

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Alberta Network of Immigrant Women

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Sisters and friends:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. Many of us come from different parts of the world, but what we have in common is that we are immigrants and we are women. In the context of my life, my heritage and gender have played a major role both in how I see the world and how the world sees me. Today, I'm going to share with you my perspective as an immigrant woman.

Technically I am not an immigrant in the usual sense. I came to Canada as a university student with the intention of returning to Hong Kong after graduation. But then I met my future husband - a Canadian whose family came to Canada during WWII - and I've been here ever since. However, I am an immigrant because I was not born in Canada, and of course, I look different from the majority of white Canadians. And after having lived here for 41 years, I'm told I still speak English with an accent.

The term "immigrant woman" immediately suggests that we are disadvantaged. We all know that women in many parts of the world are second class citizens, and in some parts of the world, women have no rights at all. In a country like Canada, we are still continuously striving for equality in the workplace. So, it certainly is a handicap being a newcomer and a woman. However, we don't need to dwell on the negative aspects of our situation. We can choose to make our status work to our advantage.

Many of us are aware that because we look or sound different, we'll always be called "immigrants," and it doesn't matter whether some of us are 2nd, 3rd, or 4th generation Canadians. I deal with this situation through acceptance. Since I look different, I might as well be really different. Why should I want to look like the majority of Canadians anyway?

In what I call "my past life" as a fashion designer and stylist, my advice to my clients has always been bring out the best of what you've got. Over the years, I've gradually developed my own style, and have earned the reputation as a visible, visible minority.

I must relate a conversation I had with a woman doctor friend. She said she loved having patients who wore the chador because it meant no drugs or alcohol problems. Can you imagine what a wonderful, positive image that is!

We are all in this country because we've chosen Canada as our home. Canada is, after all, a nation of immigrants that is increasingly multicultural and multiracial. In Canada, since no one, except the native peoples, can claim to be indigenous, you can tell those who ask you "why don't you go back where you came from?" to do the same themselves.

Please keep in mind that our heritage, and our gender, are tremendous resources to draw upon. I take great pride in my heritage and my culture. They act as anchors for me in times of uncertainty and in times of need. Each one of us has brought to Canada our own rich heritage. We not only want to preserve it, we need to add it to the mosaic of our multicultural society. It is this characteristic that makes Canada unique in the world.

The world is a global village: the more you know, the better off you are. As immigrant women, we are fluent in two or more languages and will become very comfortable in at least two different cultures. We are adaptable, and able to learn and grow with the world around us. We are not only Canadians; we are also "global citizens."

Many of us have overcome great challenges in the past so we are prepared to face whatever we may in the future. My own family was part of a wave of refugees fleeing to China when Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese in December, 1941. I spent the first years of my life on the run, just one step ahead of the Japanese forces. I grew up with no shoes and no toys. Leather was kept for boots for the soldiers in China so children wore wooden clogs. I remember travelling on top of the cargo on transport trucks. We had to climb up with rope ladders and hang on for dear life, and I often felt very carsick. I remember passing our bombed-out house and seeing only part of the walls standing.

At the end of the Second World War, my family returned to Hong Kong to face a colony in crisis. Food, clean water, housing and schools were in short supply for both residents and refugees fleeing the civil conflict in China. There were beggars on the streets. Some of them were amputees still wearing the tattered uniforms of the Chinese army. Even though I was very young, I remember those years well. I watched how my parents survived and prospered. In her later years, my mother said that since she had survived the war, she was no longer afraid of anything. I learnt from her that adversity is but a way of strengthening us for the future.

It is a great irony, I think, that as "visible minority women," a term I don't happen to like, we are invisible in a larger sense. Our economic and social contributions are seldom acknowledged. Women's role in the family, as an unpaid educator, counsellor, housekeeper, and nurse, is not recognized.

Much of the reason immigrant women are invisible is because of the way we are defined under the Immigration Act of 1976. Of course, in theory, as the Department of Citizenship and Immigration emphasizes, the point system is gender neutral. However, this viewpoint is often disputed by feminists and anti-racism scholars who find that, in practice, when a family enters Canada, the man is usually defined as head of the household and classed as an independent immigrant.

The official view of the immigrant family, according to immigration procedures, is that of one "independent" member upon whom others depend for sponsorship, livelihood and welfare. The process, therefore, structures inequality within the family.

Women's husbands are usually designated as the "independent" member, and consequently, they are expected to make a positive contribution to the economy. As a result, the majority of male immigrants benefit from greater access to free employment training programs, language training, social security, and welfare.

Women, particularly women from third world countries, are usually classed as dependent family members. This is due to the discretionary powers granted to the immigration officers, their stereotyping, and their prejudices, which often influence the allocation of points, as well as a woman's status. It is only fair, however, not to blame the situation solely on

the immigration officials' discretion, since a woman's status may also be determined by the existing cultural norms in many of the countries of origin.

Not surprisingly, according to the statistics last year, women were designated as household heads in only 34% of applications for independent migration.

The husbands or relatives, who are the sponsors, are expected to care for their women. This arrangement fails to account for the fact that most immigrant women begin to work shortly after entering Canada, making regular contributions to the tax system. Therefore, although women are often defined as dependents, in reality, many are not.

Women's qualifications, which may be equal to, or greater than their husbands, are not factored into the equation unless they can enter Canada as the heads of households. Often as women begin to work to support their families as part of the cheap labour pool, their husbands, as household heads, are able to obtain E.I. funds so that they can take advantage of employment or language training. This situation may leave women out in the cold. With no Canadian experience and no prospects for government support, they risk being segregated into low-paying labour ghettos.

According to a study conducted in Saskatchewan, immigration officials told many women that they did not need to learn English because they were housewives. As "dependents," women who wish to take language and job-training programs may have to pay. The high cost of these programs often renders them inaccessible to immigrant women. Women, in this situation of dependence on their sponsor, are also much more vulnerable to neglect and abuse, as we learn from the many stories in the media.

Until perhaps recently, the feminist movement did not address the unique concerns of immigrant women, especially those of visible minorities. The movement has been primarily focused on white, middle-class women's concerns. Fortunately, organizations such as The Alberta Network of Immigrant Women, and its members, have been formed to give immigrant women a voice in this country. You are to be applauded for tackling the issue of women's access to employment by trying to unravel the complex rules of accreditation in various professions.

We need the skills and talents of women immigrants like you in this country. In September of last year, Jack Mintz of the CD Howe Institute warned that within 20 years there will be an international labour shortage and that we need to attract new immigrants. In Canada, we are already experiencing a crucial shortage, particularly in the area of medicine, as well as in the science and technology sectors.

Despite the competition of our neighbours to the south, we are fortunate in attracting some of the best and the brightest immigrants. We are getting far more educated and qualified immigrants than ever before. In fact, women who have recently immigrated to Canada tend to have significantly higher levels of education than their Canadian-born counterparts. Despite their education, university-educated women, between the ages of 25-44, have a higher rate of unemployment than Canadian women of almost any educational background, other than those with less than a grade 9 education. Lack of recognition of credentials means that often Ph.Ds, of both genders, are left driving taxis or working in low-paying jobs for far too long. The net loss to immigrants and to the Canadian economy of this "brain waste", according to a study by University of Toronto sociology professor, Jeffery Reitz, is in the neighbourhood of \$55 billion a year. He estimates that visible minorities earn between 15 to 25 % less than most immigrants of European origin, whether in skilled or unskilled labour markets.

This "brain waste" is particularly evident in the area of medicine where there is a severe shortage of doctors throughout Canada. I'm sure many of you are aware of a report commissioned by the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women, and released by the Alberta Health Department in fall, 2000, which found that 132 immigrant doctors can't find work in Alberta. More than half of these doctors are highly educated women with significant levels of experience.¹ This is the situation in other professions as well. Engineers are having trouble getting jobs, despite the great demand in the high-tech sector.²

¹ Recent media report (04/01) referred to pilot project at Royal Alexandra Hospital, in Edmonton, to train international doctors; other than this pilot, there are 8 designated residency positions for international medical graduates in all of Alberta (they will graduate in 2003), with approximately 160 international doctors awaiting placements.

² B.C. started a pilot project in March, 2001 which will help foreign-trained engineers get the work experience they need to qualify for licensure by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia, and to work as professional engineers in B.C.

McMaster University human resources professor Harish Jain describes the current situation as a "Canadian-made tragedy." With immigrants making up the majority of new workers in the labour force today, and with plans to increase the number of immigrants entering Canada, we need a more coordinated approach, by all levels of government, to help put immigrant skills to work.³

Canada's employers and its policy makers need to take into account the dramatic changes in the global economy over the past two decades. As the free trade ideology has swept across the globe, money, goods, services, and even whole industries, move effortlessly across borders. Why should labour continue to be stopped at the border or hampered by inflexible and outdated accreditation systems? In a capitalist society, labour supply inevitably follows demand as it has in Canada. It should be put to good use as quickly as possible.

Canada's best, and most important resource, is its people. Canada needs to use all its resources to the fullest if it is to satisfy industry's demands for labour, nurture entrepreneurs, encourage research and development, and provide a market for its goods. Women, particularly immigrant women, are one of the most important resources that Canada has. As the mothers of future generations, we are the bridges that link the old countries to Canada, and the past to the future.

Racism and sexism continue to be a problem, particularly for immigrant women, and especially for visible minorities. Even if the law doesn't discriminate, individuals and institutions still do.

I believe the media has a huge responsibility in setting the tone for human relations in Canada. The media has a tremendous influence on how we see each other. What we generally call "mainstream media" is still often biased against visible minorities and immigrants. For example, such terms as "Asian crime" and "monster homes" have been used repeatedly in the media to stereotype Asians. I often wonder why we don't hear the term "Caucasian crime", and why large, expensive homes owned by the white population are described as "large, spacious and elegant," and not monsters.

³ Currently access to regulated trades and professions are under provincial jurisdiction. In turn, the provinces have delegated this authority to professional associations and apprenticeship boards.

I have also noticed that positive and important events that take place among visible minority communities are often not reported in the mainstream media. I can't help but believe that negligence is as important as negative reporting. In a sense, we are given the message that we are not important enough to be counted in Canadian society.

Over the years, I have been involved in numerous community events and know this happens all the time. My way around this is to get to know those in charge or the reporters of the so-called "mainstream media" and get coverage of events that way.

Many of you are aware that a new Immigration Bill, Bill C-11, has recently been introduced in the House of Commons. As a Senator, I am committed to doing my part to ensure that immigration law is more responsive to the needs of immigrants, particularly immigrant women. But although the law is important, a change in attitudes, especially among employers, is even more crucial for our success. The need for "Canadian experience" which may be valid in certain cases, is often used by employers as an excuse to discriminate against immigrants, which results in a huge "brain waste" in this country. Immigrants have asked me, "how can I get "Canadian experience" if I'm not even given a chance?"

Ultimately, education is the key. Young people in our schools, individuals who work in the media and politicians need to hear our stories. Canadians must learn about the contributions immigrants have made to this country. Due to the low Canadian birthrate, our population growth is fueled by immigration. Guess who is going to support the aging population of Canada? You guessed right - your children and mine.

It is a fallacy that immigrants cost Canadian taxpayers money. On the contrary, immigrants are less costly to our health care services, and we don't use more social services than the average Canadian. We also contribute substantial sums to Revenue Canada. According to Dr. Morton Beiser, Director of the Toronto based Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS):

"The typical immigrant family, will, over a lifetime, pay forty to fifty thousand dollars more into the public treasury than they consume in services. Thus, immigrants can be seen as an economic windfall."

Immigrants also create employment and contribute to the development of business and technology in our country. We provide much needed markets for Canadian goods and services. The logical conclusion is that Canadians should welcome new immigrants with open arms.

Despite all the problems we may encounter, we may take solace in remembering that multiculturalism is but a relatively new innovation in Canada. It is a brave experiment. Just imagine, in 1965, more than 98 % of Canadians were of European origin.

As immigrant women, we can take the lead, for future generations, in fighting for our rights as equal citizens in this country. For those of you who are from countries that deny women equal access to education, here's your chance - not only for yourselves - but also for your children who have the opportunity to have a good education.

I believe in the new Canadian identity. It's a mixture of the cultures, of the newcomers with that of the native peoples, the French and the English. This is the essence of being Canadian. It is up to all of us to make sure that multiculturalism is mainstream, that sexism is eroded, and that barriers to all immigrants, especially immigrant women, are torn down.

My motto in life is to keep learning, because through knowledge, our lives can only get better. We should treasure what is best in our cultures because we have a lot to contribute to Canada. And please remember, it's our differences that make us unique, not our similarities.

Thank you.