

# There is a Connection Racism, Hetero/Sexism and Access to ESL

by Kathleen Rockhill and  
Patricia Tomic

*Les auteures expliquent comment le racisme et l'hétéro-sexisme agissent de pair pour reléguer les femmes immigrantes au statut d'autres. Pour*

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*Women's work is not valued as important enough to merit the resource allocation necessary to enable them to learn English to acquire a decent job.*

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*ces femmes, l'étude de l'anglais comme langue seconde devient une course d'obstacles qui les décourage de poursuivre des études plus poussées.*

*If I suffer from violence at home, or if I don't have access to an English course, or if I don't have work, there is a connection. It is not my fault but rather it is a problem within the system, within the patriarchal or capitalist system.*

Racism and hetero/sexism work together to construct "immigrant women" as "other," not members of Canadian society, not entitled to a fair share of the economic resources that are essential to their successful survival. The confluence of these "isms" is played out in an intricate, tightly woven obstacle course that prevents women from seriously pursuing the study of English as a Second Language (ESL).

**If you have a husband, you do not have the right to study**

Within the framework of Canadian immigration policies and practices, most women who immigrate to Canada do so as spouses; they arrive either to join husbands who have

come earlier, or, if they enter at the same time, the husband is designated as the "principal applicant," the head-of-household, with his wife as his dependent. There are serious drawbacks to this deceptively simple discursive category "spouse." Spouses are denied access to most forms of social assistance, including subsidized language and job training. There are exceptions: special programs for refugees; a handful of programs geared specifically for immigrant women, courses with long waiting lists and hundreds of applicants for the few available seats.

During 1990/91, we conducted a study of ESL and Latin American immigrant women in Toronto. As part of our study, we interviewed eleven workers at community centres offering educational programs that, in one way or another, serve Latin American immigrant/refugee women as part of their mission. Since most of our interviewees are women who were also once newly arrived refugees and/or immigrants, they know from personal experience, as well as from their work, the obstacles that women face at every turn. We also interviewed two women, more recent refugees, who told us their stories in more detail. These informants, without exception, stressed that institutionalized sexism and racism work in concert with patriarchal family relations to place immigrant women at the bottom of the social scale.

*...As a result of institutionalized sexism by the government here, in the family, it is the man who receives an English course and not the woman.... The woman does not have access to courses in English unless she goes to a public school,*

*but as you know the English taught is not the same.*

In an effort to counter charges of gender bias in Canada Employment and Immigration Commission's training programs, the Settlement Language Training Program was instituted, theoretically for women "not destined for the labour force." Women are denied the economic subsidy necessary for full-time study, ideologically justified on the grounds that they don't work. This is not true. What is true is that their work and their lives are not valued as important enough to merit the resource allocation necessary to enable them to learn enough English to acquire a decent job.

*The common belief that women do not work is false. Women work within and outside the home.... They are in the fields most poorly paid. If you add the problem of language and immigration policies that define the man as the head of household, the man receives the financial help and the English courses. He is the first to attend English classes while the woman works and cares for the children, because the reality is that the money given [subsidy to study] is not sufficient to make ends meet.*

Most women do not have the luxury of choosing between work or study. Denied access to subsidized courses, their income is too vital to the family for them to be able to afford to go to school full-time.

Many women attempt to combine work and study. They are left to choose from an array of part-time courses offered through adult schools and community centres. The English taught in these courses goes only to the sixth grade level, and even that is limited to "survival," or "basic" English.

*The places that give women access to English classes teach basic level English that is being provided by the Board of Education. Basic. What does basic mean? It teaches a woman how to buy a hamburger, how to use the TTC, how to ask for directions ...*

While basic English can be helpful to daily living, it does not provide the language skills required for economic

*husband doesn't make enough money, how is one to study? You can't. I began to study when I separated. Family Allowance has maintained me.*

Ironically, dependence on the state as "provider" allows many women to study and struggle for autonomy. Denied the dignity of subsidized study, they are subjected to the indignity of being "wards" of the state.

*friend, and I would ask her "And I, what right do I have?" Her reply was "No right. Now look after your duties. The one who must start to work now is your husband, and he must now handle the language."*

If a woman is lucky enough to get into a program, she must have subsidized day care in place. She will not be admitted if she plans to rely on family, friends or other informal arrangements. It can take a woman more than three years to get this in place.

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*"Why do they limit me to staying at home? I am not a woman of the home!!! I can defend myself, I can talk, I can participate in the society...."*

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### The vicious circle

Lola is caught in the "vicious circle" of scarce subsidies/full classes/no day care spaces. A

teacher in El Salvador, she was denied the opportunity to study English upon arrival to Canada because she was pregnant. Her husband, who insisted that they be permitted to study together, was told by immigration: "You must study because you have to work; she can study at another time." Once her child was born, Lola was stuck at home with the care of her young child because she could not get subsidized day care. Once she was approved for subsidy, she had to stay on a waiting list until a space opened up, and then, after finally finding a space for her child, the few advanced English courses were full. At the time of our interview, her social worker was pressuring Lola to give up her volunteer teaching and community work, to go to work in a factory or, she threatened, her child care subsidy would be taken away.

advancement. "The reality is that it condemns them to factory work or to cleaning jobs." Unless they arrive fluent in English, or they have access to money, either through a government subsidy or personal funds, their options are limited to the long slow haul of part-time ESL classes, followed by part-time upgrading courses, and then some form of further education. Gloria describes her experience of trying to work and study English at the same time.

*I used to go to night school to study English. But after such a hard day's work when one comes home so tired, one used to still go to English classes, but I did not assimilate the lectures because I was so tired.*

Based on her frustrated efforts to learn English while working full-time and raising a family, Gloria concludes: "I don't think it is possible to work and to study at the same time." Like so many other women, Gloria would be separated from her husband before finally having the opportunity to pursue her studies seriously.

*If you have a husband you do not have the right to study. You have to be always working, and if your*

*"Let her begin studying and we will pay her. She should be looking after the children right now." Nooohhh!!! I became so mad my head was boiling! Why do they limit us? And they are women! Why do they limit me to staying at home? I am not a woman of the home!!! I can defend myself, I can talk, I can participate in the society.... So I would go talk to my*

### "Immigrant girls" as cheap labour

Most women go immediately into factory work or cleaning—forms of menial labour where language is not an obstacle, where employers would just as soon the women not know English, where employers prefer that the women not talk.

*I talk to some of these managers and they ask me to send over a few "girls." They've got this idea in their head—"immigrant girls" and I'm gonna pay them six dollars an hour. And that's the way it is. These women are paid six dollars an hour for really hard physical labour.*

This obnoxious concept, "immigrant girls," captures the confluence of racism and hetero/s sexism. In demeaning the knowledge and skills that immigrant women bring with them when they come to Canada, society leaves these women with little choice but to answer the clarion call for "immigrant girls"—if they are lucky enough in this time of recession, of the decline of the manufacturing and textile industries, to even be called.

### They can't even get an interview

Women who received training or professional education in their countries of origin rarely find paid work

related to their qualifications and experience. Even if they can learn English, it is unlikely that they will be able to acquire enough English to meet the "perfect" English performance requirements of potential employers.

The painful irony is that English is even more important to women than to men in order to get a job that pays more than minimum wage. Avenues open to immigrant men that require

### A problem of power

Relegated to the home and/or to minimum wage jobs, immigrant women are dependent upon their husband's income; as long as they are married, they are not eligible for social assistance. If they do manage to find a way to study, even part-time, it is not unusual for the woman to be met by opposition from her husband.

*To many families the fact that the woman can study has created a problem of power.... When the woman starts answering the telephone,*

*receiving phone messages and is able to understand key words, she starts questioning what's happening. This creates a lot of problems for the family.*

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*"They undermine the strength to fight, then introduce fear. They know if you are deported what you go back to is the firing squad."*

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less formal English and provide the possibility of a decent livelihood—small business and the trades—are largely closed to women. Office work, health care, and teaching have been the way out of the factories for educated women. They are the jobs that women from Latin America have held and aspire to. This work is highly language dependent. "Perfect" English is required of immigrant women even for entry-level positions.

Sometimes, even knowing English is not enough. Canadian experience is another requirement used to discriminate against immigrant women. An employment counselor tells us of a typical example, a young woman who is a chemist and pharmacist from Ecuador, an area of work where the English required for job performance is already known.

*She can't even get an interview because as soon as [they see] her résumé, her work experiences in Ecuador, people would say that she has no Canadian experience and she probably doesn't speak English very well. A lot of women that I've seen in my experience, even when they do have English and equivalent education, they can't compete with Canadian English-speaking women.*

While some husbands provide encouragement and support, more often, they feel their fragile hold on power in their homes threatened as their wives learn English, become more educated, and begin to challenge their authority.<sup>1</sup> As one teacher succinctly puts it: "There is a common belief among the husbands of the women in our program that what we are doing is destroying marriages."

Men's opposition to women's education extends across classes, cultures, and races. It is a question of power, as organized through institutionally-sanctioned racism and heterosexism. As an alternative site of power for women, education presents a way to greater independence. Whether it be through thinking differently, becoming more aware of their rights, developing a sense of worth, and helping them achieve greater economic independence, the traditional heterosexual power relationship is threatened.

### A process of intimidation

*The man has enormous power over the woman. There exists a process*

*of intimidation where if you bother me too much, I can get out whenever I want.... The man says: "Don't bother me otherwise I phone immigration."*

Violence against women is an especially severe problem for immigrant and refugee women. This is not because the incidence of violence is any greater than in the dominant society, but because an immigrant woman is so vulnerable, cut off from the resources and supports that she has been able to depend upon in the past.

The real, potential, or even imagined threat of deportation is terrifying to a woman who has no legal status independent of her husband, a woman who exists only as "spouse" and/or as "sponsored," or a woman who has no knowledge of her rights in Canada. To understand its full impact, the intimidation of the wife by her husband has to be placed within the context of the racist intimidation that the woman has had to face from the agencies of the dominant society since her arrival—from immigration officers, welfare workers, employers, health care workers, and even educators.

*They treat you like you are not a person.... They undermine that strength to fight which you have brought—then introduce fear. They know that if you are deported what you go back to directly is the firing squad.*

The weight of intimidation is especially great for a woman who does not speak English. Institutionalized racism, and the limited resources dedicated to providing support for battered women have resulted in the special needs of immigrant and refugee women not being met.

In the absence of other resources, community centres have been doing what they can. Several women had been sent to their language or

literacy programs by social service workers who do not know where else to send them.

*The majority of the women who arrive at these courses have been referred by the social community worker because of a violence problem....It is very sad because these women arrive at these centres not because of their language problems, but because of abuse problems at home.*

The community centres have been responding to the problem of wife abuse by setting up special programs on violence. Some have set up special English classes for women where they can talk about their struggles. The advantage of these courses being located in the community centres is that bilingual instruction makes it possible to speak in Spanish, as well as to learn English. These classes provide an opportunity for women to break out of the isolation of their homes, to find other women with whom they can talk. In the process, they learn that they are not alone, that the racist and hetero/sexist violence is systemic, and that they are not to blame. They have the opportunity to link the personal to the political, and to see how they can change their situations in ways that respect their values and desires.

#### Having the courage to study

Gloria began her studies when her husband left her. The factory where she worked closed down shortly after. Serious back pain from working on the machines made her seek help. Having children young enough to qualify her to receive family allowance, and old enough not to need day care, made it possible for Gloria to study full-time. She went to an upgrading program and then enrolled in an adult school where she is completing her grade 13. She is determined to graduate even though welfare has told her that her family allowance will be cut off now that her children are beyond the age of eligibility.

*Now that I am accustomed to being in a classroom, that my mind is conditioned to study and to carry out my responsibilities, I have to finish my degree. My mind has become educated. I have changed from the way I used to be. It was a great step....I was a timid woman. It was not easy.*

Gloria hopes that she will serve as a model for her daughter. It is possible. The obstacles are unending, but so is the will.

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ronto, available for \$10.00 from J. Stewart, OISE, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, MSS IV6.

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<sup>1</sup>This dynamic was also found by Rockhill in research she conducted in Los Angeles. For a fuller discussion, see "Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing to be SOMEBODY." J.S. Gaskell, A.T. McLaren eds. *Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective*. Calgary: Detselig Publishers, 1987.

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