism, etc.

Even those programs and organizations which have attempted to address the particular needs of women from our communities, have merely "added on" issues of "cultural sensitivity" or "anti-racist" training to their existing systems and approaches to violence. Immigrant and racial minority women/women of colour have organized at the grassroots level in response to the problems in the mainstream approaches. The strategies they have developed reflect a different understanding of violence against women and challenge the mainstream feminist perspective and strategies in this area.

## Re-Conceptualizing Violence

Women from our communities who are engaged in alternative strategies conceptualize violence against women in the context of racism, economic poverty and social and political violence experienced by women. The analytical framework within which they organize incorporates anti-racist, anti-classist feminism which challenges historical roots of oppressions of colonialism and imperialism specific to the communities and experienced globally by all women. A Latin American women's project in Edmonton called "Proyecto Soledad," for instance, begins the discussion on wife assault by presenting an analysis of all forms of violence, including economic exploitation, military, political and social oppressions.<sup>1</sup>

The term "wife assault" itself is being re-defined to reflect the realities of immigrant and racial minority women. Some women experience abuse by in-laws, fathers or brothers, adult children, etc. Other women work as domestic workers and may be victims of abuse by their employers. Some women were brought to Canada as "mail-order brides" by white Canadian men and face racism and abuse.

The arbitrary division between sexual assault and wife assault as reflected in service delivery poses further problems for immigrant and racial minority women. Funding is allocated separately and shelters for abused women and sexual assault centres often do not or cannot coordinate their services. Immigrant and racial minority women who work against violence against women are becoming increasingly aware that more holistic approaches are needed to reflect women's needs. For example, a refugee woman who was raped and terrorized by government soldiers in front of her husband and children in her previous country and who now faces abuse from her husband must be allowed to define her needs from her own complex experience of violence.

## Popular Education/ Popular Theatre

Popular education and popular theatre as models of community development are being used by many groups. Printed materials are produced to be accessible to all groups of women regardless of education and class; they start with the experience and concerns of women in their everyday lives. The formats used are often participatory and incorporate drawings, poems, cartoons and basic language styles to convey the analysis of violence.<sup>2</sup> These strategies actively support the principle that immigrant/racial minority women through popular education can begin to participate in the process of personal and social transformation. This certainly challenges the stereotypes of immigrant and racial minority women as uneducated, passive, difficult to organize and politicize.

Popular theatre is also being used in very creative ways to address violence against immigrant and racial minority women. Theatre groups such as Vancouver Sath and Literary Society and Samaanta, both working in the South Asian community in Vancouver, involve women and men who have organized to address violence against women in the community. The Sath group has performed a street drama in the marketplace to reach out to the community. Their play, "Different Age, Same Cage," describes the oppressions experienced by women in the community through the different stages of their lives.<sup>3</sup> The popular theatre group, Puente, in Victoria, uses a forum theatre method to engage women in a support group for Latin American women in Vancouver. Women are asked to intervene during a play on wife assault so that they can re-create the scenes to show how violence can be overcome.<sup>4</sup> These groups are exploring many possibilities for public/popular education and social change through theatre while being sensitive to the needs of the communities and the level of awareness on violence against women.

It is often found that theatre is a more socially acceptable and accessible medium with which to begin engaging the communities in discussion.

### **Survivors of Violence Organize for Change**

Another popular theatre group, V.O.I.C.E. (Violence Overcome In Creative Ensemble) in Toronto, consists of women from different cultures who have experienced violence and have come together to form the group. Theatre has been a powerful medium for their personal transformation and for engaging audiences from different communities across Canada to participate in a social change process. The women have produced and performed a play based on their own life stories. Their video, "Fires of Transformation," is a celebration of the strength, courage and dignity of these women who have organized through theatre to empower themselves and to reach out to other women to overcome violence in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Women of Courage, in Toronto, is a group of immigrant and racial/cultural minority women who have experienced many different forms of violence against women. What began as a support group for immigrant Spanish-speaking women who were ex-residents of shelters has now evolved to include about 75 women from various cultural backgrounds including Latin American, Vietnamese and Portuguese. They are a network of friendship with their own means of controlling their growth and self-determination. They run a catering business, study English, perform music which they created in their workshops and help each other with child care. They visit shelters and other community settings to talk, sing, recite poems and perform music about their experiences of violence as immigrant and cultural minority women. They assist women in finding safe refuge from violence and they are talking about creating appropriate co-op housing for women in abusive situations. Many of these women have found shelter experiences to be oppressive. They want to establish a dialogue on violence against women from *their* perspective.<sup>6</sup>

### **Community-Based Programs of Direct Service**

There are also a number of community-

based programs on wife assault and domestic violence by immigrant women's groups, culturally-specific community organizations across the country. These programs provide culturally and linguistically sensitive individual crisis support and/or support groups. However, all of these programs are grossly underfunded and are often staffed by one woman who is supposed to provide direct service and public education/community development.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Politics of Funding by the State**

In speaking about strategies for change and our organized struggles against violence against women, we must address the politics of funding, or lack of funding, which create unjust systemic discrimination against us and perpetuate the divisions amongst us. It is with great irony that I found during my research in this area that the very groups who are doing the most creative and innovative work were the least funded or not funded at all. All of the groups that I have identified above are some of the least funded and least recognized groups. Why is this happening?

Many groups I interviewed described the "channeling" or "streaming" of funds to mainstream services and organizations, including shelters and rape crisis/sexual assault centres. Immigrant and racial minority women's groups are only eligible for project funding. Mainstream groups are granted core or on-going funding to operate while services and groups in our communities are expected to survive on minimal or no funding to do our innovative work.

In fact, the whole scenario is a vicious circle. The mainstream groups are funded often to do the "outreach" work into our communities. These groups then turn to our groups who are scraping to survive and ask us to join their advisory committees, participate in their workshops (without pay), translate (for free) their material into our languages, attend one more government consultation meeting, etc. Our efforts are often superexploited and not recognized by mainstream organizations and government funding agencies.

When immigrant and racial minority women's groups seek substantial or on-going funding to continue our work, we are often given paternalistic treatments; our credibility is often questioned and we

have to prove that we are legitimate, professional organizations. However, we cannot do this without adequate resources. We cannot afford to hire workers or counsellors; or they are underpaid and overworked in poor working conditions. It is a testimony to the commitment of immigrant and racial minority women working in this area that they are continuing the struggle against violence. But at what cost to ourselves and to our families?

When we demand more funding, we are told that we do not know how to say no to women who come to us for help, often as the last resort. We are also told that we do not fit into the funding criteria even though these same criteria often reflect systemic racism, classism and sexism. Our work is considered neither to be settlement service nor social service and counselling programs. Many immigrant and racial minority women's groups are left caught in this gap if they are interested in working at the level of the community, if they want to see objectives defined by the needs and realities of women themselves and not imposed by government funding criteria. The question becomes: who is setting the agenda of our work against violence against women?

The allocation of funding in our communities often discriminates against the most vulnerable groups who have the least resources and yet are doing the most creative work. From the perspective of the community-based groups, it appears that funding set aside for our communities tends to go to professional, middle class, conservative, male-dominated organizations. Other groups are supposed to fight over whatever is left in the pot. This perpetuates the divisions in our communities along the lines of class, sex, race, language, politics and religion. Affirmative action is well overdue.

Government policies and practices must become pro-active in reaching out to grassroots, community-based groups working against violence against immigrant and racial minority women. The alternative approaches of such groups reveal an understanding of the problem in the broader context of violence in our society. It is important for immigrant and racial minority women working in the area of violence against women to continue to network, exchange ideas and strategies with the so-called "Third World" women's and community-based groups addressing violence in all of its forms. We

must build solidarity with women of the First Nations in Canada, for they are organizing and strategizing in the overall context of the historical, economic, political, social and military violence faced by their communities.<sup>8</sup>

With all of these challenges faced, we may begin to hear the words of the women and children of *Mujeres de Coraje/Women of Courage*:

AND YOU WILL ASK US WHY WE SING  
*We sing because of a nameless sorrow  
 (yet, we can name our unhappiness)  
 We sing for all the women  
 Who fight for a new life*

AND YOU WILL ASK US WHY WE SING  
*We sing for today and for tomorrow  
 For friendship, life, and joy  
 And united, truly united, we will defeat  
 Violence in all its forms*

AND YOU WILL ASK US WHY WE SING  
*We sing for a peaceful future  
 With dignity, respect and courage  
 We sing for all these things  
 And our children wish us to sing*

## References

<sup>1</sup> See p. 3 from *Proyecto Soledad: Resource Booklet* (1989). Mennonite Centre for Newcomers: Edmonton. See also, "Isolated, Afraid and Forgotten: The Service Needs and Realities of Immigrant and Refugee Women Who Are Battered" (1991) by Linda MacLeod and Maria Y. Shin for the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

<sup>2</sup> See *Proyecto Soledad*; Judith McCallum, *Coming Together: Support Groups for Immigrant Women*. A resource kit (Toronto: Access Alliance and Children's Place, College-Montrose); Monica Riutort and Hildegart Peddle, *Abused? We Have the Keys: Wife Assault Information Kit* (Toronto: The Centre for Spanish-Speaking Peoples, Women's Program, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see "Isolated, Afraid and Forgotten..." p. 19 and Appendix 3: Resource Organizations.

<sup>4</sup> See the report on violence against women published by the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada in Ottawa. Or, contact: Puente Theatre Group, 1647 Fell St., Victoria, B.C. V8R 4V9.

<sup>5</sup> From conversations in 1990, 1991 with Ana Maria Santinoli of VOICE. VOICE has also

produced a Video Package and Training Manual: A model for creating a theatre and skills-training program based on the lives of abused women from many cultures. Contact: 152 Arlington Ave., Toronto, ON, M6C 2Z2.

<sup>6</sup> *Mujeres de Coraje/Women of Courage*, c/o Parkdale Community Legal Services, 165 Dufferin St., Toronto, ON, M6K 1Y9.

<sup>7</sup> See "Isolated, Afraid and Forgotten..." and the NOIVMWC report for more discussions on issues related to direct service programs including funding issues.

<sup>8</sup> For descriptions of organizing against violence against women by women in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and the First Nations in Canada, see the MATCH International kit on *Linking Women's Global Struggles to End Violence* (Ottawa, 1990).

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