

ImMIgRAnT yOUng wOMeN as FeMInISts?

by Azmina N. Ladha

Le féminisme est un concept étranger chez la plupart des jeunes femmes immigrantes parce qu'elles sont impliquées dans des problèmes beaucoup plus dramatiques que ceux qui préoccupent le mouvement féministe. L'auteure examine de quelle façon les jeunes femmes immigrantes s'identifient.

"But you're not even an immigrant," she exclaimed. I stared at the honest surprise on my friend's face after I told her I was thinking of volunteering with a Cultural Buddy program that paired up new immigrant teen girls with older role models. "Yeah, I mean no, but..." I stammered. "Why are we having this conversation anyway, I mean who cares?" another friend interjected. "So are we still going shopping tomorrow?" Soon the conversation switched to the more pressing issues of dark denim versus black and red highlights versus blond. Even as the debate of which was better, Lancôme or Estee Lauder, swelled around me, I couldn't let go of what she had said earlier. When exactly did one stop being an immigrant? If there was some graduation process, complete with diploma, cap, and gown, someone had forgotten to mail me an invitation. Or maybe there were signs on people's backs that distinguished the immigrants from the non-immigrants. If so, someone had taken off my sign without me knowing it. Or, maybe it had just dropped off along the way.

Though I thought casually about the issue a few more times, the daily routine of life soon took over as I memorized the difference between *anions* and *cations* for chemistry classes, separated whites and colours for laundry, and ate the last of the cookie dough ice-cream before my brother got to it. As much as I wanted to sit down and ponder the issue of who an immigrant really was, it seemed as though I never had time. It wasn't until it came up suddenly, in the same forceful manner as it had the last time around, that I really began considering where I stood.

I was sitting in on a focus group with the Cultural Buddy girls and the issue at hand was the barriers for new immigrant girls. The group was really lively and engaged when the facilitator posed the question, "Do you trust the current government?" Her hopeful expression was met with dead silence. She tried to rephrase the question, "Would you consider voting for the same party or another one in the next election?" Again, the same deafening hush as the girls stared at the ceiling. Sensing a lull in the

outpouring of emotions that had preceded this round of questions, the facilitator called for a snack break and the relieved girls rushed for the muffins and juice.

When everyone took their seats again, this time armed

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with breakfast goodies, I knew something in the atmosphere had changed. Hands were no longer shooting up in the air before the facilitator had even finished posing the question; now, there was a certain hesitancy on the girls' faces. Refusing to give up, the facilitator tried once more by asking if the girls felt that the government really represented them. Unable to maintain my silence any longer, I quietly pointed out that maybe people repeatedly voted for the same government for lack of a viable alternative. My opinion was formulated through years of taking political science courses and reading political theory literature but I didn't really realize how many equally correct opinions could be applied to the same question. It wasn't until a shy girl sitting near the back of the group pointed out that many immigrants, especially immigrant women, didn't vote at all that I realized why there was such silence. I thought about equal access to elected representatives and weighing candidate platforms before voting because it is a part of my world. I am exposed to it in school every day, I relish reading editorials that praise the government equally as much as I enjoy reading those that criticize it, and sometimes, though I would never admit it in public, I even like watching the House proceedings on television. But I had never considered how insignificant this is to so many people. That is not to say I assumed everyone is a political junkie as I am—my own parents would rather watch the grass grow on their front lawn than read the latest edition of the *Red Book*—but I have always felt that politics has at least some relevance to everyone only because it impacts daily life in a big way.

After the first round of questions about politics in general, the facilitator focused on the issue of representation. She began by briefly describing some aspects of



Jennifer Moreau, "Guevara Hill," Silk Screen, 14.25" x 15.5", 1999.

feminism (though she did not use the term itself), and then posed the idea that many feminists felt men could not represent women in the public arena; consequently, women would be better represented by women who knew their issues and were connected to them on a more personal level. Though I expected the same silence to prevail once again, the girls began rolling their eyes and giggling. Finally one of them said, "But we don't even care about feminism." If politics held such little significance to the teens in that focus group, is it any surprise that feminism would hold even less interest?

Issues touching teenage girls surfaced later when the facilitator posed the million-dollar question, "What defines an immigrant?" It was amazing to see the wealth of emotions flash across each girl's face, ranging from pensiveness to confusion to anger. Here was the question that had been plaguing my mind for so long and it finally looked as though I would get some answers. Hands began shooting up left and right. A tidal wave of comments burst forth ranging from how immigrants did not speak English to how immigrants could not get jobs. Though the atmosphere was charged, it wasn't until someone mentioned how immigrants were always in ESL classes in school that it truly reached a climax. Everyone nodded their heads vigorously in agreement. Here were girls who came from vastly different backgrounds, had different

lifestyles and different opinions but this was obviously an issue they agreed on. Soon I heard some of the most poignant stories that truly reflected the trials and tribulations of being an immigrant teen. A story of how one girl was yelled at for failing science tests only because the teacher didn't realize that she could not understand the language of the textbook. Discussions of how even within ESL classes, there were cultural cliques, tied together by common languages and customs. Honest admissions that moving out of the ESL class into a class of "normal" students was almost like moving up in social status.

This discussion of language barriers proved critical for it was here that the girls explained that not knowing the language was the root cause of a host of other problems. A girl mentioned that her father, a lawyer, could not practice in the new country because he did not have the necessary certificates and he could not get the certification because his English was not good enough. Other girls mentioned that their parents could only find jobs involving hard labour, once again because of the language barrier. As a result, their parents encouraged them to make English-speaking friends, because they believed that this would improve their children's communication skills and perhaps better prepare them for the future. It was

at this point that the language barrier problem contributed to a cultural barrier problem. Girls talked about how their parents wanted them to have "American" or "Canadian" friends but would not allow them to go to the movies with them or dress like them. Problems such as having friends of the opposite sex and setting curfew times were even more critical to immigrant parents because while they wanted their kids to integrate into the new society, they wanted them to hold on to the values and traditions of the old one. Most girls just saw this dilemma as impossible, believing that the two ways of life could never be reconciled. For them, it was a choice to either retain the old or adopt the new.

It was at this point that another critical concern was raised, that of admission to post-secondary institutions. The younger girls of the group worried they may not be admitted because their English was not good enough while the older ones, those who already attended colleges and universities, spoke of unequal treatment at the hands of professors who regarded them as third-class students because they were not perfectly comfortable with the language. The facilitator seemed genuinely concerned at what the girls did when they felt they were being treated unfairly. I wanted someone to say that they fought the injustice and demanded explanations for the discrimination but I wasn't surprised when they said that they

ignored it and went about as though nothing was wrong. Finally I pointed out that many professors would be willing to explain the material again if they asked but my comment was met with snorts. "Yes, but you speak English and grew up here so it's different for you," someone said. And again, I was left to consider exactly how it was different for me.

It wasn't until I got home that I began to consider why the facilitator had even mentioned feminism. Perhaps it was because feminism is supposed to address all women's issues. But to a great extent, feminism in the immigrant community is viewed as something foreign. The issues that feminism is stereotypically linked with advocating, such as equal pay for equal work, or supporting equal numbers of female representatives in government, has no real relevance to immigrant women who are more concerned with daily trials such as learning a new language or finding a job. More importantly, those in the movement who advocate these issues are seen as "different." It is felt that these female advocates already have a very comfortable life and the course of feminism is something they pursue as an idealistic hobby or to ward off boredom.

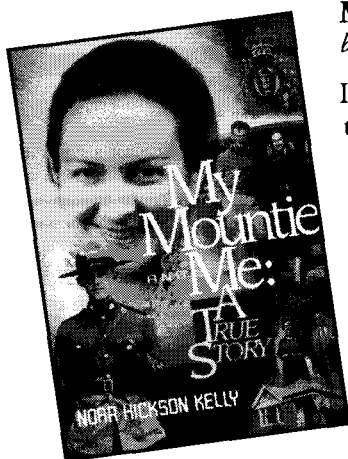
Immigrant women, especially teens, feel no connection to someone standing on a podium advocating for equal opportunity because they are more concerned with opportunities, pure and simple. Once they have access to these, then perhaps equality will be their next concern but for now, their life revolves around bare necessities rather than

idealistic notions of fairness. The feminist movement needs to first identify the issues of immigrant women as distinct from the issues of other women, and then work on addressing them in a fair and equitable manner. It is only then that immigrant women will see feminist leaders as women who are mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives just like themselves as opposed to women who are "different." Only when feminism applies to them will they see it as a viable alternative to current leadership.

It seems as though I have finally come to terms with who is an immigrant. The irony is that there is no clear definition and maybe there never will be, there is no clear line separating immigrants from non-immigrants, and I certainly don't know why I consider myself to be an immigrant while everyone else doesn't. But it is a comfort knowing that there are female immigrant teens who, with their distinct experiences and unique personalities, will one day find unity in their diversity and begin to advocate for equality, first within the feminist movement to make their issues heard, and then in the larger society.

Azmina N. Ladha is a third-year political science student at the University of British Columbia. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, she grew up in Los Angeles, California and currently lives in Vancouver with her family. She works as a facilitator for the youth advisory panel at the FREDA Centre.

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