

The Foundation of NOIVMWC

(The National Organization of Immigrant And Visible Minority Women of Canada)

By Carmencita R. Hernandez

It was the fruit of more than ten years of hard work on the part of immigrant and visible minority women's groups to obtain changes in legislation and policies to improve the status of their constituencies. It was formed out of an awareness that there is a need for a national voice to address issues of language training, employment, immigration, health and social services, racism and the status of women. This formation is the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada (NOIVMWC). The more than 250 women who met in Winnipeg, Manitoba, locked in their hotel because of a snowstorm that almost paralyzed the city, cast their votes in favour of a national organization for both sectors of women.

The mandate given by the membership includes the followings goals: to achieve social, political and economic equality for immigrant and visible minority women; to form a united national voice, meet and liaise with other women's groups; to fight sexism, racism, poverty, isolation and violence.

The efforts of immigrant and visible minority women's groups over the last ten years have been taking roots in various communities. These efforts so intensified in the last five years that the government had to react. The first government initiative took place in 1981 when the then Minister of Multiculturalism, Jim Fleming, convened the first national conference of immigrant minority women in Toronto. At that time, a national follow-up committee was developed to create provincial networks across the country and to prepare the road for a national conference for immigrant women.

In 1985 the Minister for Multiculturalism, Jack Murta, called for a national consultation: thirty-seven women represented over forty national immigrant and

visible minority women's groups and national ethnocultural organizations. The government again was responding to the increasing pressure from organized groups.

The recommendations from the 1981 national conference were refined and presented to a number of Ministers. The main areas of concerns centered around language training, employment and training, health and social services, immigration, funding and the status of women.

Despite the ministerial shuffles that took place within the federal government, the direction of the women was clear — they wanted action on the recommendations. There is a feeling among the women that the lack of action is mainly due to existing institutional barriers.

One of the main concerns of NOIVMWC is to press for readily available English or French language training for immigrant and visible minority women. It will also lobby for improvements in immigration law, health and social services for its constituencies. "Without sufficient training, many women are trapped and isolated in their homes. Often, they are unable even to call an ambulance if a child becomes ill. These women are confined to poorly paid jobs and loneliness," states Patsy George, Vice-President for the Western region.

A volunteer chairperson of Pacific Immigrant Resources, Ms. George said that her organization learned of a Central American refugee who had been raped by men living in her rooming house. She was afraid to tell the police, because in Guatemala, her home country, the police are feared. Without the knowledge of English or of social services in Canada, she did not know how to escape her predicament. "And this case could be multiplied so many times over," said Betty Lee, President of NOIVMWC.

The Board members of NOIVMWC realize that majority of immigrant and visible minority women are not part of any organization. There are very few places in Canada — mostly major cities — where the groups and networks are part of the scene. But the majority remains out there. "We want to reach out to a lot of women who are isolated. We want to reach out to women who may not be members of any organization or who may not be part of the union. This is one of the main tasks ahead of us," said President Betty Lee.

Within the two-year mandate given by the general membership to the Board, the following committees were formed: Language; Immigration; Status of Women; Racism; Employment; Funding; and Health and Social Services. A committee was also formed to draft the constitution of this national organization. The Board members are prepared for this long voyage: "What we want to do is remove the barnacles and the barriers. Immigrant and visible minority women are a strong group. They migrate to this country, have jobs and raise families despite all the stereotypes given to them," said Dorothy Ellis, one of the Ontario representatives.

The formation of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada is part of a natural process — and an evolutionary one — a process common to a group that emerged from a growing awareness.

MEMBERS OF THE NOIVMWC EXECUTIVE

President: Betty Lee, 101 Charing Crescent, Fredericton, New Brunswick E3B 4R7, (506) 454-1821; *Secretary:* Lillian Ma, 139 Walmer Road, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2X8, (416) 926-1927; *Treasurer:* Leti La Rosa, 10 Shell Ct., Charlottetown,

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Playing leap-frog

There's a woman
A woman with firm hands
And a strong back
A woman with an allotment
She grows vegetables

There's a woman who cooks
Whose smile is wide, and warm
Embracing jokes and anecdotes

There's a woman
A woman with deft fingers
Who knits
Wearing flaming sweaters,
She sews bright banners for them

There's a woman who leaps and leaps
Leaving the stove and vegetable patch
With firm hands placed on their strong
backs
She soars right over them
And on the other side
She sprints
She calls on them to join her

And one by one they vault
And one by one they stoop
And up the mountains they sprint
Playing leap-frog

And with them come the banners and
blankets
The seedlings and pots and pans
For they are women
Women with firm hands and strong
backs
Women with deft fingers
And they carry vegetables and grains
Laundry pegs and string
For they are the forerunners
Women who weep, and dance, and keen
Women who sing
They cut down fences
And let the rebels in.

Valerie Free

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