

# The Status of Italian Immigrant Women in Canada

By Costanza Allevato

**T**he bulk of Italian immigrants came to Canada during the 1950s and 60s. Their entrance into Canada began to decrease throughout the 1970s and 80s. The majority came from Southern Italy and the rural areas of the North. Most were poorly educated and possessed little or no employment skills. In Italy they were faced with unemployment for themselves and a future of misery for their children. It was primarily for these reasons that Italians immigrated to Canada as "economic refugees."

Often it was the husband who came to Canada first in order to find employment and accommodation. Later his wife and family entered Canada under the "Family Class" category of immigration policies. This government classification relegated immigrant women to a position of inferiority as soon as they entered the country. The Family Class status made the woman dependent on her husband for her "maintenance and care" for approximately ten years. If her relationship with her husband broke down, she had to prove that the sponsorship had ended before she was eligible for government services (such as General Welfare Assistance, subsidized housing, legal aid, etc.). Often embittered husbands were less than co-operative. Even if the woman was a Canadian citizen, the sponsorship agreement determined her status.

This situation continues today: many immigrant women's groups have called on the Canadian government to eliminate the dependency status created by immigration policies; this could be achieved by ensuring eligibility for government services for sponsored immigrants in need and by making the sponsorship and citizen-

ship periods coincide.

Another anomaly of the Family Class category is that it did not consider immigrant women as "labour bound." Consequently, women entering Canada were not eligible for government sponsored language training programs. Experience has shown that not only did Italian men have to work, but most Italian women were forced into the labour market to make ends meet. This immigration policy resulted in many Italian women not receiving language instruction: thereby another barrier to their integration into Canadian society (especially into the work force) was created. This policy also forced many women into low-paying, dead-end jobs as cleaners, assembly-line workers and sewing machine operators. If Italian women wanted to improve their employment opportunities, they could apply for government English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. However, because they did not need proficient English in order to clean offices, wash dishes or sew on machines, they were not eligible for these classes.

This policy persists today. Many immigrant groups have called for comprehensive language training classes — even within the work place. Some advances have been made: there are more community-sponsored ESL courses. But for many Italian women who came to Canada twenty-five to thirty years ago (when such courses were not available), English continues to be foreign and unfamiliar.

This immigration policy has been instrumental in maintaining immigrant women in job ghettos. Approximately 90 percent of textile workers in Toronto are immigrant women. Most of these jobs are

low-paying, involve piece work, have no health and safety committees, and often are not unionized. In 1983 about 57 percent of immigrant women earned less than \$10,000 per year. This compares to \$15,751 for all women working in Canada, and \$26,171 for all men in the labour force (Statistics Canada). For Italian women the situation is worse, considering the Italian community is one of the oldest communities in Canada. According to a study by the Social Planning Council of Metro Toronto, in 1980 Italian women earned \$8,600; they were second lowest in earnings, next to West Indian women (who received \$8,000), and were victims of racism. Most immigrant working women are not unionized and this also accounts for their low wages and poor working conditions. Many Italian immigrant women have been enduring these injustices for the twenty-five to thirty years that they have been in Canada. Many still working in these low-paying jobs are now forty-five to fifty years of age (the retirement age in Canada is sixty-five).

As Canada enters the scientific and technological revolution, many immigrant women are faced with losing their jobs. In the textile sector, the Canadian government has handed out enormous grants to help industries modernize: for example, in 1981 it gave Dominion Textile \$30 million; Wabasso \$5.5 million; Peerless Rug \$4.2 million; and Celanese \$3.1 million (*Brief on Textile Industry by Women Working With Immigrant Women*). These grants helped companies eliminate jobs through automation, or to relocate to different regions within Canada where wages and levels of unionization were lower. In addition, companies

have not been keen to retrain their workers — especially older Italian women workers. Instead, businesses have been pressuring the government to change its immigration policies in favour of skilled workers. The government has enthusiastically complied — it means less spending on government retraining programs. This has resulted in a massive loss of jobs: for example, the textile industry (which employs 160,000 workers, many of them immigrant women) has lost over 40,000 jobs in the last 10 years, and many more jobs are threatened. The trade union movement in Canada is demanding that workers have control over the introduction of new technology in the work place and that workers whose jobs are eliminated be assured new jobs.

The question of job loss for immigrant women is even more serious today as the government of Canada pursues a policy of Free Trade with the United States. Essentially, Free Trade means that goods would flow back and forth across the border as though Canada and the U.S. were one country. A study by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Technology of Ontario shows that at least 552,000 Ontarians could lose their jobs — 281,000 of these will be lost in the manufacturing industry. Forty-three percent of women work in the processing and manufacturing sector; many of these are immigrant women (Statistics Canada). The Federal Government's Macdonald Commission, a conservative body, estimated that nearly 1 million Canadians will lose their jobs due to Free Trade (there already exist 1.5 million unemployed people in Canada). In Ontario women constitute 46 per cent of all unemployed workers. Free Trade will only worsen the situation.

In addition to increasing unemployment, Free Trade will result in the weakening and eventual loss of all government social service programs, such as unemployment insurance, paid maternity leave, worker's compensation, medicare, family allowances, etc. Many women have had to depend on these programs for their livelihood. Women's organizations have joined with the labour movement in their opposition to Free Trade.

Italian immigrant women in Canada have been exploited and oppressed — both as women and as workers. They have also fought back: more and more immigrant women are organizing into unions and are becoming more crucial in the struggle for workers' rights. Italian women played a significant role in the Lancia-Bravo strike, the fight against contracting out at Villa Colombo, the

general protest in Toronto's clothing industry, and the struggles of the Union of Injured Workers.

The women's movement is articulating the problems facing immigrant women and demanding an end to their discrimination. People's coalitions of labour, women and community groups around issues of equal pay for work of equal value, affirmative action and Free Trade are also incorporating issues affecting immigrants. But it is primarily due to the efforts of immigrant women themselves that attention is being paid to their cause. And it is through their unity with other groups that their issues can be resolved.

My heart is  
the shape of  
a maple leaf.  
It throbs  
red, red.  
Oh Canada, Canada  
can you feel me  
beating for you?

**Anita Keller**



*Woman outside her house in Little Italy*

*Photo: Charisse de Freitas*