

Multicultural Policy: Women Beware

By Carmen Perillo

Because this paper is written from a very personal perspective, I want to clarify certain underlying beliefs before proceeding. I believe that knowledge of people's culture is critically important to an understanding of their life situations. Respect for cultural norms and values is a fundamental premise upon which I operate, personally and professionally as a social worker. Therefore, a policy which aims to combat racism and discriminatory practices is based on a principle which I wholeheartedly endorse. However, multicultural policy as operationalized in Canada has had quite a different effect than may have been intended: this is the reason for the concerns I express in this article.

*The irony of multiculturalism is that it furnishes Canadian society with a great hope without having to change the fundamental structures of society. Multiculturalism is the failure of an illusion, not a policy.*¹

This paper will explain the importance of women approaching Canada's multicultural policy with great caution. This stance reflects a healthy skepticism based on my experience as an Italo-Canadian woman and on my observations of the state's response to the needs of women.

Of primary concern is the potential of multicultural policy to divert the attention of immigrant women from the state's neglect of their most basic needs and concerns — many of which are shared by all women. This is critical, given that women tend to accept responsibility for situations and circumstances which more rightly belongs to the state. *It is my contention that immigrant women tend to be*

abused, as women and as immigrants.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue that multicultural policy is bad, but rather that culture and identity issues are minor when compared to such basic needs as affordable housing, adequate incomes and child care. I believe that if our society had more respect for its members generally, a multicultural policy would be unnecessary. People of every cultural background would be entitled to assert their cultural identity. The development of this mutual respect is not assured if it is state-imposed. Immigrant women may also feel that the state is encouraging them to retain certain cultural values which prevent their full integration into Canadian society. A strong message of choice may encourage immigrant women to move outside of the traditional rigid role definitions.

I will look first at some of my recollections of being a daughter of an Italian immigrant family newly arrived in Toronto in the 1950s. This account will emphasize the impact of particular aspects of multiculturalism on my life. An analysis of the state's current response to women's needs from two perspectives — the residual and institutional — will follow. Finally, I will discuss some of the issues and conflicts engendered by multicultural policies.

My family immigrated to Toronto in stages; my father arrived first, followed by my mother with the three of us. The largest group of Italians in Toronto at that time (the late 50s) came from the rural regions of Southern Italy: this fact is critical to an understanding of this immigrant population. They tended to be poor, ill-educated, and possessed of a fatalistic view of life.² Behaviours which they dis-

played were often wrongly attributed to culture, when they were in fact a reflection of their history of poverty and of the difficulties of integrating into Canadian urban society. Northern Italian immigrants from a more industrialized setting were entirely different, with their own characteristics and problems.

Many Italians who immigrated during the 1950s came to escape the poverty of post-war Europe and to build a better life for their children. A number of them felt ambivalent about staying in Canada and often dreamt of returning home. It was commonplace for fathers to immigrate before their wives and children. Some young single men immigrated and later married, by proxy, women from Italy whom they had never met.

My recollection is that Italian immigrants did not feel that they had a right to live in Canada. They were not aware of the value of their contributions to the country. They were often victims of overt discrimination such as name-calling (D.P., Wop) and exploitation in the work place. It is my impression that they only started to feel like citizens after many years of residence in the country. This change in attitude coincided with their decisions to spend their lives in Canada, their increased economic and material progress, and their gradual, albeit grudging acceptance by other Canadians.

The other important issue during the 1950s and 60s was the concept of family and what it meant to Italians. Culturally, the family is seen as a resource and protection against all ills.³ Feelings of being unwelcome in Canadian society caused the boundaries around families to become even more rigid. For children, particularly

girls, a schizophrenic way of coping with this reality began to develop. Within the family, it was not okay to be Canadian and Canadian traits were discouraged. Outside of the family, it was not okay to be Italian. This resulted in a lack of acceptance of oneself in both realms. This may have led to identity difficulties and a reduction in self-esteem for Italian children. A strong attachment to extended family and to other Italian families from the same Italian town or village was being forced.

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This was sometimes from a necessity to survive and belong, rather than a matter of choice.

Italian women historically, and during the 50's, gained primary pleasure from their role as nurturing and servicing the family. Her personal needs took second place. Her main role was to serve men, the authority figures, and to nurture children. Although men were in charge of the economic issue, women tended to capture the domain of the emotional realm of family life.⁴

Women on their arrival to Canada were forced to work outside the home, perhaps for the first time. Their jobs usually entailed very long hours and frequent economic exploitation by employers. They often came home late, at which point they were required to deal with their responsibilities as wives and mothers. At the time, there was little daycare available. I recall Italian parents often being forced to leave small children alone, with strict instructions not to go outdoors. This inadequate form of taking care of children produced a great deal of guilt in women. This in turn resulted in these children having to deal with their parents' guilt. I do not recall hearing any expressions of anger regarding the state's failure to provide daycare.

Gradually, an overzealous attempt to maintain Italian culture within the family occurred. This related to two issues: the ambivalence about returning to Italy and their perception of what good Italian children should be. Given the hostile environ-

ment for Italians at the time, it was a way for them to maintain a sense of who they were. As things changed and as things in the broader Canadian society changed, many Italians — particularly women — were stuck and did not then fit into either Canadian or Italian society.

During my education and professional career, I have come to understand other factors that were important in terms of the plight of Italo-Canadian women during the 50s, 60s and 70s. Being Italian was not a respected status within the society. The Catholic religion supported the oppression of women. Catholics were not totally accepted by the general society. During my professional development, I was always told that it was an asset to be Italian and to speak Italian. However, in my first social work job, I was labelled an 'ethnic' worker. I struggled for a long time to understand what this meant — given that it was assumed that some people, such as Anglo-Saxons, had no ethnic identity. On principle, it implied that ethnic people were tainted with some sort of disease called 'ethnic.' This lack of acknowledgement that everyone has a cultural identity, with its own set of values, was very frustrating. The constant state of change as people adapted and grew within their society was also ignored. The over-emphasis on cultural issues allowed for the lack of attention to issues such as poverty, discrimination, and other special issues facing immigrant women.

Why is this an important issue? Why do I mistrust multicultural policy with respect to immigrant women?

Marilyn Callaghan, in her article, "Public Apathy in Government Parsimony: A Review of Child Welfare in Canada," questions the status of women as members of the state.⁵ She raises the issue of the appropriate division of responsibility between the state and citizens. I believe strongly that women should first be considered as citizens with a guarantee of certain rights; that in turn should translate into special policies and services because of their roles and contribution. One perspective that Marilyn Callaghan discusses is described by her as a 'residual' approach. This implies that individuals do not seek help from the state until all other alternatives (such as the family and the private market) have been exhausted. Often the types of services offered by the state carry a stigma and imply charity. The implication is that something is wrong with needy individuals because they are not able to cope alone in our society. The administration of this type of service usually subjects people to

means tests. Multicultural policy within a society that provides services to citizens in a residual manner can lead to emphasis on customs and values, while neglecting the broader issues of adequate income, housing, daycare, and other services and resources.

The second perspective is an institutional one. This perspective is founded in the belief that women, like other vulnerable groups in our society (dependent children, the elderly, the disabled), have

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special needs and rights. Regardless of the capabilities of women, they should have the right to assistance on the principle of need and equality. The emphasis is on normalcy and the realization that no one individual can be expected to carry the burdens faced within our complex and rapidly-changing society. This comprehensive approach assumes that the state has a responsibility to intervene in areas such as employment, education, housing, health, and social welfare. This perspective takes a front line defence against social problems, and services are given to citizens as a *right*, not a privilege (examples of this type of response to dealing with the special needs of women are universal daycare and medical care). There would be no stigma attached to women who are receiving such services. This particular perspective may not address the total inequality of women because of our class system, but it would provide a more appropriate way of intervening within our current system.

An understanding of the residual manner in which the state intervenes is critical to comprehending the impact of multicultural policy on immigrant women. This type of approach implies that difficulties experienced by women are due to the personal inadequacy. My concern is that multicultural policies imply that the problems experienced by women are caused by the lack of attention to cultural differences — as opposed to the discrimination that immigrant women are confronted

with in many areas of their life. *Understanding a women's cultural identity will not alleviate her poverty or lack of daycare, and other special problems.* It may also lead to women being locked into traditional, oppressive roles.

The state needs to begin taking responsibility for the immigration policies that have brought immigrants to Canada. It also needs to deal with the reality that confronts immigrants. An added concern is expressed by Margaret Eichler, who states that over the past several decades, families in Canada — as in all highly industrialized countries — have been undergoing some rapid structural changes.⁶ The rising divorce rate, falling fertility rate, and a continuing increase in the labour force participation of wives and mother, are only a few of the factors that have fundamentally altered the composition, structure and functions of families. As these changes have occurred, according to Eichler, the policies have not responded adequately to meet the needs of women and children. For example, the state has not significantly intervened in providing affordable daycare for single parents (usually women). In two-parent families, women are no longer working to supplement the family income for luxury items, but in order to provide basic necessities for their children.

The other issue that has not been addressed by the state is the forced dependency of women. Immigrant women are often found in hostels for victims of fam-

ily violence. Although there has been some service provided on a temporary basis in order to alleviate this difficulty, there has not been a real attempt to decrease women's dependency. Often women in this situation are trapped, with no way out: no remuneration is given to women to assist them in raising children. Women need this type of recognition so that value is placed on their work either in or out of the home. Without remuneration for the service they provide in raising children, they will never obtain the right to be independent. This lack of response by the state raises the question of what value is placed on children and women in our society.

My other concern regarding multicultural policy is that it may lead to the internalization by immigrant women of that view that their problems are due to personal inadequacies. This is particularly critical for Italian women because of the oppression they experienced being raised with the philosophies of the Catholic church. Internalizing difficulties is not uncommon for most women. There is the saying that women go mad, and men go bad because women tend to internalize frustration and anger rather than externalizing these emotions. This, added to the abuse that they experience through the media in terms of the exploitation of their bodies and their identities, becomes very worrisome.

What do immigrant women have to do, say or be before we accept them as

women and as full members of the women's community?

Women's ethnic identities should not be allowed to contribute to their further oppression. Women who immigrate to other countries do not seek to remain separate from other ethnic groups. Multiculturalism should not be allowed to divide women from other members of the women's community. Diversity should be encouraged and used to enrich women's lives, not to oppress further. Multiculturalism should never be seen as a separate piece of policy. It should be *integrated into every policy.*

¹ E. Kallen, *Ethnicity and Human Rights in Canada* (Toronto: Gage, 1982), p. 230.

² M. McGoldrick, J.K. Pearce and J. Giordano, eds., *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1982), p. 340.

³ S.M. Tommasi, C.S. Tommasi and M.H. Engles, eds., *The Italian Experience in the United States* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1970), p. 340.

⁴ McGoldrick, p. 347.

⁵ Ed. B. Warfe, pp. 1-27.

⁶ Margaret Eichler, *Families in Canada Today* (Toronto: Gage, 1983).

Laced Shoes

Black, laced-up, stacked-heeled, my new shoes evoke memories of nuns' habits, corsets and pessaries, the old world ideas of sin and grace, virgin and whore. Pointed, they cinch my toes yet I am eager to wear them each day as if slipping into their too narrow fit, I am slipping back into a life familiar to me, a life of sacrifice. In these shoes, I am all women who believe in duty and vanity, who experience passion as an illness no drug can alleviate. These shoes lead me back down the convent halls of my soul, where the pain that makes me wince is a requisite for my salvation.

Anne Cimon

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