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# Breaking Chains

## *Immigrant Women Workers and Literacy*

**L**iteracy in its most encompassing definition is the right to PARTICIPATE, the ability and confidence to articulate concerns, to pose questions, and above all, to get involved in one's own workplace, union and community. Being literate is knowing that you have a choice.

In this great land of opportunities, many immigrant women are walking in chains. These are chains of dependency, chains of being treated as hands rather than as a person with a brain, and chains of having doors closed right in your face in the name of Canadian experience. It is a sense of vulnerability and helplessness, of being stripped of one's own historical, cultural and linguistic roots once you set foot on Canadian soil. It is also a sense of humiliation for having to rely upon a relative, a friend, a child or at times even a stranger to "speak" and "think" for you. Being illiterate for a non-English speaking immigrant woman is like "doing time" in a prison without walls.

The marginalization of immigrant women is more apparent when we walk into any garment, textile, food processing or electronics manufacturing factory in Metro Toronto to set up the English at the Workplace Program (EWP). What do you say to an immigrant woman worker, who has been working on the line for the last twenty-five years, and who told us we came twenty years too late because she had lost her hearing! What do you say to a Punjabi-speaking woman assembler who speaks flawless English and whose Master's degree in Education in Punjab was given a mere Ontario Grade 13 equivalent? What do you say to a Chinese sewing machine operator who keeps saying that she can't learn because she does not even read Chinese!

The Metro Labour Education & Skills Training Center, a project of the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto, has been

trying to break some of these chains. Since its inception six years ago, the English at the Workplace Program has attempted to address the functional ESL literacy needs of immigrant women workers. Inspired by educational campaigns like the Nicaraguan literacy crusade and the work of Paulo Freire, the philosophy of the Program emphasizes the need to develop worker/participants' critical consciousness of their work situation, their society and position in it, and ways of effecting changes through action, hopefully through participation in their union.

The content of our Programs is very much learner-centered. Workplace functions, such as how to report a machine breakdown, what to do in an emergency situation, how to read the health and safety labels, etc., are integrated into the training program. The learner's own life experiences as an immigrant, a worker and woman are very much acknowledged. We strongly oppose teaching approaches that patronize, and materials that infantilize the learners. The following, from one of our EWP participants, further illustrates this shared sentiment:

*I came to Canada from Monteleone, Italy in 1957. The boat arrived in Montreal. I took a train to Toronto. After 3 weeks, I looked for a job. After a couple of months I went to school to learn English. The teacher said the same thing every night. 'This is my pencil. This is my apple. I give it to you. You give it to her.' She made me sick when she said the same thing every night. I stopped after two months. I didn't want to hear her say the same thing every night.*

*Now I am learning English again. I like this class because I learn different things every week.*

BY WINNIE NG, IN COLLABORATION  
WITH PRAMILA AGARWAL & BRENDA WALL

Workers come forward for many different reasons. For many immigrant women, EWP classes provide a welcome break, a chance to relax and do something for themselves alone. Confidence-building is probably the most important achievement of EWP programs. It has enabled hundreds of immigrant women workers to speak out and stand up for their own rights:

- A Polish woman, who had been forced to do her bosses' personal laundry for many years, filled out a grievance form and regained her dignity in the workplace.
- A Greek woman, a custodial worker, received thousands of dollars in back wages because her employer continually passed her over in the promotion process. After she raised the issue in the EWP classes, the union fought a successful case on her behalf.
- Two immigrant women, members of the CUPE local at a health care institution in Toronto, have recently become stewards in their local — a major step forward.
- A Chinese sewing machine operator who had endured backache for the last ten

months, finally gathered up enough confidence and English to ask the mechanic to adjust her seat. She came back to the class with a renewed sense of pride.

Our EWP program is now taking on a new direction to recruit and train other workers to become potential EWP instructors. Hopefully through this process, we will be able to open up new possibilities for the immigrant women who have been silenced and whose previous training and credentials from their home countries have been totally discarded. These women workers can very well be ideal EWP instructors, as they will have a good knowledge of the workplace and empathy for the participants in the program.

The Center is also exploring new training programs that will address the mother-tongue literacy needs of our EWP participants. These immigrant women are in a double jeopardy position in the broader political, economic and social context. It is a basic human right and an access to learning that they have been TWICE denied. We strongly see the need for a bridging program in which bilingual

instructors will be able to provide the additional support and pre-basic functional ESL training for these learners with special needs.

We see our English at the workplace Programs as a stepping-stone for immigrant women to have more options and to be able to move on. It is an empowering process which, at times, can be frustrating because training alone is not the only solution. Training does not create jobs. Nor does it resolve the systematic inequalities that immigrant women face on a daily basis. However, an acknowledgement of all these limitations does not immobilize us. Instead it has given us a much clearer focus to provide the support and tools for immigrant women to SAW their chains of isolation and "illiteracy." It is this collective strength of our sisters that will empower us all.

*Winnie Ng, Pramila Agarwal and Brenda Wall have worked for many years in immigrant women's programs. They are now involved in Metro [Toronto] Labour Education & Skills Training Center.*

