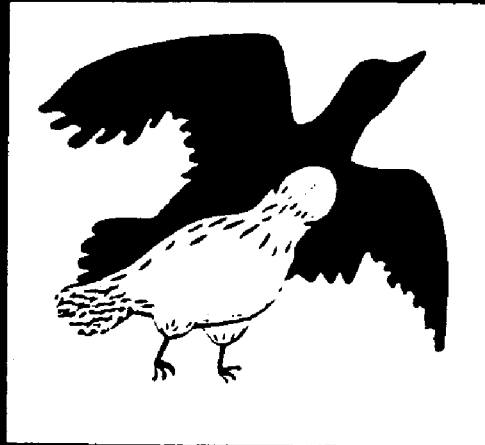


*"Like a Wingless Bird..."*



*A Tribute to the Survival and Courage  
Of Women Who Are Abused and  
Who Speak Neither English Nor French*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **"LIKE A WINGLESS BIRD....":**

#### **A Tribute to the Survival and Courage of Women Who are Abused and Who Speak Neither English nor French**

This report begins to tell the stories of a group of women in Canada who are often forgotten..... the many women across Canada who are Canadian citizens,(some have lived in Canada for over thirty years), who are abused by their husbands and who do not speak either English or French. These women are rarely the focus of programs or policies. They have become part of the unheard and invisible fabric of Canadian society. They have been in Canada long enough that it is assumed that they have "integrated" into the mainstream. If they are noticed at all, it is usually to blame or shame them for not learning English or French, for not becoming a "real" part of their new country. If their abuse becomes known, their suffering is too often dismissed as part of a culture that "accepts violence". The real stories about their language isolation, about the meaning of abuse in their lives, about their experiences linking the abuse, their immigration to a new country, and the factors which contributed to their inability to speak English or French, is obliterated in assumptions and stereotypes which "explain" their pain and isolation in terms of their "differences".

Their stories, however, contradict the stereotypes, for their stories are real-life dramas of overwhelming loss, suffering, strength and endurance. Their stories are not tales of "helpless victims", nor of women who come from cultures which accept violence against women. Instead, these are the stories of women who, through their tenacity, their ingenuity, their sensitivity and often through their deep sense of spirituality, have endured their isolation and suffering and have survived.... like proud, but wingless birds.

#### **"Respect our Strength, our Choices, our Wisdom"**

The women interviewed for this report ask not for pity or for charity. They ask instead for forms of help that respect their strength, support their choices, and acknowledge the wisdom they have gained through their experiences. They ask as well for forms of help which clearly communicate that abuse is wrong and unacceptable and that the abuser will be made to understand this. Through this report, sixty-four women from four different minority-language communities in Canada: a Chinese community in Montreal, a Polish community in Ottawa, an Italian community in Toronto and an Indo-Canadian community in Vancouver, have shared their ideas for responding to abuse, for reducing isolation, and for increasing communication across languages and cultures.

### **"We Have Lived With So Much Loss...."**

The women who shared their experience for this report came to Canada seeking a better life and instead found that for them life in Canada has meant: physical, sexual, psychological and/or financial abuse at home; discrimination, disrespect and exploitation in the workplace; a life of exclusion and barriers, and an overwhelming sense of loss....loss of family, friends, status, choice, power, respect, self-esteem, loss of trust, loss of privacy, loss of freedom, loss of acceptance, and in some cases loss of self. Many have also found, contrary to their hopes and expectations, that they have had a lower standard of living in Canada than in their home country. The severe climate, their loss of friends, family and community to help them, and the isolating assumption-in Canada that everyone should look out for themselves has made life in Canada much harder than life in their country of origin, for many of the women we interviewed. Several women were struck by the Canadian reality that "you need money for **everything**".

### **"Language Barriers Affect All Parts of Our Lives...."**

The women interviewed emphasized that language barriers as well as abuse affect all parts of their lives. Not having language makes everything difficult. Women told the animators that they are discriminated against often because they cannot speak English or French.

The women described becoming invisible to others because they cannot speak English or French. They spoke of being taken advantage of, being dismissed as stupid, being misunderstood, being purposefully exploited. They spoke of the profound sense of loss and isolation they experienced as their children began to make English or French their language of choice and lost proficiency in their "mother" tongue. They talked of their pain and humiliation when their children became ashamed of them for not being "Canadian enough".

### **"Abuse at Home cannot be separated from Exploitation, Discrimination and Loss":**

The women interviewed emphasized that the abuse they suffered at home could not be separated from the exploitation, isolation and loss they experienced in all parts of their lives in Canada. For many women the links were direct, for their abuse was integrally tied to being used by their husbands and their bosses as "cheap labour", "as a machine to make money". And certainly, for all the women, the isolating shame and fear so characteristic of experiences of abuse were amplified many times over by their language isolation.

As a result, for many women, the option of leaving their husband or calling the police to escape their abuse was no option at all, for it would not address the other aspects of their suffering....their economic insecurity, and their sense of isolation. In fact, leaving would worsen their situations, for they would have even less money, they would lose everything they had worked so hard for, they would bring shame on their communities and would risk losing their places in their communities.

### **"Your Services Take Away My Strengths...."**

Many of the women interviewed for this report do not even consider looking for help to stop their abuse, because the help that is available is not only usually linguistically and culturally foreign, but it often takes away the very things that give them strength. So, for example, the emphasis of many available services on short-term dependency on welfare, is experienced as robbing women of dignity by eroding their value of self-sufficiency. Counselling approaches which do not emphasize practical approaches are seen by many women as all talk and no substance, as inappropriate personal intrusion by outsiders and as patronizing. For many women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French, their faith tradition is a source of



strength and direction in their lives. Programs and services which do not incorporate or even respect their faith are perceived as negative and destructive by many women. Many of the women interviewed find that existing services with their emphasis on individualism and centred on North American culture and values do not validate nor recognize their cultures and value systems. Similarly, many of the women, even some of those who want their husbands punished for their abusive behaviour, do not understand a model of help which offers women support as individuals, but offers nothing to help their children and their husbands. In their eyes, all members of the family are suffering and therefore, all members of the family should be offered help.

In addition, the women who did attempt to find help found that the services available did not help them find practical solutions. In addition, they were often put on waiting lists, service providers were often insensitive to their needs, they were shuffled from one service to another, had to cope with poor translations and the workers they met with were often untrained and wouldn't spend much time with them. Some women felt that too many of the services seemed to be based on theory, not on practical realities. In sum, the women said they wanted less talk and more action. They felt that available services should help them make practical decisions to end the abuse, without robbing them of community support and financial security.

### **Learning from Experience:**

The women interviewed spoke candidly of the poverty of many of the "solutions" to abuse, to isolation, to difference in Canada. They spoke of the difficulty, if not the impossibility of building more inclusive, less violent communities on principles which emphasize individualism, difference and competition, and which de-emphasize what we share as well as the importance of spirituality. They offer all of us a clarity of vision which can help communities across Canada move beyond current attempts to stop violence against women, to new approaches which can reach out to all women, including those who do not speak one of Canada's official languages.

The women interviewed made many suggestions, some of which are highlighted below.

- Reduce isolation by promoting group discussions and group meetings, but not just about abuse. Women who are abused, share a wide range of interests and concerns with other women and men.
- Provide more education and awareness in ways that reflect the values of the community, and in ways which depict the "whole story" not just the crisis times.
- Create services and programs with a problem-solving orientation.
- Involve survivors of abuse in planning programs and services.
- Create "one-stop shopping" services to reduce the experience of so many women of being shuffled from one service to another.
- Sensitize mainstream services, and especially the justice system to different cultures, languages, traditions and systemic racism.
- Create ethnospecific drop-in centres which provide information on a myriad of life problems and issues, but which also provide a place to go for support, sometimes for safety, for privacy

and for practical advice.

- Provide information, training and support to help women work so that they can support their children and not rely on welfare.
- Impose tougher penalties on men who assault their wives, especially if they are known to be repeat offenders.
- Remove the abusive man from the home, not the woman and children.
- Create programs to help all those affected by violence, including the woman, the children, the men, extended family members and the broader community.
- Offer services where the people providing help, speak the languages of the people in the community, know their culture and history and are sensitive to their backgrounds.
- Teach all children in the schools (including ESL/FLS classes and heritage language schools) about the effects of wife abuse and that wife assault is a crime.
- Provide support for women from minority language communities. who have lived with abuse and language barriers, and who have a thorough knowledge both of their own language/cultural community and of mainstream society, to initiate programs and services for their communities.
- Ensure that outreach and follow-up services are provided.
- Improve services for women generally. Do not target only women who have been abused.
- Provide interpretation as an extension of advocacy service for women which is sensitive to the culture of the woman, which respects confidentiality and which is accurate. Interpreters must be trained to develop trust and be supportive.
- Involve formal or informal leaders of ethnic communities as key people for providing help for women who are abused, when the women feel this is appropriate.
- Provide women with adequate housing options.
- Ensure that ongoing and future research projects on woman abuse and other issues of concern to women who are members of linguistic minority communities, are appropriate to the needs of the communities involved. Researchers must involve women in the community, directly at all stages. Above all, research must attempt to begin and end with the experiences of the women. Follow-up action should be an integral part of all research design.

### **And Now, to Make These Ideas Realities....**

The insights of the women interviewed for this report emphasize the need for new ways to respond to abuse and to language isolation which celebrate our strengths instead of magnifying our suffering, which emphasize our commonalities instead of sentencing women to isolation, which build community instead of fostering fragmentation.



Their wisdom points to the need for new ways of approaching the prevention of abuse and the realities of a country as culturally and linguistically diverse as Canada. They remind us that women who are abused by their husbands, are not just "abused women". They teach us that as a society we can only find the ways to prevent violence when we build responses on the rich and multifaceted life stories of the women who experience abuse, of their children, of their husbands, of their extended families and communities. When we celebrate what we share as well as our differences, then we will all have wings.

## **"LIKE A WINGLESS BIRD...":**

### **A Tribute to the Survival and Courage of the Women who are Abused and Who Speak Neither English nor French**

#### **INTRODUCTION :**

This report tells a story of remarkable strength and courage in the face of overwhelming loss, despair, suffering and isolation. This is the story of women who have come to Canada sometime in the last thirty years and who have lived with the inevitable challenges of leaving their homes and living in a new country. But these women have faced, and many still face, two added challenges. They have endured physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual and/or financial abuse from their husbands or partners.....some have survived abuse by in-laws, teenage children, other relatives and employers as well.....and they have survived this abuse without being able to speak English or French well enough to seek help in one of Canada's two official languages.

This report seeks to understand their experiences of loss, despair and suffering in a world where the women may not be able to make even a simple request for help. The authors will trace the misunderstandings, the disrespect, the isolation and loneliness of people who cannot speak either of Canada's official languages. We will attempt to convey the despair they experience enduring their abuse in a country where they may have few or no friends or relatives to give them emotional support, where they don't understand the language, cannot read brochures or newspaper articles that might identify people who can help, know nothing of the services or programs available to assist them. We will describe their hopelessness at finding help for their abuse in a country where they often don't understand the customs, where different interpretations of body language can lead to misunderstandings, disrespect and conflict, and where the services available often do not meet their needs. We will look at the added struggle of surviving abuse while coping with devastating losses: loss of their place in the community along with the respect they may have enjoyed before they came to Canada; loss of their close friends and family members; loss of the work they performed in their home country; loss of recognition of their professional credentials; sometimes the loss of respect of their children because they cannot speak English or French, and the ongoing loss which comes from feeling like an outsider in their own country.

But we will also document the insights, hopes and strengths of the remarkable women interviewed for this study. For through the abuse, the frustrations, the crushing workloads, the loss and the imposed silence of not speaking a mainstream language, these women have coped in many ingenious ways and have survived physically, emotionally and spiritually. They bring fresh perspectives on the reality of abuse and the services available for women who are abused in Canada. And they bring ideas for change. They offer all of us a clarity of vision and a wisdom which can help communities across Canada move beyond current attempts to stop violence against women, to new approaches which can reach out even to those women suffering in the profound silence of those who do not share the language of those around them.

Throughout the report, whenever possible, the authors have included quotes from the women. These quotes are interpretations in English provided by the community animators from the women's original words in her own language. The research team hopes that through these words, the silence with which these women have lived for so long, will finally be broken.

## WHY WAS THIS REPORT NEEDED?

In recent years, women from immigrant, refugee, Aboriginal and racial or cultural minority communities have alerted women and men working to prevent violence against women, of the poverty, inadequacy and inappropriateness of many of the commonly accepted "solutions" and responses to woman abuse. These women have placed into question the approaches the dominant society has taken to woman abuse, and have enriched the directions people across Canada are now exploring to prevent woman abuse.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many documents have been produced on the language barriers experienced by recent immigrant and refugee women.

However, in the existing literature, it is rare to find information which looks at the problems of abuse and language isolation together. Only a handful of reports focus on the devastating extra burdens women who are abused experience without the key to cultural understanding, adaptation and integration which language can provide.<sup>2</sup> In addition, most available studies focus on recent immigrant and refugee women who are abused and who don't speak English or French. Women who are already Canadian citizens (or who have been in Canada for many years and are eligible for citizenship), who are abused and who don't speak English or French, are frequently overlooked. These women become invisible - women not heard of by mainstream society, and women sometimes forgotten even in their own language communities.

These women often become the brunt of negative stereotypes and myths. They are silently dismissed too often as being less deserving of special services or programs to help them with their abuse, because "they are too lazy to learn to speak English or French", or because "they just accept the abuse ... it's part of their culture". They are dismissed because they have been in Canada for many years, but have not become part of the mainstream.

The authors of this report will attempt to draw a clearer picture of the barriers these women face, and of the realities of their lives....a picture which acknowledges the differences within this broad group of women, but a picture which also explores the similarities in their experiences. The authors will attempt to communicate the intricate maze of barriers which so many women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French must navigate. The report will reveal that these women are isolated by language, by culture, by abuse, and by a society which does not recognize their particular needs and realities.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Parades, Milagros: "Setting the Precedent: Process as Change in Meeting the Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Women Surviving Abuse and Sexual Violence", prepared for the Advisory Committee Immigrant and Refugee Women's Project: Education Sexual Assault, April, 1992; the chapters written by and for Inuit and Aboriginal women in the final report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, "Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality", Ottawa, 1993; Shin, Maria: "Violence Against Immigrant and Visible Minority Women: Speaking with Our Voice, Organizing from Our Experience", National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada, February, 1992; MacLeod, Linda and Shin, Maria: "Isolated, Afraid and Forgotten: The Service Delivery Needs and Realities of Immigrant and Refugee Women who are Battered", Health and Welfare Canada, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Gentium Consulting (Alma Estable, Mechthild Meyer and Mary Teresa Devlin) "Structured Dependencies: The Situation of Finance/e Visa Holders:", Ottawa, Ontario, April, 1990.

Through the voices of these women, the researchers who undertook this study hope to share the wisdom of the women's experiences with others working to prevent violence and with others working to provide support to women who speak neither English nor French. The research team hoped to gain new insights into how to create responses to prevent woman abuse which are sensitive, accessible and useful for women who do not use existing services and programs. And the researchers were particularly interested in knowing whether women from very different minority linguistic communities have similar needs, experiences and ideas about the types of responses they would find helpful and appropriate.

Through conversations with women in four different minority linguistic communities, the researchers for this study explored some very fundamental questions, such as:

- What impact has violence had on their everyday struggles to live in a country which is foreign, and in which they feel isolated by language?
- What wisdom and insights can women isolated by language and abuse share with us about the services that exist?
- Are our attempts to help so out of touch with their realities that they simply increase the women's isolation and suffering?
- Are there other ways to approach "help" which are more appropriate to the women's experiences?
- How do these women understand the abuse they have experienced?
- Can their insights help to create a new understanding of violence and violence prevention not constrained by current assumptions about violence and responses to violence which are not working?

## **WHAT DO NATIONAL STATISTICS TELL US ABOUT WOMEN WHO ARE ISOLATED BY LANGUAGE AND ABUSE?**

We have no comprehensive statistical information on women who are abused and do not speak English or French fluently, but we do have some statistics on women who do not speak one of Canada's two official languages.<sup>3</sup>

National statistics, calculated from 1991 Census data reveal that 191,175 immigrant women reported being unable to speak English or French, compared to 117,355 immigrant men who said they cannot speak

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<sup>3</sup> The reader should note that the information compiled to create these statistics comes mainly from the answers to the following Census question: "Are you able to carry on a conversation of some length in English, French, both, neither?" Because respondents to such questions prefer to present themselves in a positive light, it is possible that the figures cited below represent an underestimate of the actual number of women who speak neither English nor French fluently enough to be able to function fully in Canadian society. Further, the statistics give us no indication of the number of people who may be able to conduct a conversation in English or French, but who are unable to read or write this language.

one of Canada's two official languages.<sup>4</sup> Census figures indicate as well that over half of these women (almost 58%) are 55 years of age or older.<sup>5</sup> Census calculations from the 1986 Census show that many of these women have been here for many years. In fact, the majority entered Canada when they were less than 25 years old.<sup>6</sup>

National statistics provided from 1986 Census data also suggest that life in Canada is not easy for women who speak neither English nor French. The majority of these women are either not in the labour force or are concentrated in low paying jobs. "About 70% of immigrant women who do not know English or French well enough to carry on a conversation are slotted in...domestic work, piece work, assembly work and janitorial work...(compared to about) 28% of...immigrant women who know conversational English or French."<sup>7</sup> Their income levels are correspondingly low. In 1986, 89.3% of women over 15 who were unable to speak English or French had incomes under \$15,000, compared to 67.5% of women who were able to speak an official language.<sup>8</sup> These figures become especially poignant when we realize that 42% of the women who cannot speak either English or French have been in Canada for at least fifteen years.<sup>9</sup> Language training advocacy groups from immigrant communities attribute much of these problems to the lack of adequate, available and accessible training opportunities for the women in the past and present. Later in this report, we describe what the women we interviewed said about language training issues.

Without facility in either English or French, women find it nearly impossible and/or too late to move into higher paying and more satisfying jobs. All these factors also have implications for a woman's struggle to survive an abusive relationship, including her decision to leave an abusive husband.

## **IDENTIFYING THE WOMEN WHO ARE THE FOCUS OF THIS RESEARCH :**

A conscious attempt was made to identify women who are or have been abused, who are not recent immigrants or refugees, and who have not been likely to use either existing mainstream services and programs, or services within their own linguistic communities, to help them escape, prevent or heal from their abuse.

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<sup>4</sup> p.3, Harrison, Brian, "Non Parlo né Inglese, né Francese", Statistics Canada, Census of Canada *Short Article Series 91*, Number 5, September, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> p.4 Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> p.28, Pendakur, Ravi and Ledoux, Michel: "Immigrants Unable to Speak English or French: A Graphic Overview", Policy and Research, Multiculturalism Sector, Ottawa, Ontario, February, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> p.7 Community Legal Education Ontario, "Let Me Tell You: Language Rights for Immigrant Women", Toronto, Ontario, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> p.85, Pendakur, Ravi and Ledoux, Michel, op cit.

<sup>9</sup> **p. 80 Ravi Pendakur and Michel Ledoux, op cit.**



This decision was based on a desire to find out more about why so many women who have been in Canada for many years have not learned English or French. In some cases, are linguistic isolation and abuse linked? It was also based on a real concern to find out what services are even available and accessible for women who are not recent immigrants or refugees, are abused and speak neither French nor English. Experiential knowledge of the researchers who made up the project team suggests that services for women who speak neither English nor French are often targeted at women who have recently arrived in Canada. Therefore women who have come to Canada many years ago may not be targets for support and outreach programs. What help is there for them?

Finally, the researchers hoped that by speaking to women who are not likely to use existing services, the women would provide fresh insights concerning the problems and barriers they see concerning current attempts to help women who are abused.

## **METHODOLOGY :**

### **Community-Outreach Methodology:**

The voices of women who are abused and isolated by language and culture form the basis of this report. However, their words and ideas are much more than traditional data. The researchers for this report attempted to include women who shared their insights for this project in a process of change...a process which ideally could reduce their isolation and which ideally could provide support, help or options to prevent their abuse and the abuse of other women in their communities.

Therefore, the researchers were interested both in identifying issues and concerns of the women from the chosen communities, and also in the process of the research project. In other words, in designing the research approach, the researchers asked: How can the methodology itself become part of a process of community building, outreach and change?<sup>10</sup> A number of community-based research projects in the past have made attempts to apply various versions of this approach.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action-research* by Orlando Fals-Borda & Mohammad Anisur Rahman (1991) and *Doing Participatory Research: A feminist Approach* by Patricia Maguire (1987) for details on the theory and techniques of participatory research and participatory action research (PAR). The philosophies behind our community-outreach methodology are similar to the those expressed in these books. However, our own approach was a limited application of the methodologies described in these books.

<sup>11</sup> See the report written by Milagaros Prats Paredes, "Setting the Precedent: Process as Change in Meeting the Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Women Surviving Abuse and Sexual Violence", prepared for The Advisory Committee Immigrant and Refugee Women's Project, Education Sexual Assault, April, 1992, Toronto. This province-wide project was the most conscious attempt up to date to involve immigrant communities actively in the process of change using research as a 'tool for change'. The report documents in detail the theoretical and practical issues and dilemmas in applying participatory research method to address woman abuse and sexual violence with these communities.

In this project, the researchers were interested in making the research approach part of the findings of the report. Thus, sharing insights, through this project, about how to reach out and involve women who are not generally part of research projects, and sharing insights about facilitating a community-building process, became an integral part of our findings. These insights have also become the basis of some of the recommendations in the final sections of this report.

Through this dual process of reaching out and developing a uniform methodology, the research team faced the challenge to respect the uniqueness of different communities, but also to uncover similarities in the approaches needed. However, this raised a number of additional challenges. The following sub-sections describe our attempts to address these challenges.

### **Involving the Isolated Women:**

Ideally in a participatory, community-outreach process, the women who are isolated through language and abuse would have been full participants in all stages of the research, i.e. identifying their specific research needs, formulating the purpose and goals of the project, selecting the research team, deciding on the questions to be explored, answering the questions, organizing the findings, writing the report, and following up on the results. However, this project departed from the ideal in that the initial need for this project was identified by the funder and the project coordinators. The project coordinators then approached the respective communities.<sup>12</sup>

As well, there were other difficulties in applying a "pure" participatory approach. First, the women in the four communities spoke different languages. Second, some of the women were hesitant to become involved because of their fears about confidentiality, safety and trust. Therefore, it was difficult to involve these women in the first part of the project. Time was needed to develop particular, community-based and sensitive approaches which responded to these fears. Third, there were insufficient funds and time to build the degree of trust and involvement needed to work through this entire process in all of the communities. As a result, the project coordinators decided to involve some women from the chosen communities as community animators, and through them to reach out to other women in the community.

The community animators were involved fully in the participatory process and they involved other women in their communities through informal discussions and dialogues. Further, the community animators made the decision to take the results of the final report and to tailor these findings to the particular needs and realities of their communities by creating community pamphlets summarizing some of the findings of the research project.

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<sup>12</sup> The project coordinators, Linda MacLeod and Maria Shin, have been active as well in addressing woman abuse and have a collective experience in front-line work, advocacy, education and community-based research with immigrant communities on this issue.

## Choosing the Communities:

National statistical information available on women who speak neither English nor French was used to identify the communities in Canada where the greatest number of women live who do not speak English or French. The project coordinators learned from 1991 Census data that two thirds of all immigrants unable to speak English or French live in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver<sup>13</sup>, and that approximately 60% of all immigrants unable to speak English or French speak Chinese, Italian, Portuguese or Punjabi.<sup>14</sup>

Based on these figures, the decision was made to choose Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver as three out of four of the research sites, and to find communities within these cities whose members speak Chinese, Italian, Portuguese or Punjabi. After contacting numerous community groups in these locations, and speaking with many potential community animators, the decision was made to include an Italian community in Toronto, a Chinese speaking community in Montreal, and an Indo-Canadian<sup>15</sup> community in Vancouver. A Polish-speaking community was chosen in Ottawa as the fourth site to provide diversity and breadth to the sample by including women from an Eastern European country, many of whom are more recent immigrants than the women from Italian, Chinese or Indo-Canadian communities.

## Choosing the Community Animators:

Community animators were identified through key community contacts interviewed in the developmental phase of this project. A number of these contacts were made through broad-based ethnic/immigrant service agencies in the Italian, Indo-Canadian and Chinese communities. The Polish community contact was known to the research coordinators. She is a community worker who has experience working with abused immigrant women as well as knowledge of broader services for immigrants. The contact in the Italian community is a woman who has had long-term involvement in the largest immigrant serving program in her community and for years has been an advocate and leader in the community. The Chinese community contact founded the women's program in her broad-based community-serving organization, has worked in this program for many years and is widely known in her community. The community contacts in the Indo-Canadian community are women with front-line experience working with women in abusive situations and coordinating programs in ethnic-serving organizations.

The community animators were diverse in terms of their positions within the respective communities. Their differences gave them a variety of strengths in terms of how they could approach and involve women in their communities. Three of the community animators were longtime community activists/workers and two were recognized leaders in their communities as well as being involved in broader immigrant women's struggles at the national level. All of the community animators had experience working specifically with women in abusive situations as well as with immigrants and ethnic/ racial minorities in general.

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<sup>13</sup> p. 2, Harrison, Brian "Non Parlo né Inglese, né Francese", op cit.

<sup>14</sup> p. 3, Harrison, Brian, op cit.

<sup>15</sup> The term "Indo-Canadian" is used in this report to describe the community in Vancouver whose ethnic origin is South Asian (including Indo-Canadian). Terms such as "South Asian" and "East Indo-Canadian" are used also to describe this community. The term "Indo-Canadian" is commonly used in the Greater Vancouver area.

A community animator was selected on the basis that she:

- a. is trusted and respected in the community;
- b. has some knowledge about woman abuse and has experience working with women in abusive situations;
- c. has the personal flexibility and openness to really listen to ideas and suggestions made by the women who are interviewed, even if these ideas do not support the type of intervention the interviewer may feel is optimum;
- d. is totally fluent in the language(s) of the community and familiar with the context (economic, cultural, political historical, religious, etc.) of that community;
- e. is seen by the women we hoped to interview as part of the community;
- f. has the potential to continue as an animator in the community even after the completion of this project in order to help bring about changes needed at the local community level, which might be identified through this project.

### **How the Project Team Approach Shaped the Project:**

The community animators and the project coordinators gathered together to shape the course of this research project. In line with the philosophy behind participatory action research, there were various levels of interaction, discussion and reflection during the design, implementation and interpretation stages of the research between the community animators and the project coordinators.

During this interactive, participatory process, a number of methodological issues were identified which could be informative to other future community initiatives in this area.

### ***What might the project do for the communities?***

The community animators identified a number of expectations for this type of project. The two listed below capture the essence of these expectations. They said they expected that:

- the project would have an impact on policy making and that this impact would in turn influence the administration of services and programs; and that
- the project would produce pertinent information for planning.

In addition, hopes were expressed that the project would:

- help share information about what already exists to avoid the chronic problem of reinventing the wheel;
- highlight the commonalities across communities which would facilitate the sharing of information and approaches, and,
- clarify why women cannot use existing services.

There were also fears and concerns raised that the emphasis of the report on commonalities shared across very diverse and unique communities would be ignored and the report would be used to support divisive policies, which fragment people into European versus visible minorities, and pit communities against one another. Another related concern raised was that the project and any follow-up action identified would suffer from stereotypes about the communities included in this project. Community animators mentioned that funders and policy makers frequently believe that some communities have no need of funding, and that the assumptions behind these beliefs are unfounded.

For example, the animator for the Italian community mentioned that the Italian community is frequently portrayed as having no problems because Italians are white and are perceived to be wealthy. The animator for the Chinese community added that her community is seen as prosperous, educated and therefore as having no need for funding support and additional programs. These stereotypes and the limits they can put on funding to some communities, raised additional concerns that the project might set up false hopes for the women involved, that initiatives they suggested would be funded.

### **The Interview Process:**

Throughout this project, all members of the team emphasized that participatory research must be respectful of the needs of the women for confidentiality, safety and establishing trust. The community animators and coordinators came to a number of agreements about how interviews with women in the community would be conducted, in order to respond sensitively and effectively to these concerns.

#### ***Confidentiality:***

- In order to protect confidentiality, women were assured that their names would not appear on the completed interview form, and that names of family members would not be recorded.
- Every effort was made to establish trust in the integrity of the interviewer.
- When initial calls were made to the woman, great care was taken to ensure that the woman was not compromised by being overheard by someone else in her home or place of work, by asking if she were alone and if she could be overheard.

#### ***Establishing Trust:***

Not only must the interviewer gain the initial trust of the woman, the lack of longterm contact or follow-up with the woman is a real issue in terms of trust and support. Accordingly, the animators agreed that:

- the interviewer would give the woman a number at which the interviewer could be reached. It was also agreed, that the woman would be given the interviewer's business number, or the number of a generic agency through which she could be reached, but would not be given the number of an agency known for woman abuse services if this was where the interviewer worked. In this way, the woman would be able to phone the place of business or agency to ensure that the interviewer was actually who she said she was. The woman could also reach the interviewer to discuss the interview further, or to ask for support or help. And, because the woman would not have a number that could be linked to abuse prevention, the woman would not have to explain her involvement with an agency concerned with abuse to her husband, if

he were to find the card. This decision was intended to protect the woman's safety against a possible reaction by the abuser.

- The project team also agreed that a support worker would be identified in each community, who could be available after the interviews to provide support and/or resources, where necessary, to the women.

### ***Safety:***

The lack of follow-up and/or ongoing contact with the women, especially women isolated by language, culture and abuse, is also a real safety issue. In addition, the location of the interview is critical to her safety and comfort. For a woman who is currently in an abusive situation, her home is not a safe place. The abuser(s) may come home, or neighbours may tell the abuser(s) that a stranger was at the house, etc. This must be balanced carefully by making the site of the interview accessible to the woman, since many women trapped in and isolated by abusive situations do not have the freedom to come and go without explaining their actions. Therefore, the animators decided that:

- Whenever possible, the interview should be held somewhere other than in the woman's home. The interviewer should discuss safety precautions about the setting of the interview without trying to alarm the woman.
- Child care should be offered in an adjacent room to the interview room and transportation costs reimbursed if needed.

### **Outreach to Women/Breaking the Silence:**

The first challenge for the community animators was to identify women in their communities who are or were abused and who have not gone either to services or programs targetted at women who are abused, or to other existing services or professionals for help concerning their abuse. The animators began this task by contacting family doctors, family law lawyers, social workers, and women in the community, to explore whether these contacts could help the animators get in touch with women who don't speak English or French, who are isolated, and who the contacts suspect or know have been abused. The animators quickly discovered a number of difficulties in identifying women to be interviewed for this project.

In the Italian community, most women, even those who have gone for help, still live with their husbands, even if technically they are separated. Therefore, the women were afraid to talk and very difficult to interview. During the process of finding women to interview, seven of the women initially identified in the Italian community, changed their minds about being interviewed. Most of these women were older women who have lived with abuse for many years and were very pessimistic and resigned to the fact that the system will not help them.

In the Chinese community, the animator tried to contact isolated women through referrals from women in the community, friends as well as professionals. About half the women contacted refused to participate. The women had a lot of apprehension, suspicion and fear about being involved. Some of the women also refused because of the length of the interview and the focus of the interviews on abuse.

In the Polish community, the "key contacts" included: people working in small businesses; professionals such as doctors and dentists who were familiar with the community because of the nature of their work; a man abused by his wife who knew of women who were abused by their husbands; and Polish

physicians. The older women in this community, as in the other communities, were particularly difficult to reach because of the taboo surrounding this subject. Unfortunately, in order to keep to the project timeline, we were not able to follow up with these older women. It was clear that we would have needed to spend a much longer period building contacts and establishing trust before these women would talk about their experiences.

The most common sources of referrals in most of the sites, for the women who were actually interviewed, were ethnic community organizations, other women who were in abusive situations and ethnic business professionals. However, the sources of referrals varied between the communities. In the Indo-Canadian and the Chinese communities, the majority of women interviewed were referred by other abused women. In the Italian community, most were referred through an ethnic community organization. In the Polish community, which does not have existing ethnic social service organizations, many were referred from community agencies, schools and ethnic business professionals.

### **Choosing Where To Conduct the Interviews:**

The interview locations were chosen to be as accommodating as possible to the needs and concerns of the women, including safety, convenience, and accessibility needs. In most cases, the interviews were conducted in the community animator's offices, in community organizations or in women's homes. However, the choice of the most appropriate interview site depended again on the community. For the Italian community, most of the interviews were done outside the women's homes, whereas for the Polish women, many of whom were separated or divorced, most of the interviews were done at their homes. There were interviews conducted at local malls and coffee shops as well as at the women's friends' homes. In a few cases, the women would not talk to the animators unless their friends could accompany them.

### **Designing the Questions and Discussion Guide:**

The interviews with the women included discussions on many topics including: changes in the woman's life circumstances, information about her immigration experience, language and communication issues, the woman's awareness and experience of woman abuse, her level of isolation and her support system, her responsibilities for children and adults living with her or dependent on her, any information she had about woman abuse, her community service needs, her ideas for services or programs which would meet her needs, and her hopes and fears.<sup>16</sup>

While the focus of the research was on language isolation and experiences of abuse, the project team felt it was essential to gather information which could help define the context within which the women interviewed live with language isolation and experiences of abuse. In particular, the project team was interested in experiences of loss, and responsibilities or barriers which could compound the woman's isolation. Therefore, a broad range of questions were raised with the women interviewed. This decision was based on findings from previous research studies concerned with immigrant women in abusive situations which have pointed out the profound links across the experience of abuse, the experience of coming to Canada, the frustration of not being understood because of language barriers, the loneliness and lack of support many women suffer because they do not have family or friends living near them, and the anger, stress and/or resignation often caused by economic and work problems. These experiences are often compounded by feelings of deep hopelessness when women realize that there is no help available to them

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<sup>16</sup> A copy of the discussion guide can be obtained by writing to Linda MacLeod, 150 Carleton St. Ottawa, ON, K1M 0G7.

for their abuse that is compatible with both their values and the patterns and restrictions of their day-to-day lives.

### **Interpreting the Quantitative Data Included In This Report:**

To repeat, finding these women through traditional sampling methods was impossible, because of the many methodological challenges described in the previous section of this report. The number of women interviewed totalled 64: 14 from the Italian community, 15 from the Chinese community, 14 from the Polish community, and 21 women from the Indo-Canadian community. Given the small number of women interviewed and the nontraditional sampling approach, no claim is made for the statistical reliability or validity of any of the numbers quoted. Any statistics included are intended to be indicators only, to help the reader understand how the authors arrived at some of the points and Conclusions which make up this report. The richness of the paper comes from the qualitative insights of the women interviewed as well as from the contextual information provided by the community animators.

The reader is asked to interpret the statistics as they were intended, that is, as signs of shared experiences, feelings or opinions rather than as figures that can be extrapolated to a larger population.

## **WHO ARE THE WOMEN INTERVIEWED FOR THIS STUDY?**

### **A Brief Snapshot:**

There are considerable differences among the women according to community. The women from Italy, for example, tend to be the oldest, those from Poland the youngest. The Polish women are much more likely to be separated or divorced than are the others. Church/temple attendance is much less a regular part of life for the women who speak Chinese, whereas temple attendance is very much a regular part of life for the Indo-Canadian women we interviewed.

The sections below provide a more detailed picture of the women who shared their insights with the community animators.

#### **a. *Do An of the Women Interviewed Speak English or French?***

Ability to speak either English or French varied by community, like most of the characteristics described below. Twenty-three of the women interviewed said that they speak no English or French. Almost all of the other women speak some English, but speaking English or French is not part of their everyday reality. We found that almost none of the women used English or French in their homes.

The women from the Italian community were least fluent in English or French. Only three of the fourteen said that they could speak broken English. The remaining eleven said they speak no English or French. Eleven of the fifteen women interviewed from the Montreal Chinese community now speak English but only three speak a little French...the official language of Québec. Thirteen of the Indo-Canadian women speak at least a little English. The remaining eight speak no English. None of these women speak French. Once again, the Polish community is somewhat atypical. Seven of the fourteen women interviewed from this community speak a little English. The other seven are either functional or fluent in English. Four of these women also speak a little French, six speak some



Russian and three have learned a few words and phrases in other languages.<sup>17</sup>

**b. *Are there Special Challenges for Women Living In Québec?***

The Chinese speaking women in Montréal find that without French in Montréal they cannot be an integral part of the mainstream community, but learning two new languages is very difficult. Women in Québec spoke of living through the "quiet revolution" in Québec. Most of the Chinese-speaking women who settled in Québec and learned a second language, learned some English. Today, they live with significant expectations to learn and to speak French. However they emphasized that because the Chinese language is so different from either English or French, learning either language is a real challenge. Learning two new languages feels insurmountable to most women. As well, one woman was very concerned about the political situation in Québec and the added insecurity about her own future. A woman from another community, who has recently moved to Québec in order to get away from her husband, finds that she is 'back to zero' since she cannot even use the little English she learned before.

**c. *Have All the Women who were Interviewed Been Abused?***

The majority of the women...44 of 64, said they had been abused by their husbands. In addition, one woman said she had been abused by her brother, 2 by their teenage children, 6 said they had been abused by in-laws, 2 by aunts or other relatives, 2 by a boss and 3 by another unspecified person. Abuse by other relatives was mentioned most often by women in the Indo-Canadian community.

There was a real unwillingness among some of the women to reveal that they had been abused. Even among those women who did tell the interviewers they had been abused, very few wanted to talk in detail about their experiences of abuse.

Given the difficulty of finding women who have not used services for women who have been abused, AND who will admit that they have been abused, the researchers decided to expand the source of information. We decided to include women who may not have been abused themselves or who are not comfortable telling an interviewer that they have been abused, but who have known well someone who has been abused, and who have some familiarity with the experiences of this friend or relative. In some cases the women who came as a spokesperson for a friend who has been abused, had also been abused themselves. However, by not insisting that the women "disclose" their own experiences, the women were given the option to maintain their privacy, if they so desired.

The women in one community were particularly reluctant to speak of their experiences with abuse. In this community, only three women identified themselves as abused, compared to virtually all the women who were in or had been in a marriage, in the three other communities.

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<sup>17</sup> The women who spoke Russian went through the education system in Poland when Russian language courses were mandatory. The three women who speak a little of other languages had stayed in refugee camps in Greece, Italy and Germany before they came to Canada. As a result, they had picked up a little of the languages of these countries.

**d. *Did the Abuse Start when they came to Canada?***

For 28 of the 44 women who said they were abused, the abuse started in Canada. The majority of those women who had been abused before they came to Canada said that the abuse became worse in Canada. For some the abuse became more physically brutal, for some who may have been psychologically and/or verbally abused before they came to Canada, the abuse became physical as well in Canada. A number of women mentioned that there is also more psychological abuse and more verbal downgrading now than when they were in their home countries. Several women spoke of financial abuse. Five of the women said that their husbands take their money. Four women said that their husbands did not give them any money. One woman concluded that abuse is much more common in Canada than in her home country. Others felt that the abuse feels much worse because the woman has lost her support system and is isolated by language and culture.

**e. *Are the Women Still with their Husbands?***

Seven of the women interviewed were single. These women came from the Chinese and Indo-Canadian communities and were women who knew women who had been abused by their husbands. The majority of the women, 29 in all, were married, 16 were separated, 7 divorced and 5 widowed.

This pattern was not reflected in all the communities. For example, in the Polish community, two thirds of the women interviewed were separated or divorced, compared to about one seventh of the women in the other communities. In the Polish community, none of the women were widowed. This probably reflects the fact that only one woman in the Polish community is over fifty years of age, compared to two in the Indo-Canadian community, five in the Chinese community, and eleven in the Italian community.

**f. *Are they Canadian citizens or Recent Immigrants/ Refugees?***

The sixty-four women interviewed for this report are all Canadian citizens or permanent residents, whose first language is not English or French and who, according to their own assessments, do not speak English or French well enough to seek help from people who speak one of Canada's official languages.

**g. *Where Do they Come From?***

Fourteen of the women interviewed came from the Italian-speaking community in Toronto, (all of these women came from Italy originally); 15 women came from the Chinese-speaking community in Montreal, (10 of these women came from Hong Kong, three from China and two from Vietnam); 21 women came from the Punjabi-Hindi speaking community in the Greater Vancouver area (all these women came from India), and 14 from the Polish-speaking community in Ottawa (all of these women came from Poland).

**h. *When Did they Come to Canada?***

Most of the women interviewed arrived in Canada in the 1970's and 1980's. However times of immigration varied considerably by community. Most of the women in the Italian community arrived earlier than the women in the other communities. Ten women, from the Italian community came to Canada in the 1950's or 60's, The remaining four arrived by 1980. In the Chinese community, only one woman arrived in the 1960's. Four arrived in the 1970's, and ten arrived in the 1980's. This

pattern is fairly similar to the immigration pattern of the Indo-Canadian women. Five arrived in the 1970's, thirteen arrived in the 1980's and three arrived in the 1990's. The majority of women in the Polish community also arrived in the 1980's. In this community, only one woman arrived in the 1970's, 11 arrived in the 1980's, and two arrived in 1991.

***i. Did the Women Come to Canada as Children or as Adults?***

Combining all communities, only twelve of the women were under 19 years of age when they came to Canada. Eight of these women were members of the Indo-Canadian community. Most of the women (50 out of the 64 interviewed), came as working age adults (20-49 years). Only 1 woman was over 60 when she arrived in Canada, the remaining woman was in her 50's.

***j. Did Their Husbands Sponsor Them?***

The majority came under family sponsorship, but only twenty-three (over a third of the women interviewed) were sponsored by their husbands or their husband's family. Thirteen came through arranged marriages. Nine came as refugees. Only four came as independents.

There were some differences across the communities in terms of sponsorship patterns. These are summarized below. However, since our statistics cannot be seen as definitive, it is difficult to draw conclusions or directions from these numbers. As mentioned earlier, a more detailed study is needed to understand the specific needs based on these differences.

Women from the Indo-Canadian community were most likely to have come to Canada through arranged marriages. Almost half (9 of 21) came to Canada in this way. Less than one quarter of the Italian women came through arranged marriages, only one of the Chinese women and none of the Polish women.

Chinese and Indo-Canadian women were more likely to have been sponsored by their husbands than were women from the other communities. Six of the fifteen women interviewed in the Chinese community were sponsored by their husbands almost half. In the Indo-Canadian community 8 of 21 were sponsored by their husbands. In each of the Polish and Italian communities, 4 of 14 women were sponsored by their husbands.

Most of the refugee women were from the Polish community; five were sponsored by the government and 2 by private groups. Two women from the Chinese community were also government-sponsored refugees. There were no refugees from the Indo-Canadian and Italian communities in our study.

***k. How Old are they Today?***

Forty-five of the women interviewed were under fifty years of age. Women over fifty were definitely more difficult to locate and they were much more reluctant to be interviewed. However, the researchers believe that the problems described in this report are shared by older women who do not speak English or French and are often even more difficult to deal with for this age group. The research team is also confident that using the type of methodology outlined in this report, within a more generous time frame, it would be possible to include older women in a similar project.

***l. Do They Have Children and/or Other People to Take Care Of?***<sup>18</sup>

Thirteen of the 64 women interviewed had no children. Nine women had one child, 22 had 2 children, 9 had 3 children, 10 had four children and 1 had 5 children. Only 12 of the women had preschool children at the time of the interviews. These twelve women came from the Polish and Indo-Canadian communities. Thirteen of the women with children had grown children. Another 2 had grown children and one teenager still at home.

In the Italian community only 2 of the women have children twelve years of age or under. One woman in this community had no children. The rest had grown children. Six of 14 women in this community have four or more children.

All of the Polish women interviewed have children, and they are all under 19 years of age. Only one of the Polish women has four children. The majority have two.

In the Indo-Canadian community, only three women have grown children. Six have no children, and the rest of the women have one or two young children, most of them preschool or between 6 and 9 years of age.

Of the Chinese-speaking women interviewed, none have preschool children, only three have children under 9 years of age, seven have children over 10, and four have grown children. Four women interviewed in this community have no children.

Twenty-one of the women, mainly from China and India also take care of parents, in-laws or other relatives.

***m. Do They Have Any Help With Their Children or the Other People Living With them?***

All the women with young children (under 12), have help with their children, and in the Chinese and Indo-Canadian communities parents and in-laws are almost always the caregivers. In contrast, only two of the Polish women with small children have had family help with their children, and for one of these two women, this help lasted one year only. The Polish women rely almost exclusively on paid babysitters who are not related to them. This difference in the Polish community follows mainly from the fact that many of the women do not have their extended families living in Canada.

For all the communities, none of the women said they had help taking care of other relatives living with them.

***n. Do They Have Any Other Relatives Close By?***

Forty-six of the women have other members of their families in Canada. Almost all the women in the Italian and Indo-Canadian communities have relatives living close to them. However, very few of the Chinese and Polish women interviewed have any of their relatives living close to them. Eighteen of

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<sup>18</sup> This question was included to help the researchers understand the range of the women's responsibilities which might add to their difficulties in accessing services, which might complicate their decisions around dealing with the abuse, etc.

the women have their husband's family living close by. Half of these are in-laws of women who have come from India.

***o. What About Work?***

Only in the Chinese community do the majority of women work outside the home for pay or for payment in kind (one woman works for room and board). In the Polish and Indo-Canadian communities half of the women work outside the home for pay and five of the 14 women interviewed in the Italian community work outside the home for pay. Two women work at home for pay.

The majority of the women interviewed work at blue collar or service industry jobs - as factory workers, waitresses, cooks, store clerks, child or elder care workers, domestic workers, farm workers or janitors. Once again, the Polish community is somewhat different from the other communities. Two of the Polish women are professionals working in the public service. One is a supply teacher.

Only eleven of the sixty-four women interviewed did the same work in their home countries. They all miss the autonomy and/or respect they feel they had before they came to Canada.

Thirty-eight out of the 64 women said there have been major changes in their work situations over recent years. Only the young, single women in the Chinese community said their situation changed for the better. They have found that they are gaining job mobility as their language skills improve. Unfortunately, this positive experience was not shared by the other women. The stories of the other women are characterized by loss and disappointment, often as a direct result of their abuse. Several women said they were forced to quit their jobs and go on disability pensions, often as a direct result of abuse. One woman said she lost her job because of an alcoholic husband. Some left their jobs because of accidents on or off the job. A few were laid off. Some women spoke of being unable to find work after they left their husbands. Some spoke of being unable to keep their jobs because of violence.

***p. Is Money a Problem?***

Income information was very difficult to collect and not reliable, since some women were unwilling or unable (often because their husbands would not tell them their income) to report family income. However, of the forty-eight women who answered this question, twenty-six had a family income under \$20,000. Another sixteen had a family income between \$20,000 and \$36,000.

***q. What is their Educational Background?***

The education levels of women in different communities were very different. Two thirds of the women from Italy had no formal education or had elementary school education only. Only one of the women from the Chinese community had more than highschool education from their home country. Two thirds of the women from India had no more than highschool education (three of these women had no formal education at all). However three had college diplomas, two had university degrees and another two had graduate or professional degrees. Eleven out of 14 of the women from Poland have gone to college or university, five of the Polish women have graduate or professional degrees, and all the Polish women have at least completed highschool. Some of the Polish women and the women

from India took highschool, job skills, community college and/or university courses in Canada.

*r. What About Literacy Levels?*

Literacy levels vary considerably as well, but very few of the women interviewed could read and write English or French. Of the Italian women, ten of 14 can read and write Italian and one can read and write a little Italian. None of the Italian women can read and write English or French. Almost all the women from India are literate in their own languages (19 of 21 can read and write Punjabi, 7 of these women can also read and write Hindi). However, only three can read and write English. The Chinese women are all literate in their own language and eleven of fifteen can read English. Six can write it. However, only two can read any French and none can write it. The Polish women are also fully literate in their own language and they can all read and write to some extent in English. Four can also read and write in French.

## **THE REALITIES OF LIVING WITHOUT ENGLISH OR FRENCH:**

The three problems most frequently mentioned by the women interviewed were language barriers, abuse and menial jobs. In this section, we will look at how linguistic isolation affects the women's lives including their experiences at work. In later sections, we will address how language limitations affect their decisions and experiences around abuse.

The women interviewed emphasized that language barriers affect all parts of their lives. Not having language makes everything difficult. Women told the animators that they felt discriminated against mainly because they could not speak English or French. Some women experienced this type of discrimination much more profoundly than discrimination based on race or ethnicity, while others described discrimination based on language as well as race/ ethnicity.

Women described becoming invisible to others because they couldn't speak English or French. They spoke of being taken advantage of, being dismissed as stupid, being misunderstood, being purposefully exploited. Women said they "felt like an alien", "felt blind and deaf". Many spoke of feeling depressed and worthless because they could not communicate and simple things like banking became too difficult. As mothers, many of the women felt frustrated that they could not help their children with school, ask doctors questions when their children were ill, etc. And all of them spoke of everything they do taking longer because it is so difficult to be understood, because they must rely on other people to translate for them and because they must constantly invent ways to reduce their need for language.

As the authors mentioned earlier, these problems are particularly complicated for women in Québec who find themselves living in a society different from the one they experienced when they first came to Canada. Women interviewed from Québec spoke of the special difficulties of being a minority woman within a society which is dealing with its own minority status within Canada. As mentioned earlier, most of the Chinese women interviewed in Montréal who had taken language training when they came to Canada, learned some English. Today, they feel they must start all over again to become part of Québec society. They feel triply discriminated against because of their heritage, race and lack of language ability.

Most of the women have similar language problems today even after many years in Canada. They still need others to help them communicate. In some communities this is less of a problem than in others. In the Italian community, for instance, there are "ethnic" doctors, lawyers and social workers who speak the women's languages. In these communities, women may need people to translate only for

bureaucratic/government problems such as filling out forms or gathering information about unemployment benefits or immigration issues. In some communities where women do not speak English or French however, there are few or no service providers whose first language is the same as the women's. In these communities, women can find life particularly difficult. In essence, however, despite these differences across communities, most of the women have resigned themselves to the lifestyle within their "ethnic" communities, a lifestyle which includes difficulties and isolation.

### **At Work:**

Most women had difficulties finding work in the field they were trained because of language difficulties and discrimination by (potential) employers. The Indo-Canadian women found that they could not even find jobs because of their language and/or race/ethnicity. People also made comments about Indo-Canadian food. The Polish women were refused jobs or promotions because of their accents.

Women, particularly from the Polish community spoke of the subtleties and breadth of discrimination. Some Polish women felt that affirmative action policies were misused to justify discrimination against white immigrants and refugees. They were led to believe that hiring quotas for francophones and visible minorities precluded hiring white immigrants or refugees. Most Polish women felt that they were led to believe that people from certain backgrounds were preferred over others in terms of jobs and training courses. i.e. people from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds before French-speaking people, then visible minorities and then others. Such tactics of "divide-and-rule" were strongly identified by community animators as barriers to community development and relations-building between linguistic and racial/ ethnic minority communities. Furthermore, the animators believe that these tactics fuel discrimination and racism.

Once the women started to work, often they found that they did not know what was going on at their workplace. They could not always understand instructions, expectations or social conversations and they had to ask for more information with basic words. Still they ended up misunderstanding directions. People often lost patience with them when they were trying to explain or understand. The women reported that they were often taken advantage of or were mistreated because of their lack of language skills and awareness. Women were told, "You're in Canada now - speak English."

Moving to a multicultural job-setting in Canada (an experience mentioned by many of the women), also meant the women had to go through other adjustments. They were not trying to learn English or French only, but also Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, etc., whatever language was needed in the workplace.

Anecdotal evidence provided by thirty-nine key contacts working with immigrant and refugee women, interviewed in the planning stages of this project, also suggests that many of the jobs held by women who speak neither English nor French are not unionized and may be jobs within the 'informal labour force', such as 'homework', domestic work or farm work. As such they are often unprotected, and are frequently characterized by long hours, few or no benefits, dangerous working conditions and exploitation or abuse from employers. This means that women working in such jobs have virtually no opportunity to take time off to learn English or French, to access job retraining courses, or to try to find a better job. For instance, women who do industrial sewing at home or do other types of 'homework', typically for six or seven days a week with grossly underpaid wages, are mostly immigrant women, many with small children. "Their ethnic origins vary - they may come from Italy, Greece, China, Portugal or elsewhere - but they are typically immigrants to Canada. Most lack proficiency in English. Their life routines keep them using their

native languages, even though they may have been in Canada for many years."<sup>19</sup>

As well, our key contacts told us that, in the current economic context of recession and restructuring, industries such as the garment industry which has relied heavily on immigrant women's labour, are now laying them off as many factories shut down to move to other countries for even cheaper labour. Older immigrant women who speak no or little English or French, who have worked in these factories for many years, now find themselves suddenly unemployed and with "nothing to show" for all those years of hard work.

***Racism, Exploitation and Abuse in the Workplace:***<sup>20</sup>

Many women from the Italian community reported workplace discrimination and racism based on lack of language ability and their ethnicity. Women from the Chinese and Indo-Canadian communities attributed their experiences of racism to lack of language, to accent and to their visible minority status. The women from the Polish community reported experiences of racism based on their linguistic barriers and being immigrants.

The Italian women were called names such as "WOP", given degrading looks, ignored and were treated disrespectfully at their workplaces, in shops and on public transportation. Many women from all the communities talked about being ignored or people losing patience with them or pretending not to understand their broken English.

Women from all four communities reported being exploited at work, being treated like a slave, receiving less pay than the other workers and having few or no rights as employees. This exploitation occurred even if they were working in their own linguistic communities. They were often given the heaviest jobs such as unloading trucks with men and sweeping the floors. They were not allowed to collect disability insurance even if their employer spoke their language. Some women also reported physical abuse at their workplace. They were also treated as if they were "crazy" when they felt depressed."<sup>21</sup>

One woman said she was treated like a slave at work and could not complain. "I was expected to just say 'thank you' because they gave me a job."

Another woman said she was forced to take very physically hard jobs which ruined her health

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<sup>19</sup> From p. 97, *The Seam Allowance: Industrial Home Sewing in Canada* by Laura C. Johnson (1982). Although this study of 50 women was conducted over 10 years ago, it illustrates vividly how difficult the lives of the women were even then and how many of these women never had the chance to learn English or French because, from the time they arrived in Canada, they were always busy struggling to make ends meet on meager incomes.

<sup>20</sup> The issue of racism and discrimination will be raised several times in this report. While the reader may feel that these sections should be merged for tighter organization, the authors decided instead to introduce this issue in several places throughout the paper to communicate the unavoidable presence of racism and discrimination in the lives of the women interviewed for this project.

<sup>21</sup> In the following sections, a number of quotes from the women interviewed are included. As was mentioned earlier, these quotes have been interpreted and expressed in English by the community animators.



because she did not have to speak English at these jobs.

## **In Their Families:**

### ***Role Reversals in the Family:***

Women talked about role-reversals or shifts in the relations between women and their children because of the loss of language. Children often had considerable power over the mother because the children could speak better English or French than their mother. The women often ended up relying on their children to help them communicate. They felt they had to ask their children to go to appointments (e.g. to the doctors') with them, even though they often felt it was degrading or inappropriate to describe their problems in front of the children.

As mothers, and caregivers for their families, the women had a number of difficulties. Many sought out doctors, dentists, lawyers who spoke their language, for their families. However, for most of the women there were no or very few specialists who spoke their languages. Women even needed to find someone to help them speak to their children's teachers. Some were forced to pay a translator to read them their children's report cards.

Women also spoke of the profound sense of loss and isolation as they lost the central link of communication with their children. Many children, after speaking English or French to their peers for several years, lost their fluency in their mother tongue and women found communicating with their own children became difficult. Some women also told us that their children were ashamed of them because they did not speak English and the children refused to speak their mothers' languages.

- "I lost the respect of my children, because I had to rely on them to translate for me. The worst was going to the doctor and asking my eight year old son to translate personal problems I was having to the doctor."

### ***The Plight of Older Women:***

The older women in our project suffered from losing their families in their home countries through the huge distances which separated them and also "losing" their extended families in Canada because of the language barrier. Often sons-in law or daughters-in-law did not speak the women's languages, and grandchildren were taught only English or French. As one woman said:

- "I felt depressed because I could not even talk to my grandchildren."

The implications of this loss have been far reaching for many of the women because of the high value placed on extended family life in many of these communities.

## **In General:**

Losing language means losing respect and losing independence.

- "You lose control of your life and become very dependent on everyone...your family, your friends, translators, your boss and strangers."
- "In Italy, I did things for myself. Here, I was subjected and beholden to children and strangers."

Even the most personal times and intimate information about their lives were now open for children or strangers to see because of their need for people to interpret for them. Simple things like asking for directions could not be done alone.

As one woman said: "It was hard to answer phone calls and to go to the door when the doorbell rang; talking to the landlord was often too difficult."

Not having fluent English or French skills means that the women do not have access to mainstream services nor to information about education, health or social services, political structures, legal institutions, etc. Few mainstream services have material available in languages other than the two official languages, and few programs have people on staff who can interpret for people who do not speak English or French.

## ***Loss of Self:***

Women talked about the loss of self-esteem and self-confidence which resulted from this loss of language and voice.

- "I felt stupid and I felt I had no confidence. I cried a great deal."
- "I felt illiterate despite having formal education in Italy. I cannot show that I am intelligent."
- "I felt exposed and unprotected."
- "I felt awkward, stupid and unable to communicate with people."
- "I felt nervous and panicky."
- "I feel dumb."
- One university-educated woman said, "I was an intelligent woman. What I want to say is never really heard despite how educated I am. I feel like I'm inferior even though I am educated."
- "I felt helpless, low self-esteem. I felt like a beggar asking people to help."

Some women from the Chinese community talked about the lack of self-confidence they felt around developing friendships with non-Chinese people. And, so many women dealt with their loss of self-esteem by simply "staying away" from public places. Many became virtual prisoners in their own homes.

### ***Someone Else's Voice - Problems with Interpretation:***

The community animators, the key contacts for our research project, and the women interviewed identified the extreme difficulty in finding people who can provide quality interpretation for women in abusive situations. They described how so many women have to rely on people who are not trained properly. They spoke often of women having to rely on children or husbands to translate, even in situations where their presence was highly inappropriate (e.g. a young child translating during an appointment with a gynecologist) because there is no one else available who can speak the language.

They emphasized that speaking the woman's language is also not enough to ensure that the woman is "heard". To truly be "understood", women want and need "cultural interpretation" which provides appropriate translation taking into account cultural usage of language, cultural values and other information necessary to build a full communication between women and English or French-speaking people. Even where there are trained interpreters who are sensitive and appropriate to work with women in abusive situations, there are so few of these people available that few women have real access to their help.

### ***Lack of Trust:***

- "You have to trust what the person is translating for you. You have no control over what you say and what is being said for you and you have to have a total trust in your translator (which is impossible when the translator is a small child). I watch the faces speaking English and I see that they are angry when they should not be and I wonder why they are laughing when nothing is funny."
- "I don't trust people interpreting for me because I have had wrong information given to me before about Unemployment Insurance."

### ***Loss of Privacy:***

The women interviewed reported that, using their children to interpret, while giving some sense of trust sometimes, brought much embarrassment. In hospitals, often cleaning staff would interpret for the women.

- "I felt inferior and humiliated because my personal life became public knowledge."

Most women said that they avoided and still avoid situations where they have to speak English. Some said that they forced themselves to speak the little English they know in order to avoid interpreters. Women felt that they could not trust that the information coming through an interpreter was accurate.

### ***Loss of Support Network and Isolation:***

Women talked about their diminished support network. Losing their voices brought extreme experiences of isolation. In terms of language and communication/ expression, the women went from feeling independent to very dependent:

- "I was treated like a slave at work and had to be grateful for the work, while taking care of the children after work."



Like this woman, after work, most of the women took care of children, husband and relatives. They had no friends. Their day-to-day life was one of isolation. Some women talked about losing touch with the people from their hometown or village who had come to Canada. The only social times in their lives were times when they had obligations to fulfill, such as weddings, funerals, etc.

### ***Mistreatment, Prejudice and Racism:***

Added to this loss of their former selves and lives were mistreatment and discrimination by others for not being able to speak English or French. Although the women interviewed spoke most often of racism and discrimination in the workplace, several women spoke of the devastating effect prejudice and racism had on their lives in Canada.

- "I was treated like a child because I could not express myself."
- "I felt beneath others and people shouted at me."

The women faced prejudice and racism as well because of their linguistic backgrounds. "There is a hierarchy here. The British/ English degrade me, but I know two languages."

## **THE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH LANGUAGE TRAINING:**

### **Weren't ESL/FSL Classes Available to Them?**

Forty-three of the sixty-four women interviewed said that there were ESL/FSL classes available for them either when they came to Canada, or when they might have considered taking classes. However, the remainder of the women identified a number of systemic barriers. Of the twenty-one women who said they were not available, two said they were not offered classes because they were not intending to go to work, two said the classes were offered only to their husbands because they were considered "the head of households", two said they were only available to new arrivals and they had to work when they first arrived, two said they could speak some English so classes were not open to them, and one said that the waiting list was too long. Some women were not aware that there were ESL/FSL programs at all. In Québec, government sponsored and subsidized French as Second Language classes are available only to new immigrants and not to citizens. Yet, these women never had a chance to learn French before because there were no FSL classes for new immigrants when they had first arrived.

### **Did the Women Who Took ESL/FSL Classes, Benefit from Them?**

Twenty-seven of the women interviewed did take ESL/FLS classes.<sup>22</sup> Those women who did attend classes had very mixed feelings about their effectiveness, and overall, these feelings were more negative than positive. One of the biggest criticisms is that the teachers do not speak the languages of the students. For women who had some English or French before they took the classes, this was not such a big problem. But for women starting classes with no English or French it was usually an insurmountable problem. As one woman, who took an FSL course said: "The teacher is a francophone. I still don't understand her at all, even after three months in my course." Other criticisms are that the courses are too short, the pace too fast, and

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<sup>22</sup> ESL/FLS course levels were not specified in most cases. When they were specified, most spoke of taking classes at levels 1 and 2.

the methodology childish. The language classes also did not account for the vast differences between some mother tongue languages (e.g. Chinese) and English or French.

One woman from India said she did not learn much English, but did learn culturally appropriate eye contact. Only seventeen out of the twenty-seven women who took classes said they learned any English or French at the ESL/FSL classes. The women who were more positive about the classes were women who already knew some English when they came to Canada. However, the women with higher education from the Polish community found the curriculum content to be inappropriate for their level.

### **Why Didn't More Women Take ESL/FSL Classes?**

Many of the women interviewed said that they could not take ESL/FSL classes because their husbands did not want them to and actually forbade them to take the classes or were so unsupportive in terms of adjusting their own schedules or helping with child care, that the women were unable to attend. In many cases as well, the decision was related to work. Most women had to go to work as soon as they came to Canada. Over time, their husbands became more controlling and violent and forbade them from taking time from work and family for classes.

### **Did the Women Learn English or French in Any Other Ways?**

Some women said they picked up the little English or French they knew mainly by watching television. Thirty-three women cited T.V. as a way they picked up English. Thirteen said they learned from their children, but this method was almost entirely reported by women in the Italian community. Fourteen, nine of them Polish women, said they learned from neighbours or friends. Four learned some English from their husbands, and ten taught themselves some English, often using cassettes.

## **THE PRESENCE OF ENGLISH OR FRENCH IN THEIR DAILY LIVES:**

### **Do Their Husbands Speak English or French?**

Forty-four of the husbands of women interviewed speak at least some English. This number represents virtually all the women who legally have husbands (there are 45 women who are married or separated in the sample). Only seventeen of these men learned English or French at least in part through ESL classes. Twenty-four learned through schools in their home countries or through Canadian elementary or secondary schools, since some of them were Canadian or came here as children. Work also helped six men learn English, according to the women, and five men learned on their own. The women said that all men who took ESL/FSL courses were given allowances to attend classes. For the Polish women in our study, the majority of them spoke better English than their husbands and so the women were expected to do any chores outside the home which required a knowledge of English, piling extra responsibilities on their shoulders.

### **Do the Women Use English or French in Their Daily Lives?**

English is used by virtually all the women interviewed only when absolutely needed. Almost all the women interviewed use their mother language at home, and said they avoid speaking English as much as possible. Many use some English when they go to doctors or shop. A few use it on the bus, at the bank, at their children's schools and at church or temple. At work, twenty-five women (almost all Polish or Chinese speaking) said they use English because English is the language most people speak.

French was used by only one woman interviewed. This woman, a Chinese-speaking woman living in Montréal, said that she uses French at work. Some women said that their work settings are multilingual, so they have the additional challenge of trying to learn the languages of other workers in order to be understood on the job.

## **THE REALITIES OF LIVING WITH ABUSE IN ISOLATION:**

Abuse generally is fed by isolation and dependency.<sup>23</sup> But for women who are abused by their husbands or partners, sometimes by in-laws, maybe by their own children as well, and who don't speak either English or French, the fear, the isolation, the dependency, the helplessness and the hopelessness which are so much a part of life for all women who are abused, are multiplied many times over.

Language provides the ability to question, language provides some freedom from fear of the unknown, language provides information, language opens alternatives, and language can create community. Without language, many women feel helpless, dependent, isolated and often hopeless..all dynamics which nourish continued abuse.

The women contacted through this project made it clear that language problems made their experiences of abuse more difficult. Twelve of fourteen Polish women, fifteen of twenty-one Indo-Canadian women, ten of fourteen Italian women, and ten of fifteen Chinese women believe that lack of language has added to the suffering they have experienced through abuse. These difficulties are described in the sections below.

The women interviewed, generally did not choose to describe in detail incidences of abuse they have experienced. Their abuse, for them, was inseparable from their experiences of being isolated by language, by geography, by culture, by loss of friends, family, status and role. Accordingly, the emphasis in this paper will be on their experiences of isolation and loss, and on the explanations the women gave concerning their abuse.

### **How Do the Women Interviewed Define Abuse?**

The women interviewed believe that abuse is a widespread social evil that must be stopped. They are aware that abuse happens in all social classes, and know, therefore, at least intellectually, that they are not alone. As one community animator put it:

- "Women who have experienced abuse do know that abuse is independent of culture, class, education, etc., whereas people around the women deny this and blame abuse on culture, and on lower class educational background. I found that women who have experienced abuse have grown and matured through their experience and have gained wisdom about abuse that others do not have."

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<sup>23</sup> These dynamics have been elaborated in many reports and books on woman abuse. For example, see MacLeod, Linda, *Battered But Not Beaten*, Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Ottawa, Canada, 1987.; Health and Welfare Canada, "Family Violence: A Review of Theoretical and Clinical Literature", Ottawa, Canada, 1989; Correctional Service Canada, "Breaking the Cycle of Family Violence", Ottawa, Canada, 1988.



When the women were asked by the interviewers to define abuse, women went beyond physical abuse to include the following ideas which emphasize the importance of economic, emotional/verbal and sexual abuse in the experiences of the women interviewed. Some of the explanations they gave to describe their abuse are quoted below:

- "making women earn money to pay the bills";
- "giving no financial support";
- "using the woman as cheap labour";
- "treating his wife like a slave";
- "taking her rights and freedom away";
- "imprisoning the woman";
- "loss of independence";
- "making degrading remarks";
- "being ignored by husbands";
- "having an affair outside marriage, or going with prostitutes";
- "arguing all the time";
- "using dirty language";
- "I was always shaking from fear";
- "I was prevented from fulfilling my goals";
- "not being able to meet the needs of my children";
- "feeling helpless";
- "sexual abuse";
- "I think of physical torture".

The women spoke often in the interviews about being treated like a machine to make money. They connected the abuse they experience very strongly to economic conditions in Canada. Some of them explained that in their home country, money meant very little. People could live off the land to a much greater extent and relied on each other much more, so money was not so necessary. In Canada, the women emphasized, money seems to be valued above all else. People need money for everything and they do not support one another. Money becomes all-important.



## **How Do the Women Understand the Causes of Abuse?**

The women interviewed suggested many possible explanations for the prevalence of woman abuse. Some feel that abuse is so widespread because many men are immature "big children who get angry and beat", and because the system does not help women in abusive situations, or does not appropriately punish men. The women in one community also blame "Canadian women" for being too sexually free and luring their husbands away. Others feel the main reason for the abuse is economic...too many of their husbands cannot find jobs, are exploited and underemployed. Some women feel it is Canada that changed their husbands, but these same women mentioned that their in-laws encourage the abuse. Some women feel that men have the need to control. However, even those women who asserted that they know it is not the woman's fault, often admitted that they still feel guilty because they believe the unity of the family is very important and they suspect on some level that they are at fault.

## **The Community Response:**

These feelings are multiplied when the community around them is not supportive, and/or will not acknowledge that abuse is a problem in their community. All but one of the sixty-four women interviewed said that they think there is a problem of wife abuse in their communities, but fifty of the women said that people don't talk about it. One community stood out as having a fairly high level of public acknowledgement of abuse, and virtually all the women who said that it is talked about in their community, came from this one location. However, even in this community, there was considerable distancing and denial that abuse exists, when the women were asked if they personally know anyone who had been abused.

When the women interviewed were asked why abuse is not talked about, thirty women suggested that abuse is seen as a taboo subject, and that community members may be too proud or too embarrassed to talk about it. Thirteen women felt it is because people are afraid. Most women agreed that people in their communities tend to see abuse as a family matter.

The women told the community animators that even when abuse is discussed, it is generally in the form of gossip. People may be sympathetic toward the woman, but they still tend to blame the woman for the abuse and/or they explain it in terms of economic pressures, unemployment and the general frustrations men experience in Canadian society. Sometimes abuse is seen as the result of too much drinking. The women explained that in their communities, the man is still considered the head of the household, and there is strong pressure to keep knowledge of abuse in the family, sometimes for the sake of the children, sometimes so the community will not be shamed. One woman even mentioned that if another man tries to intervene, it is generally assumed that he is the woman's lover.

Further, there is a general feeling that the woman should make sacrifices and keep the family together. The woman, in some of these communities, is seen as "the keeper of our culture". It is her role to ensure that her children learn the history, values, traditions and cultural practices of her home country.

In only one community (the Chinese-speaking community) did the women say that women who are abused will talk together about how they are mistreated, why they are abused and the consequences of the abuse for the children. Women who are abused in the other communities mainly suffer in silence. However, women in all communities will talk if certain conditions are met and the women are given appropriate and sufficient support by people who are sensitive to their backgrounds, know their culture and history and

speak their language.<sup>24</sup>

### **Why Don't More Women Leave?**

The majority of women interviewed had not, and would not leave their husbands. For some it is because they have come to believe that it is their destiny to suffer. They do not believe that the men will or can change, and they have resigned themselves to their fate. Others are afraid to leave because they fear revenge from their husbands. Women with children often try to preserve the family. Some women are afraid to be alone. The most common fear shared by these women is the fear that if they leave their husbands, there will be no place for them in their communities.

### **Are The Experiences of Older Women Different?**

Women in their 50's and 60's felt the most despair. These women, the majority of whom are from the Italian community, expressed over and over again how hopeless and horrible life is for them. They have "worked like dogs" and yet have "nothing to show for it"...not just in terms of material possessions but also in terms of love, affection, friends, family etc. Some women told the community animators that they are "just waiting to die".

Many of these women also have health problems because of years of beating. As a result, daily life is difficult for them and the limitations imposed by their health problems compounds their isolation and painful lives.

The older women interviewed have lived with abuse for many years and they are still living with it. Even for those women who are living essentially separate lives from their husbands, they are still living in the same house as their husbands because they cannot afford to move, they do not want to leave the house they worked so hard to buy and because they would feel even more isolated outside their language community.

In the Polish community, one woman told the animator about a 70 year old woman:

- "She never had more than five dollars in her hands. She has been abused for many, many years. She used to beg her husband for money to buy feminine napkins."

The same animator heard about another woman who was abused for many years and who died recently, in her 60's.

- "During the funeral, many people were gossiping about the abuse by her husband. She used to hide for a day or two with some friends and was in the hospital many times."

### **THE REALITIES OF LIVING WITH CHANGE AND LOSS:**

The changes women experienced coming to Canada were profound. Aside from the geographic and climatic changes experienced, fifty-three of the sixty-four women interviewed left friends and/or close family members behind. Forty-nine changed the kind of work they do. Forty-four experienced a change in financial

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<sup>24</sup> More detail about what constitutes appropriate support is given in the final section of this report.

status - many in real terms for the worse. Thirty-eight experienced a change in family composition. Twenty-seven of the sixty-four women interviewed moved from a farm to a big city. And twenty found themselves unable to use their professional or trade skills.

### **Lower Standard of Living:**

Most of the Italian women went to work right away after they moved to Canada during the 1950's and 1960's. However, they found a lower standard of living quarters (typically one room), a lower and more isolating standard of employment and linguistic barriers. The Indo-Canadian women also described their standard of living in Canada to be much lower than in India.

- "Living conditions in Canada were different. We had a house in India, while in Canada we lived in a basement suite. Working on the farm was very hard in the winter. We all had to slog day and night to make ends meet. Life was full of hardships; no one was there to guide and support us. We had to survive on our own. New country, new problems."

### **Special Issues for Refugee Women:**

Many of the women from the Polish community and a few from the Chinese community came to Canada under refugee status. As in other refugee communities, a number of the women had stayed in a series of refugee camps, had to rely on the good will of different countries, and were forced to depend on a number of government bureaucracies over these years. As refugees, they had been unable to make plans in terms of working and living in Canada. The refugee experience can rob people of self-esteem, of the knowledge that they can make long term plans, of the belief that they have any control over their lives.

To add to their dilemmas, government-sponsored refugees often have no family or friends to rely on in Canada, and therefore are often directed, out of necessity, to government assisted programs such as welfare. But once they are introduced to social assistance, as other Canadians who are not immigrants or refugees have found, it is often very difficult to move out of the "welfare trap". This "trap" seems to be created by the very system that is supposed to help people. The Ontario Social Assistance Review Committee reported the following about the experiences of welfare recipients:

- "Rules and procedures that reinforce applicants' low self-esteem and reflect negative and inaccurate public perceptions of social assistance recipients function as highly effective barriers. Time and again during the public hearings we heard passionate, eloquent, and painful testimony from recipients about their contact with a system that deals with them as adversaries and seems to affirm their view of themselves as inferior and inadequate... We heard repeatedly from recipients and from staff of an environment where the combined pressures of stressful working conditions and large caseloads mean workers are able to offer far less help than recipients need."<sup>25</sup>

The erosion of self-worth, dignity and a belief in one's potential, which is so common to the experiences of people forced to accept welfare, is magnified many times for refugees who bring with them to the welfare system a deep sense of displacement and uncertainty. What this means is that women with higher

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<sup>25</sup> *Transitions: Report of the Social Assistance Review Committee.* Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. (1988). p. 15.

educational backgrounds and professional degrees can find themselves dependent on welfare, and can find it as difficult as do people with less education to move out of the "welfare trap".

### **Loss of Family and Friends:**

Loss of family and friends was the most critical loss for the women interviewed. An Indo-Canadian woman told one of the community animators:

- "I miss my parents tremendously. My self-esteem was low. I always felt that something was missing. I wanted to return to my home country. I felt like a wingless bird."

The Polish speaking women talked of missing their parents, brothers, sisters still in Poland. They have low self-esteem and felt like children. No one treated them like adults because they couldn't express themselves. They felt their husbands put all the responsibility on their shoulders.

Other women told the animators:

- "I felt very lonely."
- "I was totally dependent on my in-laws for support."
- "I felt scared, wondered if I made good choices."

### **Loss of Role and Status:**

Women talked about feeling "freer" in their country of origin. Their position in the community was established by family and personal history: "I was a somebody." The women's status and esteem were wiped out when they moved to Canada.

In Canada, there was the loss of roles. Women repeatedly told us that in their countries, a woman was respected as a mother, a wife and as a member of the community, particularly in small towns. Support for the women was internal, i.e. from her family, her neighbours and friends, from town members. Women did not have to rely on support from external sources, such as professionals.

### **Loss of Problem-Solving Options:**

Women felt that in some ways, there have been good things about coming here but there were also many more negative things. For instance, Italian-Canadian women from rural parts of Italy had little education but had more power there. Many felt that if they had been abused in Italy, more "redress" and services would have been available to them. There would have been no language problem and family and community resources would have been available. They felt they would have dealt with the problem much sooner in Italy.

The loss of family, community and status which they had in their home countries, further isolated the women and made it that much more difficult to deal with abuse. One woman said:

- "In Italy, it would have been different. I would have gone to the authorities myself. My family would have intervened and the community would not have supported him."



Women were also unaware of available resources, even within their "own" linguistic communities in Canada. The community animators found that many women did not have any support systems, or know of any help options.

### **The Loss of Respect and Inclusion Through Prejudice and Racism:**

Added to these losses and changes, the women had to deal with prejudice and discrimination in Canada. Thirteen out of fifteen women interviewed from the Chinese community talked about having experienced discrimination and racism. They described how people masked their discrimination under behaviours like ignoring the women or pretending that they could not understand the women's accent. The women spoke of many levels of discrimination, and all expressed a hopelessness of overcoming this discrimination.

Women from the Chinese and Indo-Canadian communities told the animators that:

- "Visible minorities become invisible."
- On the other hand, the Polish women said:
- "You hope you will fit in because you are invisible, but your accent gives you away."

Sixteen out of twenty-one from the Indo-Canadian community reported experiencing racism because of their race/ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier under language issues, employers also took advantage of the women's race/ethnicity, for example, by providing less work benefits.

One employer told a woman from the Chinese community:

- "Chinese don't drink coffee anyway. Can you do this for me during the coffee break?"

Because of their colour/race, women from the Chinese community said that people never stop asking them "where they come from" and they feel that they could never be Canadian and never integrate into Québec society.

- "People are always asking me my country of origin."

### **SURVIVING IN SPITE OF SILENCE AND SUFFERING:**

#### **Coping with Language Barriers:**

To cope without knowing English or French, many of the women minimize their interaction with others, use gestures and body language, repeat and repeat what they are saying to ensure they are understood, prepare a translated note before they have to use English, work to learn few basic English phrases very well, and use very broken English when absolutely necessary. For one Italian woman, it was easier for her to use Portuguese to speak with some of her co-workers than it was to learn English.

For work, many women took menial jobs or jobs that require very little English/ French. Some turned to their own language community for work in a setting which uses their mother tongue.



In order to avoid the humiliation, embarrassment and frustration of not speaking the language, the women, whenever possible, seek out stores, doctors, church, etc. in their linguistic community or in settings that use their languages.

Women also seek help from friends, family, acquaintances and strangers to interpret or translate for them. However, as described earlier, they find that there are numerous problems with people who are not trained and are not professional translators, attempting to interpret for them. Even with professional interpreters, the women often find it frustrating because they are not their own "voices".

Women feel humiliated and embarrassed, degraded and frustrated. They lose patience with themselves and others and feel angry at times. Most of all they feel powerless.

- "I even paid an interpreter to read my children's report cards. I was trapped and isolated - powerless."

For most of the women, these communication and language barriers exist as much as ever and most of the women still cope using the above means. However, some of the women did describe small improvements in their lives today because there are more ethnic professionals now and, to deal with "small" things, many of the women have a little English to manage on their own. Yet, the vast majority of the women still rely on others to help them communicate with English or French-speaking people.

### **How Do They Survive Through the Abuse?**

In general, women in abusive situations asked for help only in critical, extremely dangerous situations. However, women from most of the communities talked to someone about their abusive situations, although only half of the Indo-Canadian women interviewed told someone about their experience. For the women who did speak about abuse, family (mother) and friends (sometimes also abused) were key sources of support and confidence. For the women from the Indo-Canadian community, a number of them spoke to their husbands' families about abuse and very few talked to their friends. This again reflects the fact that many of the women lived with their in-laws within that community.

The women generally received a double message from their families and friends. For the most part, they received no real help from the people in whom they confided. In some cases, there was disbelief and accusations were made against the women themselves.

Most of the women also reported that people around them were aware of their abusive situations. However, once they knew or suspected that the woman was being abused, they stopped visiting or pretended that they did not know or gossiped and did not want to get involved.

The women explained that community involvement can be a trap for them, trapping them in gossip and fear of gossip, rather than freeing them by providing a support network. This is a particular problem in linguistic communities divided by age, period of immigration, religion or values. These differences can create distrust, anger, fear and blaming which discourages the creation of supportive community links. Ironically, women who have achieved high status in the linguistic community, and are often very involved in community activities, often feel they must hide their abuse to preserve their position of respect. These women become particularly isolated.

For the most part, the women survived and coped (and still do so) through sheer patience and

tolerance for many, many years. The Indo-Canadian women cope mainly for the sake of the children, because of God, to stand up for their rights, and because they thought it was part of their "karma". The women from the Chinese community survive by concentrating on their work and child-raising in order to forget the pain. They continue to hope that things are only temporary and that they will improve. The Italian-speaking women told us that they survive with the help of God, hold everything inside for the sake of the children. Some of these women have learned to call police and have started to see Italian speaking social workers and to attend support groups. The Polish speaking women also cope for the sake of their children and to hold the family together.<sup>26</sup> They also pray and hope and continue to love their husbands. One woman wrote poetry to survive. Older women, in general, have resigned themselves to the thought that they are beyond hope and that it is too difficult to change their lives at their age.

## THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN BUILDING INNER STRENGTH

Spirituality is an important source of strength for most of the women. Not all the women attended church or temple regularly, but virtually all the women spoke of the strength and support that prayer gave them. For some, the church or temple also provides an opportunity for social contact.

Almost all the women from India (17 out of 21) attended religious services at temple every week or at least once a month, and in addition eighteen went to the temple for social events. Eight out of the fourteen Italian women interviewed attend church once a week or at least once a month, but only five attend church social events. In contrast, church attendance is not a regular part of any of the Chinese-speaking women's lives and only three even go to church for social events. Polish women attend slightly more and four out of fourteen do go to church for social events.

However, church or temple attendance is not an indicator of depth of spirituality for these women. Women in all communities stressed that their spirituality is extremely important to them. Women emphasized the importance of their spiritual lives to the researchers. One said that "prayer is the only way of telling somebody about my problems". Others said that prayer is a way of satisfying their needs. Worshipping in their homes provides peace of mind. Another woman expressed her despair in her despondent admission: "Prayer is the only thing left to me." Spirituality for many women provides a safe place for them. Prayer and faith provides the strength and courage to go on. Through prayer, women find comfort, peace and individual time.

For many of these women, having a spiritual leader tell them that leaving is acceptable is very influential in their decision making. One woman spoke of finding peace after she left her husband when a priest told her he approved of her leaving. Another Catholic woman said that a Mennonite had convinced her that Catholicism does not mean living with an abusive husband. A priest promised an annulment to another woman.

The importance of spirituality in providing strength and hope for these women, particularly for older women, cannot be ignored. Recognition of the importance of spirituality, spiritual healing and the possible role of churches and temples in helping women who are abused and who do not speak English or French

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<sup>26</sup> In the Polish community, the woman's role to keep the family together in order to preserve community values has an extra importance because for 150 years Poland did not exist. During these years, the men's role was to fight for independence, while the woman's main role was to teach heritage, language and culture.

must be integral to any responses created.

Despite their strengths in coping, for the women we talked to, the fear of abuse and violence is ever present in their lives. One woman told our interviewer:

- "If my husband found out that I came here to meet you, I would be in trouble. He only lets me leave the house if I am going to see the doctor."

## **THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND INFORMATION:**

### **Do the Women Interviewed Need and Want More Information?**

Very few of the women had any information about help or support, and the information those few had was mainly piecemeal. Six women had information about social assistance, a few had additional information about rights and services. Only one woman said she had information about counselling and translation. One woman said she had some information about the rights of children. None of the women had any information on counselling services for men.

Those who have information, received it through diverse sources, including: the police, nuns, ethnic newspapers, community organizations, brochures, a settlement agency, an ESL teacher, a welfare worker, a friend. One said she knows that wife assault is a crime in Canada as a result of a trip she took as part of her ESL course from the class to the police station. However, T.V. and radio, was the most common source of information.

Fifty-five of the sixty-four women interviewed said they need more information. Sixty-two of the women said they feel that legal information is important, although it should be noted that their definition of legal information is in fact very broadly inclusive and tends to include any information that affects financial security and housing as well as strictly legal concerns.

All but five of the women interviewed also felt it is important for other women, as well as men and children, and the community generally to receive more information, about:

- where to get help if you are abused and/or are in other types of crises;
- how women can live with their husbands with a maximum of independence (e.g. have separate bank accounts);
- where and how to make complaints about abuse;
- what options exist for women;
- specific information on sexual abuse;
- details on rights and options of all people and specifically of abused women;
- information of the consequences under the law of wife assault and child abuse;
- how women can protect themselves;

- emergency numbers and safety tips;
- where and how to get financial assistance.

Most women felt that this information should become part of the general orientation information given to people when they first arrive in Canada, and that it should be stressed that wife assault is a crime punishable by law.

### **What Are Their Specific Information Needs?**

#### ***Legal Information:***

The women asked for information on a broad range of legal issues, listed below;

- how the legal system and police services work;
- information on separation, divorce, custody, maintenance, child support and division of assets;
- women's rights;
- laws regarding wife assault;
- information on charges and convictions in wife assault cases;
- how the justice system can help women who are abused;
- how the justice system can prevent the husband from disturbing or hurting his wife;
- how the justice system can protect women;
- information on legal aid;
- the duties of police officers in wife assault cases;
- laws related to deportation;
- How can I get my kids back?
- How can I deal with my in-laws who also abused me?

#### ***Financial/Housing Information:***

Many women defined this information as legal information as well.

- How can I get subsidized housing if I leave my husband?
- How can I get financial support if I leave?
- Am I eligible for social assistance?



### ***Other Information Needs:***

The women interviewed had a broad range of additional information needs. They wanted more information on:

- subsidized childcare;
- schooling;
- basic human rights;
- employment;
- immigration rules;
- how to find a job;
- parenting;
- safety measures;
- self protection;
- how to make the decision whether to leave or stay;
- how to get an appointment;
- where to get good cultural interpretation services, i.e. interpretation which provides more than just literal translation. Cultural interpretation also provides information about the meaning and intention of statements made and places them in a cultural context. It can also provide general information about culture and various systems in Canada. It is interpretation which bridges the cultures, including information about legal, health, education, and social service systems, as an extension of advocacy service to the women.

### **How Should This Information Be Conveyed?**

Getting information to women should be done in ways that do not jeopardize the woman's privacy or safety. To ensure that the husband does not suspect that the woman has reported the abuse, and to protect the anonymity of women who may want to come forward to share their experiences with abuse, the women suggested three main ways to get information out to women who are abused but do not speak English or French.

1. Radio shows in the languages of the women in the community are anonymous and reach a wide group of women. Some women suggested T.V. as well, but others felt that T.V. was not anonymous enough, and women would not be able to call in to tell their stories. Women who favoured radio shows emphasized the importance of anonymity and confidentiality. There are few women who can dare to tell their stories because of the resistance and backlash in the community. One woman told a community animator that a woman in her community who had told her story on a radio program, had her car tires slashed.

2. Pamphlets which could be available for general distribution through churches or temples, community centres, at schools, at places of work, in doctors' offices as well as at workshops, conferences, or support groups were widely favoured for those who can read. These pamphlets ideally should be produced in the language of the community, and should not just be translated, but should reflect the values, beliefs and culture of the community. One real advantage of pamphlets, according to the women interviewed is that they can be kept and shared with others. There were mixed feelings on the idea of sending pamphlets anonymously to households. Some felt that sending pamphlets out to all households would ensure that isolated homemakers receive them. Others were worried that the husband could suspect that it was sent only to their house because the wife had reported the abuse.
3. Community newspapers were also suggested by forty-one women and were considered the most effective means by a number of the women interviewed.

Other good ideas mentioned less frequently include:

- posters;
- a 'legal advice' office for specific minority language communities;
- a 'trust phone line';
- workshops for the entire community on abuse;
- workshops for women on topics not directly related to abuse give women the information on parenting, housing, financial support etc. they need; to help encourage women to get out of the house, and to build the community and trust necessary for women to begin talking about abuse;
- workshops on women's rights;
- orientations for new immigrants in which abuse would be included as one of the topics covered.

## **THE ROLE OF OTHER SERVICES AND PROGRAMS:**

### **Do The Women Interviewed Use Existing Services?**

There is a very low level of knowledge of both mainstream and ethnospecific community services among the women interviewed. Women were asked where they had sought help (not necessarily for their abuse), in the past. The answers were diverse, but showed that overall the women sought help within their own communities and languages. Twenty-three women had sought help from ethnospecific social service organizations, fourteen from other professionals in the community, thirteen from the police, nine from churches and temples, nine from social workers and welfare services, eight from shelters, seven from women's groups or programs, five from ESL/FLS teachers, three from Centres for Newcomers, three from friends, two from interpreters' services, one from an ethnic business organization and one from an MP's office.





## Why Do They Not Use More Services More Often?

Very few women used shelters and other mainstream services to cope. One woman who went to a shelter said:

- "If I was in Italy, I would not have needed anyone and I wouldn't have gone to someone in order to take control and I am still not in control."

The women also did not know what resources were available. Even those who have been here for 40 years were unaware of the help they could access. On the other hand, some women have begged for help but as one 50 year old woman said,

- "No one came to help and I had enough - 'Basta'."
- Another woman said: "What is there for me if I separate? I will lose my house."

On the other hand, many of the women we have targetted for this study do not even consider looking for help to stop their abuse, because the help that is available is not seen as appropriate for them. In other words, the values implicit in existing services clash with the values of many women who are abused and who do not speak English or French. In particular, community animators stressed the following value clashes.<sup>27</sup>

### *i) Service emphasis on short-term dependency vs women's value of self-sufficiency:*

Many available services encourage short-term dependency on welfare and/or on publically funded shelters to enable women to leave an abusive partner. For women who come from cultures where the work ethic is strong and self-sufficiency is highly valued, even short-term dependency on the state is considered totally unacceptable.

### *ii) Mainstream empowerment model vs economic and community empowerment models.*

While many women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French are very committed to self-sufficiency, economic success and community solidarity as forms of empowerment, they reject mainstream individual empowerment models. They feel these approaches to empowerment: put too much responsibility on their shoulders before they have learned from others how to deal with these responsibilities; reject the "modelling" or learning through example approach which many of these women favour, and encourage women to compete with their husbands for power instead of building mutual, community and family-based power and strength.

### *iii) Individual Counselling vs Community and Family Building*

Key contacts emphasized that many women who are abused and speak neither English nor

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<sup>27</sup> The value clashes listed in this section were mentioned by the community animators involved in this study, and were also reiterated by an additional thirty-five key contacts interviewed by telephone in the planning stage of this project.

French see most counselling approaches as all talk and no substance, as an inappropriately personal intrusion by outsiders, and as patronizing. Some women do not understand the focus on individual happiness which is at the root of many counselling approaches. For them, happiness is essentially linked to what is good for the family and for the wider community.

**iv) *Individual Rights vs Community Rights***

For many women who are abused and who don't speak either English or French, an emphasis on their individual rights makes no sense to them because they believe that the rights of the community should be the central concern. In some cases, particularly when their religious beliefs emphasize the solidarity of the community, a focus on the North American culture and value systems will cause great conflict with their own beliefs and values.

**v) *Services for the Women vs Services which Reach Out to All Family Members***

Many of the women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French do not understand a model of help which offers them support as individuals, but offers nothing for either the children or for their husbands. In their eyes, all members of the family are suffering, and therefore, all members of the family should be offered help.

**vi) *Written Material vs Word of Mouth Communication***

Many of the women who are the focus of this study, are illiterate or have a low level of literacy even in their own languages. Therefore, written material is rarely an effective means of communication or education for them. Further, many of the women come from cultures where word of mouth is the most common and most effective means of sharing information, and the credibility of the information is linked to trust in the person divulging the information. Accordingly, written information provided by an unknown person will have an extremely low chance of being taken seriously and understood.

**vii) *The Emphasis on the Crisis vs the Emphasis on Long-term Healing and Prevention***

Women want something that goes beyond the crisis to deal with their long-term needs. Although many services do put some emphasis on long-term prevention, this emphasis tends to be abstract or society-wide. Responses to individual women and/or families rarely look at their long-term needs.

**viii) *Secular Approaches vs Spiritual Approaches***

For many of the women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French, their faith tradition is a source of strength and direction in their lives. Programs and services which do not incorporate or even respect their faith are perceived as negative and destructive by many women.

Women who did not seek help said, as well, that they did not go for help mainly because they didn't know where to go. They also spoke of fear of their abusers, fear that they could not trust the organization to keep their encounter strictly confidential, embarrassment, shame, not wanting to become the object of

sympathy and a desire to avoid a long and frustrating translation experience.

### **Were Their Experiences with Services Positive or Negative?**

Overall, the women's experiences with ethnocultural services were the most positive for the women because people in these organizations showed sensitivity, caring, support and made the women aware of available services.

Many experiences with lawyers were not positive. The women did not know how to find lawyers who could help them, and often found lawyers in haphazard ways through chance third-party references. The lawyers the women encountered tended to be culturally insensitive, although some women were appreciative of the lawyer's work in getting them a divorce.

Most of the women who had encounters with the police were not pleased with the police response, but some women who come from countries where the police are threatening and abusive, found the respectful, supportive role of police here, a pleasant surprise.

Generally, the women were disappointed with the services available because they had wanted help solving their problems. They expressed a high level of frustration at constantly having to talk to people, and not getting anywhere in terms of finding practical solutions. Some of these women said they could get more help from friends who would at least be good listeners and were more responsive to their cultural needs.

### ***Specific Frustrations:***

For many women who did receive or at least look for help, the help available was inappropriate for their needs, and frustrating. They were often put on waiting lists, service providers were generally not sensitive to their cultural needs; they were shuffled from one service to another; had to cope with poor translation; the workers they met with were often untrained and wouldn't spend much time with them; and some women felt that too many of the services seemed to be based on theory not on practical realities.

A number of the women, particularly in the Italian and Polish communities, were angry that when they called police to protect them from their husbands, the police came but they did not arrest the husband, they waited too long to take action, and they wanted the woman to leave the home. In one case, the police did not even come. They just phoned back to check if everything was O.K. In another case, the police came and left, with no effect at all on the husband. Such negative experiences with police over the years have led some of the older Italian speaking women in abusive situations to feel pessimistic and resigned to the fact that the system cannot help them. Very few women from the Indo-Canadian and Chinese communities have ever called the police.

Women were also frustrated with the inability of lawyers to stop husbands from disturbing their wives even if the wife leaves her husband. One woman also complained that her lawyer was unable to help her get alimony payments.

Some women expressed fears that demonstrated their concerns about systemic racism. For example, women mentioned that even though they would prefer to use a lawyer from their linguistic community, they fear that these lawyers will be discriminated against in court, to the detriment of the women's interests.

Generally, women who were aware of shelters for assaulted women, felt that shelters do not work for

them because they are not culturally sensitive.

In sum, women said that they wanted less talk and more action. They thought that available services should help them make practical decisions to end the abuse.

## **IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

The following ideas for improvement came totally from the interviews conducted with the sixty-four women who provided the insights and information for this report. Every attempt has been made not to edit away the intentions of these women. As a result, because of the diverse group of women who shared their ideas with the community animators, not all the ideas are consistent with one another. It must also be stressed that any of the ideas included in this report should be implemented in consultation with the individual communities involved to ensure that they are appropriate for their particular culture, values and specific local needs. Further, many of the ideas still require elaboration. This elaboration should be carried out through local consultations.

For many of the women interviewed, it was very difficult to answer questions around ideas for improvement. Many of them had used existing services so rarely, if at all, that they were not aware of what now existed. How could they then know how to improve what exists? Nonetheless, a number of trends emerged. The authors of this report have attempted to organize the many excellent suggestions offered in such a way that they can become the informal recommendations offered by women whose voices are heard so rarely.

### **1. Provide More Education and Awareness**

- Existing Programs need to be better publicized in appropriate language, and with cultural sensitivity which reflects the values of the community.
- Use theatre as an education and awareness vehicle for the whole community. Put on plays and dramas about family life, not always just about abuse.
- Use ethnic radio and to a lesser extent T.V. to get important messages out to the entire community.
- Provide information through ethnospecific agencies, on the legal, financial, housing and other issues listed earlier in this report.
- Publish and distribute pamphlets on abuse, separation and divorce, custody, child support and alimony, rights, legal options, service options, financial support, housing, etc. available in different languages, through churches and temples, through the offices of doctors and dentists who are members of the linguistic communities, through schools and places of work.
- Work to change public attitudes. Stress the message: "We are in a new country and we have opportunities to open our eyes to learn and create positive change". Women interviewed and community animators point out that abuse is a reality in Canada as well as in other countries. The message that we should all live free from abuse is a message which must reach all Canadians. For people new to Canada, this goal can be given a good start by including information about abuse and penalties associated with abuse at orientation sessions when people first enter Canada.



**2. Promote Group Discussions and Group Meetings, but Not Just About Abuse**

- Organize social events for women to help them get out of the house, make friends and reduce their isolation.
- Organize discussion groups, for all women, not just for abuse survivors around practical issues including: parenting, employment issues, separation and divorce, etc.
- If a support group especially for women who are abused is organized, create it through word of mouth to avoid gossip, hold it in the women's homes so that it takes on a social aura and do not restrict it only to talk about abuse. Deal with practical issues. Women need support to get on with their lives and to solve their problems.

**3. Involve Victims/Survivors in Program Planning.**

- Survivors should also be used more for awareness sessions, although care must be taken to protect their safety and confidentiality if this is an issue for them.

**4. Create services and programs with a problem-solving orientation.****5. Create "one-stop shopping" services specifically for women.**

Ideally, women want to be able to go to one centre and get information and help with a myriad of related problems. Women are tired of being shuffled from one service to another. Where this is not possible, build efficient and effective links among existing programs, and create a one-stop shopping resource centre which can direct women to the most appropriate services.

**6. All mainstream services, but especially the justice system should become more sensitive to different cultures, languages, traditions and systemic racism.**

Privacy and confidentiality must also be a higher priority of existing services. In addition, police and the justice system more generally, must be more open to believing women and assisting women from all backgrounds.

**7. Create ethnospecific drop-in centers.**

There is a need for women of different minority cultures to have centres they can go to for information, support, and sometimes for safety, privacy and practical counselling. Women need a place where it is easy for people to talk but also to stay quiet if they want to.

**8. Provide information, training and support to help women work so that they can support their children and not rely on welfare.****9. Impose tougher penalties on men who assault their wives, especially if they are known to be repeat offenders.**

- Men should be warned of these penalties, educated about abuse and offered counselling if they would like to change.

- 10. Remove the men from the home, not the women.**
- 11. Create special programs to help women and children in abusive situations, but create programs that are available for the whole family, to men and women, to men alone, and to the entire community as well.**

All but three of the women interviewed felt that there should be special programs to help women and children in abusive situations, but few of the women felt that programs should only be offered to women and children. Thirty of the women felt in addition that programs should be available to the whole family, 26 felt that programs should be offered to the community as a whole to help them admit publicly that there is a problem with woman abuse, 24 also wanted programs for women and their husbands and 23 felt that programs should be offered to men.

- 12. Offer services where the people providing help:**

- speak our languages;
- know our culture and history;
- are sensitive to our backgrounds (e.g. education, religion, period of immigration and family responsibilities).

The women were asked a number of questions about the characteristics of people they would welcome as sources of support. A large majority named the three attributes summarized above. In addition, however, it is interesting to note that the women in different communities were split almost evenly on whether or not service providers should come from the women's linguistic community. Polish women were almost unanimous in NOT wanting service providers to come from the Polish community. Only 24 wanted to know who the workers are, and only 7 would like the person to be someone known to them, like a community leader. A number of the women also added that the service provider should be a trained 'professional', not a volunteer.

The answers to these questions emphasize once again, the importance of confidentiality and privacy to the women interviewed, as well as the importance of trust and respect in creating the kind of services these women would use.

- 13. Teach all children in the schools (including ESL/FLS classes and heritage language schools) about the effects of wife abuse and that wife assault is a crime.**
- 14. Provide support for women in our communities who have lived with abuse and language barriers, and who have a thorough knowledge both of their own language/cultural community and of mainstream society, to initiate programs and services for their communities.**
- 15. Ensure that outreach and follow-up services are provided.**

Since so many women in language/cultural minority communities do not use existing services, they will not make use of new services and programs unless the programs reach out to them. In addition, they will not trust services which come into their lives for a brief time, never to be seen again. Women want continuity.



16. **Improve services for women generally in language/cultural minority communities and across Canadian society. Do not target only women who have been abused.**
17. **Interpretation provided to women needs to be an extension of advocacy service to women which is sensitive to their culture, respects confidentiality, and is accurate. Interpreters also need to be trained to develop trust and be supportive to allow women to get the help that they want.**
18. **Involve leaders of ethnic communities as key people for providing help for the women.**

A number of women believed that they would approach community leaders for help if they were accessible. However, women emphasized the importance of ensuring confidentiality.

19. **Provide women (especially older women) with adequate housing options.**
20. **Support follow-up in the communities involved in this project.**

In one community, two women who were interviewed have volunteered to help the community animator continue the process of community outreach and education. These three women hope to create a center to integrate health and well being issues including violence prevention.

21. **Ensure that ongoing and future research projects on woman abuse and other issues of concern to women who are members of linguistic minority communities, are appropriate to the needs of the communities involved. Researchers must involve women in the community directly at all stages. Above all, research must attempt to begin and end with the experiences of the women. In particular, follow-up action should be an integral part of all research design.**

## CONCLUSION:

The voices of women who have been abused and who do not speak English or French bring many valuable insights to those working to stop violence against women. They remind us that women who are abused are not a separate category of people, and that all of us have more in common than we have differences. Women who are abused and who speak neither English nor French share problems, concerns and needs with women across Canadian communities, across languages and across cultures.

They remind us that isolation, dependency, violence and despair are integral to the lives of too many women. But they also remind us of the tremendous reserves of strength, originality and courage which women in even the most seemingly hopeless situations can offer.

In attempting to engage women directly at different stages of the research, the project team was enriched by the insights of all the women involved - the community animators and the women who shared their wisdom through the interviews. This process has allowed the project team to work with four diverse communities and made it possible for the community animators to share their experiences and learn from each other. In any follow-up which results from this project, the community animators will share these learnings with others in their communities.

This report signals the need for new ways to respond to abuse and to language isolation which emphasize our commonalities instead of dividing women up into such small sub-categories of suffering that our unity of spirit, of courage and strength cannot help us heal.

The women who shared their wisdom through this report remind us above all to celebrate our strength, not our suffering.

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- \* Please note that a more comprehensive bibliography on "immigrant women, language issues and abuse" was compiled during the early phase of this project. For more information about this bibliography, contact: Linda Macleod, 150 Carleton St., Ottawa, ON K1M 0G7