

Involving Immigrant Women

A Case of Participatory Research

By Tania Das Gupta

The writing of a book called *Learning From Our History: Community Development by Immigrant Women in Ontario, 1958-86*,¹ originated in a participatory research process on which I and others I worked. I think that it is important to look at other immigrant women's studies produced to date in order to see how *Learning From Our History* made a departure both in terms of its research methodology and its theoretical approach.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Of late "immigrant women" have become popular with researchers, academics and committees in mainstream organizations. Some of us who have been involved in working in the community with immigrant women over the past two decades in Ontario can still remember our struggles to convince the so-called "progressives" that our lives and experiences should be recognized as an important subject to integrate into their studies and activism. Progressive males often saw women's issues as being divisive of the "larger" struggle, while white academic feminists discounted us as not "really feminist" and as "being dominated by males" more than they were. Members of the WASP, male-dominated establishment, of course, remained unmoved by our demands and gleefully rubbed their hands as they watched the community divide along class, sex and race lines.

So it is intriguing to witness the "about turn" that seems to have occurred in the late 1980s as far as literature on immigrant women is concerned. I think that this has come about through a complex series of historical events, the origin of which

lies in the community of immigrant and visible minority women asserting their rights as workers, as women and as visible minorities, pushing for a recognition of their existence, and demanding an access to society's resources. This is the history of community development by immigrant women in Canada — a movement towards affecting change in their lives, not as individuals but for the community as a whole.

This history is documented and analysed in *Learning From Our History*. It is due to this challenge from grassroots women that various levels of government decided that it was politically necessary for them to respond to these outcries. Subsequently, some funds were made available for immigrant women's programs and studies (an analysis of the history of funding is provided in the book). Despite the limitations of these funds, mainstream women's groups, centres, academic programs and journals became aware of this "new" emphasis on what to us was an ongoing reality. We saw the phenomenon of women's programs refocussing themselves on the "issue" of immigrant women. It has been said before and it is worth repeating: *we are not "an issue,"*² we Canadians whose daily lived experience is marked by discrimination in employment, housing, education, health, daycare or family life. Discrimination is not "an issue:" it is a set of structures and practices in society which impact on the entire society to deny the access of some individuals to opportunities and resources on the basis of their class, race, sex, age, disability or sexual orientation. Therefore, it is all-pervasive in "all" social issues and must be integrated into the study of *all* aspects of society.

The preceding remarks are necessary, I believe, in order to contextualize the question of the research methods employed "to study immigrant women." The particular research methods used to study a topic are directly influenced by the researcher's world view, her assumptions and overall objectives. One major defect in immigrant women's literature in Canada to date is that "immigrant women" have been the "object" of study — rather than the "subject." This is true whether we are looking at idealist/ traditional studies or at progressive/ feminist studies. In all these studies, an immigrant woman is analysed as a "victim," as "being socially organized," as "dependent," as "constituted." This view of being "over-determined" by traditions, cultures or social institutions and relations is unrealistic and erroneous: *to talk about the oppression of immigrant women, without talking about their struggles against oppression, is to objectify them and render them passive.*

My personal opinion is that this perspective has emerged because the majority of immigrant women's studies have been undertaken by academics and consultants who are limited by their funding criteria, their academic requirements or their thirst for abstract theorizing. They lack an organic link with the real world of immigrant women in the community who are working, organizing and formulating alternative structures, relations and ideas to bring changes in their lives. Academic studies and reports are depoliticized; they generally have minimal or no relevance to the needs of those who are organizing in the community. By and large, such studies and reports remain in libraries and resource centres, where they are referred to by students writing term papers. Immi-

grant women in the community rarely use these. Instead, they write, research and produce their own literature which emerges out of their own needs.

Then, once in a while, a major research project is commissioned by the government. More often than not, it is merely a "re-organized," "re-hashed" version of existing community research reports. Some policy-makers base their policies on such recycled information because community demands based upon documentations of community realities do not have the stamp of "objectivity" or "professionalism." They are not considered to be "legitimate knowledge." This is a stark example of the politics of knowledge. Knowledge of people in the community — as opposed to academia, government and business — represents the experiences and aspirations of a socially less powerful segment of society. Part of its subordination is based on its non-recognition.

Learning From Our History presents an alternative view, a reflection of the points of view of immigrant and visible minority women in community development groups. All histories express a point of view. This history is ours. It is one of confronting and overcoming the obstacles of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and class exploitation. When we refer to 'community development,' we are referring to those specific efforts in community work which are aimed at enabling immigrant women to bring about change in their lives — not individually but as a community.

The research process for the book was also a practice in community development. It was collective and empowering process whereby immigrant women in the community were involved in conceptualizing, planning and implementing activities towards the production of the book.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The idea for the book did not suddenly "fall from the sky." Over the past fourteen years, many women had come to the Cross Cultural Communication Centre (CCCC)³ seeking resources for working with and organizing immigrant women from across Canada. From our own work experience and from that of others, we advised them on how to start, whom to contact, where to go. We also actively participated in many joint ventures to develop innovative programs for immigrant women in such areas as skills training, employment and networking. After

years of this type of work with community workers, teachers and facilitators working with immigrant women, it became apparent that a resource book was needed, specifically for those who are working directly with immigrant women.

RESEARCH AND WRITING PROCESS

A community advisory committee was formed, made up of a group of five immigrant and visible minority women from Toronto who are active in community work with immigrant women. Women from Thunder Bay, Kingston, Ottawa and London were also consulted regularly. Advisory members were all linked to the networks of immigrant women, such as Women Working with Immigrant Women (WWIW) and Ontario Immigrant Women's Network (OIWN).⁴ The advisory committee held some initial sessions to clarify and identify its objectives, terms of reference and frequency of meetings. Minutes of these meetings were kept and distributed.

The advisory committee generated a list of key people to interview, as well as sources of information and strategies on ways to gain access to available records. These were all followed up. The research involved at least fifty in-depth interviews with key actors in the history of community development by immigrant women in various cities in Ontario. Archival materials from various organizations were reviewed and the history of earlier programs was reconstructed from "minutes" of meetings, letters, reports and oral histories. One by-product of this initial research process was that the women I talked with unearthed extensive archival materials based on their experiences, which had remained buried in somebody's bottom drawer or basement.

From this, I was able to write a rough draft describing the various programs and organizations we had identified. This was then circulated among advisory members for their comments. There then emerged an idea of holding a community forum for immigrant women from all over Ontario. The forum was held in Toronto on 28-30 August 1985. It was co-sponsored by WWIW, OIWN, OCASI⁵ and CCCC. The forum was based on the framework of this book. It provided us an opportunity to consolidate the research we had conducted up to that point, to generate new information, to engage in collective analysis, to assess our needs for skill development for future work, as well as to strengthen the existing networks of immi-

grant women. New information generated at the forum in turn enhanced the book and suggested ways of making it more relevant for the intended users/readers.

For the organising of the forum, the advisory committee became a part of a larger planning committee which became involved in fund raising, in planning the content and in implementing the plans. The process of organising the forum itself was an important experience for us in working collectively and creatively. We decided to document that for the benefit of others in the community.⁶

EDITING AND GRAPHICS

After the forum, the rough draft of the book was further refined. Subsequently, the second draft was circulated once again among advisory members, as well as among other CCCC staff. Overall, substantive editing of the draft was done collectively at least four times. Professional editors were then contracted to conduct technical editing of the manuscript, after which the CCCC librarian proofread the final version of it. She also compiled a bibliography on immigrant women's studies which was included in the book. A graphic artist was then contracted to visually interpret the contents and the objectives of the book. She worked with advisory members, exchanging ideas with them on illustrations and graphics which would be most appropriate for this particular book. One graphic idea which had emerged earlier at the community forum was that of the "web." The collective reconstruction of history had been facilitated by visually representing it on a web: a giant web was drawn and on it the different programs and organisations of immigrant women in Ontario were situated. Gaps in the web were later filled in with programs or organizations that had not been included thus far. The web became a symbol of the overall movement of immigrant women. In illustrating the book later on, the graphic artist incorporated the "web" to denote the expanding network of immigrant women.

In this account of participatory research, I have not dealt with the administrative and fundraising aspects of producing this book; some of the details are included in the analysis of "funding" immigrant women's programs in *Learning From Our History*. Participatory research of the type we conducted requires incredible energy, creativity and commitment — not to mention time. Funding

from external sources invariably imposes deadlines and limitations which can become barriers to a creative process. We were consistently aware of this tension and had to play a balancing act with it.

The production of *Learning From Our History* was an alternative model of resource development. It involved community workers who work with immigrant women. It gave value to their experiences and insights into community work. It facilitated a collective process of conceptualizing and analyzing our history, as well as identifying our needs for skills development. Most importantly, it initiated a process of strengthening and expanding the existing community networks. The objective of producing this book was not merely to "analyse" or to "document" as ends in themselves, but to use the analytical and documenting process to initiate action from readers/users.

¹ Toronto: Cross Cultural Communication Centre, 1986.

² "New Group Takes Up Arms for Immigrant, Minority Women," *The Globe and Mail* (January 19, 1987), p. A12.

³ CCCC, which published the book, is a community education and resource centre in Toronto which develops programs and materials on the issues of racism, immigration and immigrant settlement. These programs are developed with/for immigrant service organizations, schools, unions and a variety of community-based groups. The Centre houses a library of print and audio-visual materials.

⁴ WWIW and OIWN are umbrella organizations of individuals and organizations working with/for immigrant women in Toronto and Ontario respectively.

⁵ OCASI stands for Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, a coalition of community-based organizations providing services to immigrants in Ontario.

⁶ *Ontario Immigrant Women's Community Forum, August 28-30, 1985: A Record*. Forum Planning Group. (Mimeographed paper, 1986).

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