

Multiculturalism Policy

A Terrain of Struggle for Immigrant Women

by Tania Das Gupta

L'auteure fait une analyse critique des politiques et des pratiques multiculturelles du gouvernement canadien se basant particulièrement sur l'expérience des femmes immigrantes

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et de couleur. Elle démontre comment les relations de sexes, de races et de classes sont reproduites par les pratiques de l'État.

People from different political persuasions have called for the elimination of multiculturalism policy. They say that it has been totally ineffective in fighting racism and has instead served as a means to control ethnic groups (Bejeau 13). Others have called for the elimination of multiculturalism saying that it is a drain on government resources (Gairdner 432). People on both the "left" and the "right" advocate throwing out multiculturalism policy and reverting back to laissez-faire policies regarding racism and racial conflict.

On the other hand, Ng et al. show the "contradictions and advantages" of receiving state funding, specifically for work by immigrant women's organizations. While they examine how community organizations become extensions of the state apparatus through the mechanism of funding, they also reveal how community workers are constantly "testing and pushing the boundaries of state-funded activities" (Stasiulis 81).

In normal times, the state legitimizes the status quo and maintains ideological hegemony. This means

that anything contradicting the capitalist system, usually involving class, gender, racism, and ethnic conflicts, is contained and neutralized. It also means that disenfranchised members of the population, such as people of colour and women, are integrated

into the hierarchical structures of institutions. Leaders of resistance are co-opted or neutralized.

Wotherspoon has discussed the process of establishing and main-

taining ideological hegemony achieved by the active involvement and consensus of people in subordinate positions (9). Multiculturalism as state policy and practice has thus become an ideology.

I will point out the various processes by which the state, in particular the Multiculturalism Directorate, has fulfilled its legitimization function particularly where immigrant women are concerned. I will analyse the state's role by deconstructing an internal document titled *Multiculturalism—Priorities* as well as by critically examining the contemporary history of immigrant women's organizations derived from personal participation and observation.

Blaming the victim

The first paragraph of *Multiculturalism—Priorities* states the following:

Immigrant women are isolated both within their own and the larger society, often as a result of limiting cultural traditions and lack of basic life skills, particularly official language acquisition (Secretary of State).

A "blame the victim" scenario is

painted here. The low socio-economic position and isolation of immigrant women is seen as being a result of "limiting of cultural traditions," and their "lack of skills," particularly a lack of "official language acquisition." The indigenous cultures of immigrant women are seen as inherently conservative and pathological, not oriented to developing a high level of self esteem or self identity, and therefore, success in social life. No mention is made of the systemic racism and sexism experienced by immigrant women which lead to their exclusion from the larger society. The denial of training opportunities in official language programs through the imposition of a criteria of priority, for example being "bread winners," or being an "independent immigrant" etc., are not even hinted at even though report after report (including those commissioned by the government) have confirmed this reality (Estable and Meyer).

What is meant by isolation "within their own society" is a mystery given the fact that immigrant women are often very well integrated within their own community-based organizations and institutions. Isolation due to sexism within their own communities is not unique to immigrant women. It is a reality for all women in all societies. To suggest otherwise is to engage in the most gross example of ethnocentrism.

Another popularly accepted reason for the isolation of immigrant women is "lack of information." In keeping with the attitudes of multiculturalism policy, this reasoning lays the blame for the isolation and exclusion of immigrant women on the "ignorance" of the victim. The implication is that immigrant women's liberation from oppression will be achieved if they become more educated, more knowledgeable. It once again removes the focus of analysis away from the power inequalities ex-

isting in society which deny women in general, and immigrant women in particular, equal opportunities in life.

Anti-racism transformed to race relations

In another section of *Multiculturalism—Priorities*, there is a special paragraph devoted to the other priority target group—separate from “immigrant women”—namely, “visible minorities.” This implies that the two target groups are mutually exclusive, which is far from the truth. Although there is a recognition of the power inequalities that foster racism, policy recommendations again focus on “cross cultural communication,” “race relations,” and “multiculturalism in education.” Under the rubric of cross-cultural communications, promotion of “cross cultural understanding” is advocated. Underlying this strategy is an understanding of discrimination as being attitudinal in origin, as being a product of mis-

understanding, a communication problem which can be corrected by understanding and information-sharing—not power sharing.

Expansive hegemony

One of the approaches recommended in *Multiculturalism—Priorities* actually incorporates the aspirations of immigrant women who have been organizing collectively to oppose class, gender, and racist discrimination through community development efforts (Das Gupta 12). This is an example of “expansive hegemony,” using Gramscian terminology. The ruling class, in particular state institutions, will absorb some demands of the “grassroots” in order to neutralize popular resistance. It would rather *permit* reform around access issues as far as its institutional structures are concerned than be made vulnerable at its core social relations.

In the case of immigrant women, the government’s approach is to “encourage research and educational materials directed at the specific problems of immigrant women.” It is noteworthy that considerable data exists testifying to the specific problems of immigrant women. Much of this research has been produced by community development organizations. So, the thrust for “more research” can be seen as a tactic for inaction as far as immigrant women are concerned. It is also another way of de-legitimizing research conducted by the community of immigrant women through a process of non-recognition, thus making immigrant women and their work invisible. This lays the stage for academic researchers and consultants to corner this sphere of knowledge production by, in effect, re-naming age old realities.

Community development by immigrant women

I want to turn my attention now to the community development efforts of immigrant women in Ontario roughly from the 1970s to the 1980s. Immigrant women and women of

colour started organizing extensively in the mid-1970s. In Toronto, Women Working with Immigrant Women (wwiw) evolved as an informal group of women who began meeting to provide support to each other and to share information about their work with immigrant women. Organizations developed all over Ontario addressing issues of employment, health, and English language classes (Das Gupta 17). Immigrant women and women of colour were making an impact on other “mainstream” institutions and movements such as the labour movement and the women’s movement (Leah 166). By 1978, the Multiculturalism Directorate had commissioned a study on the needs of immigrant women and on programs aimed at immigrant women.

The Multiculturalism Directorate’s growing interest in the demands of immigrant women’s organizations was symbolized by a National Conference it organized in 1981, where wwiw (Toronto) was invited to organize the plenary session. While wwiw saw it as an opportunity to dialogue directly with policy makers, the government may have seen the conference as a process of legitimizing itself by “consultating” with the most outspoken community organization of immigrant women at the time.

In subsequent years, the relationship between the federal government and community development groups was, in my opinion, ambiguous. The ambiguity and tension persisted because many of the community organizations were directly critical of certain government policies and practices as being antithetical to the principle of the right to self-determination of immigrant women. The issue of “representation” has been a bone of contention in almost every major consultation process, coalition building, and conference. The underlying theme of such contestation has been the issue of state control over immigrant women’s movements in Canada. It started in 1976 when government officials who had been part of wwiw



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were asked to leave. It resurfaced after the national conference of 1981 when the idea of developing a national network of immigrant women arose. At the end of that conference, a group of volunteers constituted themselves as the National Follow-up Committee on the recommendations that had emerged. Their only task was to monitor the implementation of those recommendations. In course of time, these committee members became

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the official spokespersons of all immigrant women in Canada. A struggle ensued involving a concerted effort by community organizations of immigrant women chiefly from Ontario. The groups loudly denounced the process that had been followed and replaced it with a democratic, decentralized, grassroots approach to forming a national organization of immigrant women with elected executive members, and with full input from each of the provinces. This contest was not short, nor straightforward. Issues of class difference among immigrant women became apparent as middle-class participants were easily co-opted by the workings of the state.

In 1983, the Ontario Coalition of Visible Minority Women (OCVMW) was formed. This marked the first time women of colour (both immigrant and non-immigrant) came together in order to directly address racism and sexism. The formation of OCVMW was also a symbol of grassroots community workers resisting state efforts to define and control women of colour in their efforts to lobby against racism and sexism.

The National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women (NOIVMW), was formed in Winnipeg in 1986. Before the birth of NOIVMW,

the Minister of Multiculturalism held another "consultation" meeting in 1985. Thirty-seven women, ostensibly from national immigrant and "visible minority" women's groups and ethno-cultural organizations, were hand-picked to attend the meeting. Notably, some of the activist immigrant and anti-racist community workers were not invited to this event. Hence, we saw an example of the state organizing, naming, and limiting

the "representatives" of immigrant and women of colour communities. The underlying process included recognizing individual women as spokespersons, integrating

them into state discourse and structures, thereby legitimizing state policies and practices while marginalizing entire communities of immigrants and women of colour. These hand-picked consultants developed a brief that refined the recommendations made at the 1981 conference on immigrant women—another exercise in recycling knowledge. However, some of the activists selected for the consultation were able to challenge the process and shape the discourse to a certain extent. A ten member "Action" Committee was formed to continue "dialogue" with the federal government. With this move, the government was able to by-pass existing provincial and local networks of immigrant women and women of colour. In hindsight, the construction of this Action Committee was a compromise by the state. The government wanted to appear to respond to the de-legitimization of the National Follow-up Committee that resulted from the powerful critique of groups like WWIW. At the same time, the state was able to retain control over the movement through another hand-picked committee.

Such struggles within the community of immigrant women show us the pervasiveness of ideological hegemony. We ourselves take an active

role in reproducing our subordination, not because of our psychological or moral degeneration, but because of our location within hierarchies of class and racism.

In the early 1980s, the movements of immigrant women and women of colour were divided. Women of colour insisted that racism had to be named and prioritized. Some also felt that their organizations had to be exclusively "of colour." Immigrant women (including whites) felt that their movement implicitly included race issues and that the two sub-movements should be linked. Such disagreements often became bitter. Other than through the work of a few community activists who recognized the importance of maintaining linkages, classism, sexism, and racism were not connected in practice. Governments (at all levels) took turns engaging in back-patting exercises in order to "cool off" community anger wherever it was originating—from immigrant women or women of colour. Reliance on government funding further accentuated feelings of competition and resentment among different groupings of minority women.

Conclusion

The stated policy and practice of multiculturalism has successfully reproduced oppressive gender, race, and class relations and ideologies. These have been socially organized by a complex mesh of state practices, facilitated by divisions in the community.

Multiculturalism has amounted to a rhetorical device. Recent events show clearly that class, gender, and racial inequalities are being perpetuated systematically even though government has repeatedly professed the opposite.

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