

A Modest Beginning:

My Work on and for Immigrant Women.

Roxana Ng

L'auteure nous fait part de ses expériences lors de son travail avec des femmes immigrantes ainsi que de sa propre expérience en tant qu'immigrante. Il aurait été difficile de faire tout ce que ces femmes ont pu faire sans l'ambiance environnante qu'a créée le mouvement féministe, une atmosphère qui a permis aux femmes de se rassembler et de partager leurs expériences et leurs soucis. L'auteure, qui fait un travail social ainsi que de la recherche dans le quartier chinois de Vancouver, s'est rendu compte que les femmes immigrées et celles qui se préoccupaient de leur situation avaient besoin d'un moyen de communiquer entre elles. C'est donc pour cela que Roxana Ng ainsi que d'autres ont fondé le Comité des femmes immigrés. L'auteure a continué son travail avec les femmes immigrées depuis qu'elle est venue à Toronto pour faire un doctorat.

This article is a personal account of some of my experiences working with immigrant women. I want to state that although the study of immigrant women is becoming more and more acceptable and popular, my work in the area should not be construed simply as contributing to its establishment as a "field" of

study. It is the result, rather than the motive, of the work in which I have been involved in the past several years. More importantly, it is a personal struggle to come to grips with my own experience as an immigrant and the experience of others who have adopted Canada as their home. This, I am sure, is the motive of many of us working in this area right now.

I don't think that one can understand the achievements that immigrant women have accomplished without acknowledging the women's movement. In my book *Immigrant Housewives in Canada* (co-authored Judith Ramirez), I argued that the struggles waged by many Canadian women have not automatically touched the lives of immigrant women. However, these struggles did create a general climate for women to come together and share their experiences and concerns. The women's movement has certainly inspired and mobilized many educated immigrant women and has given them a way to understand the historical and contemporary contexts of their oppression, both in Canada and in their home countries.

My own serious effort in understanding and writing about the situa-

tion of immigrant women began when I worked as a community worker and researcher in the Strathcona (Chinatown) area of Vancouver in 1976, shortly after my graduate training in anthropology at the University of British Columbia. The daily contact with working-class immigrants made me realize that the theories on adjustment and acculturation, which I learned at graduate school, really did not prepare me to deal with the real-life situations of immigrants in a constantly changing world. It became clear to me very quickly that most of the work that we were doing in Strathcona was band-aid work. Moreover, the problems and difficulties of immigrant women were not addressed.

Women's experience was often treated essentially as the same as that of men. Community workers, especially if they were male, simply did not recognize the uniqueness of women's experience. This was not a profound personal discovery. As I became more involved in community activities and met others working in the area, it became obvious that this was a concern that many female community workers shared. But at that time we did not have a way of talking about the experience

of immigrant women as a general feature of our work, and we felt isolated and often frustrated in our respective work settings.

Shortly after I began working in Strathcona, I also became involved with the Women's Research Centre. In the fall of 1976 a group of women, myself among them, came together for the first time to discuss the way in which a research collective, aimed at conducting research for women at the grass-roots level, could be structured and implemented. The idea of an independent research organization for women was originally conceived by Dorothy Smith with a group of women in the community prior to 1976. But it was not until then that there was sufficient interest in implementing it.

After we formed as a collective I took my "problem" about the invisibility of immigrant women to the Research Centre, to see if it could be formulated as an issue around which a committee could be organized. Out of the discussions we had, the idea of conducting a series of workshops, which would bring together community workers and individuals concerned about the situation of working-class immigrant women, began to materialize. We wanted the workshops to be a place where women could talk openly about the problems with regard to immigrant women that they encountered in their work. The workshops were specifically not designed to replace existing services or to recommend new ones; they were designed to allow people who felt isolated in their work to establish informal networks and form support groups outside of the formal service-delivery system. Finally, the workshops also were to explore alternative methods of working out problems which were unresolvable within the confines of existing services.

Four workshops were planned and carried out in the summer of 1977. The general response to the workshops was enthusiastic. Between twenty-five and thirty women attended the workshops. Many of them told us that it was the first time that they were able to come together and share their common concerns

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about immigrant women. In the course of the workshops the unique difficulties facing working-class, non-English-speaking immigrant women in Canada came to light. When so many of us had similar impressions and experiences, we knew that these problems of immigrant women were not figments of our imagination; they were REAL!

I will not go into the details of the workshops. The entire proceeding is documented in a report entitled *Services For Immigrant Women: Report and Evaluation of a Series of Four Workshops conducted in the Summer, 1977*, written by Janet Sprout and myself, which is available from the Women's Research Centre (No. 301, 2515 Burrard Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J6).

After organizing the workshops, the Immigrant Women's Committee continued its work on and for working-class immigrant women on different fronts: some of us worked with domestic workers; some worked with other groups working with immigrants; some began to collect data on policies that might affect immigrant women. One of the most "monumental" activities we undertook was writing a leaflet on the implications for women of the

new Immigration Act, then Bill C-24. I say "monumental" because this four-page leaflet created so much pressure from the Department of Employment and Immigration on the Research Centre (at that time partially funded by the Secretary of State) that we finally had to withdraw the centre's name from the leaflet; the leaflet was distributed under the name of the Immigrant Women's Committee. This incident was an eye-opener for many of us about the effect of government funding on freedom of speech. I subsequently wrote and published some papers on the politics of citizens' participation, discussing specifically the effects of funding on the possibilities and limits of community organizations.

The final project in which I was involved before I left Vancouver was a study on family violence among immigrant families. The project was a satisfying experience because it was the first time that some of us actually got to talk with immigrant women first-hand. Though we were cautioned by some agencies about women's reluctance to discuss this issue, the women were in fact delighted to speak with us and tell us their frequently horrendous experiences. They were quite clear that they wanted their stories known. An anecdote concerns a male community worker who pulled me aside after my meeting with one agency about the project and told me that in his culture, wife-beating was considered a sign of affection. Needless to say, the women I interviewed, from *his* culture, told me quite a different story! The research findings of the study was published by Health and Welfare Canada in *The Social Organization of Family Violence: An Ethnography of Immigrant Experience*, obtainable from the Women's Research Centre.

I came to Toronto to pursue my doctoral study with two concomitant objectives. The first was to draw attention to the lack of theories that could adequately address the experience of minority women, including immigrant women. The second objective was to begin to develop analyses that would take women

into account.

This undertaking at first glance seemed impossible, because although some materials on immigrant women were beginning to emerge, such as the excellent report by Sheila Arnopoulos (Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1979), this subject was still not considered central to ethnic studies. The comment that my work on women is "women's studies" and not "ethnic studies" has been made by my male colleagues in more than one context. Fortunately for me there were many women, both in academia and in the community, who were aware of precisely the same problem I saw and wanted to do something about it.

It was under this kind of circumstance that I came into contact with Judith Ramirez, then on staff at the Immigrant Women's Centre. With her co-operation and under her sponsorship we launched a project on immigrant women in Toronto, which resulted in our book, *Immigrant Housewives in Canada* (distributed by Housewives' Initiative, 348 College Street, 2/F, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1S4), released in 1981 after two-and-a-half years' preparation.

sessions on "women, ethnicity, and class" in the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology annual meetings. For the past three years we have been able to solicit interesting papers on women from all over Canada and to open up a dialogue on issues affecting minority women: labour-force participation, daycare, mental health, and social services, as well as theoretical issues of class consciousness, and gender and ethnicity.

At the community level there has been immense progress in the last five years in the provision of services to immigrant women. In Toronto in particular there are now many community groups that devote themselves exclusively to the special needs of immigrant women cross-culturally. This increase of services would not have happened without community-wide protests, as in the case of Employment Services for Immigrant Women (now Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre).

Meanwhile, years of organizing efforts around domestic workers are coming to fruition. The Montreal Household Workers' Association was the first to establish itself as a viable organization. In Toronto a

There are new problems and new dangers, however. As immigrant women become more vocal and visible, there will be attempts to diffuse our power by influencing the character of our services (through funding, for example). As the economic recession deepens and previous funding sources are cut back, we face the danger of competing for limited amounts of money, which might lead to division and competitiveness among ourselves. In academia, as work on immigrant women becomes legitimized and research funds become available, men will want to include us as a "variable" in their studies. In this case we may face the danger of being transformed into a topic of research, the result of which may not reflect our experience or address our concern.

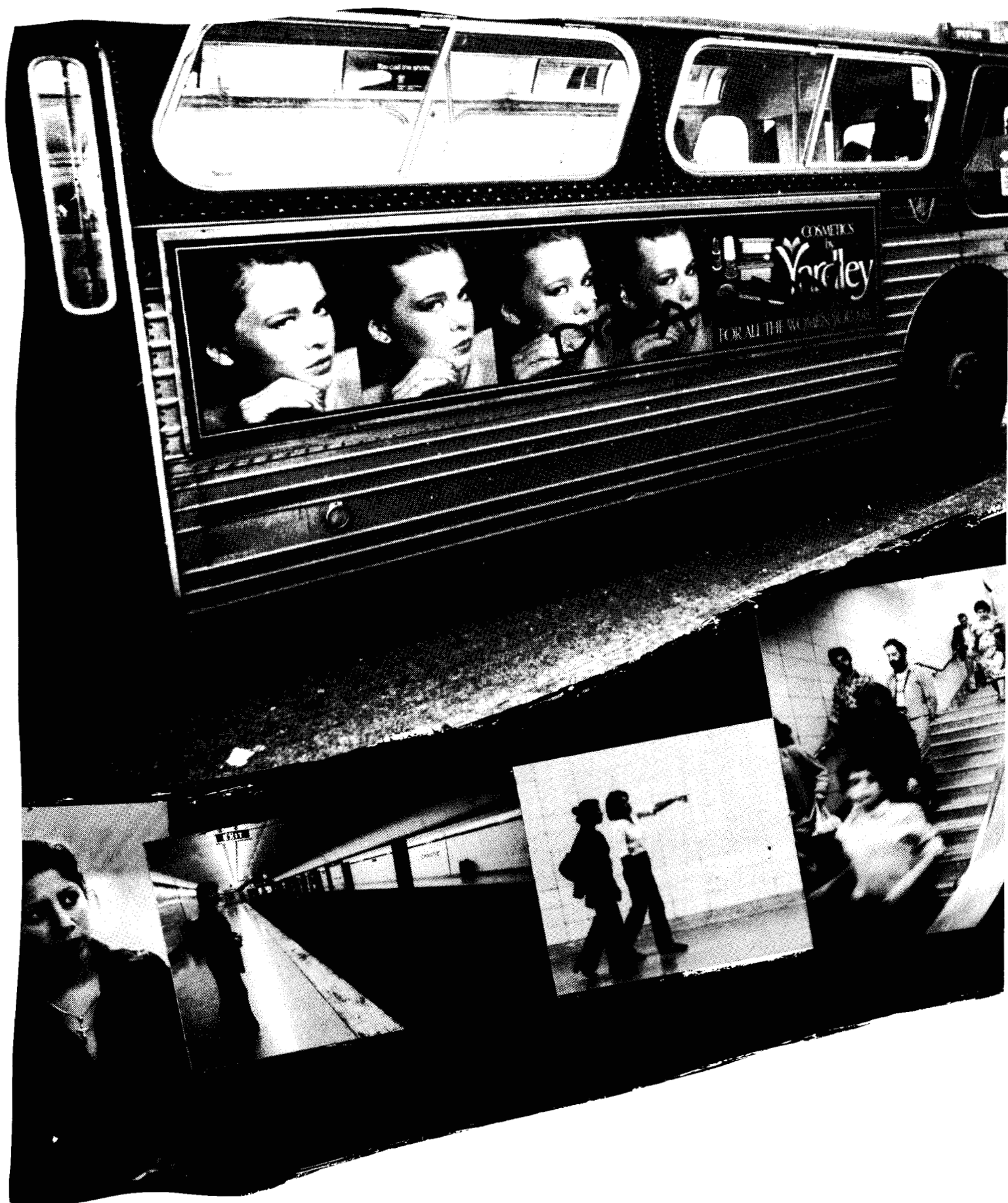
It is undeniable that we have made tremendous impact and gains in the last five years. But our accomplishment is only the beginning of a long battle which, if we don't continue the fight, will lose ground, especially during a period of economic crisis and backlash. In the conclusion of *Immigrant Housewives in Canada*, I wrote:

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In a few short years, immigrant women have come a long way in fighting for our rights and for services which meet our needs. But we also have a long way to go. Most immigrant women, relative to their Canadian sisters, are still unprotected by legislation. The service delivery system still functions, in large part, as though we were not here. We still have not gained equality in the home or at the workplace. (Our work) has brought some of the special problems and struggles of immigrant women to light. But much work remains to be done, both in the community and in academia, in order that the situations of immigrant women in Canada be more fully understood and articulated. For those of us committed to women's rights and to justice for Canada's minority groups, (what we have achieved) is a modest beginning which suggests some new directions to follow. But the struggle continues. . . .

Through colleagues and friends I was also introduced to women working in the broad area of ethnic studies in different disciplines, including Jean Burnet, Angela Wei Djao, Danielle Juteau Lee, and Barbara Roberts, who gave me a tremendous amount of support in my work. As a sociologist Danielle shared my concern about women's invisibility in ethnic studies, and, with her help, I was able to organize

coalition called INTERCEDE, which devotes itself to pressuring and lobbying governments, was formed in 1979; there are now several groups in Vancouver working with domestic workers. Although I am not directly involved in all these activities due to my academic commitments, I want to mention them to indicate what immigrant women (the collective "we") have accomplished in the past few years.



GETTING THERE

Producing Photostories
with Immigrant
Women

Deborah Barrett Ferné Cristall dian marino

Getting There is a story of immigrant women surviving in and adapting to a new culture. It is about social obstacles: the barrier of language, the lack of decent work, the dominant, distorted images of women seen everywhere. The methodology used in the production of the stories starts from the issues of everyday life and encourages people to talk to each other about their experiences. The basic principle is simple: that people learn and take action best when they explore common issues together.

Along with the photostories are short background essays on immigrant women and work and on the contradictions between advertising images and the lives of women. The book also contains a step-by-step introduction to "How the Photostories Were Made" and an activities and discussion guide.

Getting There is both an introduction to a collective method of learning based on personal and social experience and a book of provocative photoessays. It will be of interest not only to people in English as a Second Language and literacy classes and employment programs, but also to those involved in education through unions, community organizations and women's groups.

The authors are community workers and activists committed to alternative forms of education.

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