

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**The Equality Deficit –
Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada**

**Women's Legal Education and Action Fund - LEAF
20th Anniversary &
2005 LEAF's Person's Day Breakfast**

November 2, 2005

Members of LEAF, honoured guests and friends,

It is with great pleasure that I celebrate, with you, the 20th anniversary of the entry into force of equality rights, in section 15, of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the 20th anniversary of LEAF, and to be here for LEAF's Person's Day Breakfast.

We all agree that when Section 15 became law 20 years ago, it was an important milestone for all Canadians. And, I'm glad that this provision is now interpreted to include sexual orientation as in the recent historic passage of Bill C-38, otherwise known as the Civil Marriage Act.

I understand that some of the founding women of LEAF are closely tied to determining the wording of section 15, and its subsequent enforcement. My friends, I want to thank you for all your hard work on behalf of Canadian women.

Since I entered the Senate more than 7 years ago, I, along with a few others, helped to sponsor the magnificent monuments of the Famous 5, in Olympic Park in Calgary, and on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. In my work as a Senator, one of my important missions is to raise awareness of these five extraordinary women (Emily Murphy, Louise Mckinney, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Irene Parlby). These women helped to ensure that Canadian women are regarded as persons in both rights and responsibilities in the British North America Act. All women senators, including myself and your co-founder, Senator Nancy Ruth, owe our appointments to the Famous 5. When I see young girls climb on the chair that is part of the monument on Parliament Hill, I know that, aside from having a lot of fun, they are inspired by the stories of these 5 women.

Many women, including some of my friends, believe that women have equality today, and so there's no more work to be done. I don't happen to agree.

Equality for all remains a work in progress. Some groups, despite our government's best efforts, remain marginalized in society. The most marginalized group is visible minority immigrant women who continue to struggle to achieve equal access to jobs, and social resources.

I did my doctoral research on immigrant Chinese women in Canada, so I will concentrate my discussion on these women. One of my interviewees told me that women with her status are under "double jeopardy", meaning that visible minority women, whether they are immigrants or not, face two levels of discrimination, based on race and gender. It had nothing to do with her knowledge of English because she is fluent, or assimilation in Canadian culture, because she is totally assimilated. The only difference is that she looks different.

Like all visible minority women, ethnic Chinese women may or may not be new immigrants. As long as you look different, you are automatically treated differently. You are often regarded as a new immigrant despite the fact that your family may have been in Canada for generations. You are also presumed not to know one of Canada's official languages.

I am going to tell you about my own experience with this phenomenon. In my first years in the Senate, my staff used to be harassed by one of the Senate translators, who would barge into my office demanding copies of my speeches before I delivered them. My speeches are always subject to last minute changes and are never given out beforehand. My staff asked her why she needed them, and she said she couldn't understand my English because of my accent. Apparently, my appearance can affect some people's hearing! Well, I solved that problem by calling the Senate Clerk, and asked him whether he could understand my English. He was told what had been happening, and I said that if that translator couldn't understand my English, she should not work as a translator, and should be transferred to another department.

Canadian society has improved a great deal since the 1970s, but there is still a long way to go.

Before 1967, Chinese women could only immigrate to Canada as dependents of men. In 1967, the last remnant of racial bias was removed from our immigration legislation with the introduction of the points system, and Chinese women could immigrate into Canada based on their own education, training and skills.

Unfortunately, even today, in a lot of cases, when a family applies for landed immigrant status, usually the man is classified as the principle applicant belonging to the "independent" class, while the rest of the family is classified as dependents. The reality is that most immigrant women work or that a wife may have comparable education or work experience to her husband.

I will stress that in the interviews I did with immigrant Chinese women, some of them did apply as head of households because they had better qualifications than their husbands, or the husband and wife applied as co-applicants because of their equal qualifications. Sadly, these women were in the minority.

We repeatedly see from statistics that many new Canadians, who are visible minority women, still find that language, culture, and lack of integration leave them isolated. Although they may be the ones who most require legal, social, and health services, or language and career training, they are the least likely to access them.

Our existing sponsorship system places many immigrant women in a totally dependent and subordinate position vis-à-vis the sponsor, relying on the financial support of her sponsor who may be her only connection to the outside world. This is known as the "sponsorship effect" which is a key ingredient in partner abuse among immigrant, refugee and visible minority women.

If a woman finds that she is in an abusive relationship and leaves it, she may be ordered deported unless she can demonstrate her adaptability to life in Canada (mainly through employment and fluency in one of the official languages). This is particularly relevant in light of the recent attention to mail order brides, many of them from Asia or Eastern Europe.

I interviewed quite a few mail order brides for my dissertation. One of my interviewees was the daughter of an abused immigrant Chinese woman, who held two jobs to help feed and clothe her family. This woman never fought back and never complained. Her contention was that, at least her abuser gave her a chance to come to Canada with her daughters from a previous marriage. Landed immigrant status was worth all the abuse she had to suffer. Besides, “saving face” is very important in the Chinese culture, and one does not hang one’s dirty laundry out in public. So, getting help from outside of one’s family was out of the question.

Immigrants who speak either one of the official languages, but with an accent, often find it a stumbling block in their ability to get jobs. I will use the example of one of my interviewees, who was highly educated in Canadian universities, and extremely capable in the financial services. However, she has an accent when she speaks English. She had a good position in a financial institution, but someone, who is a white female, but less knowledgeable, was made her supervisor. She was not allowed to present her financial reports to the Board; they had to be presented by her supervisor, who then took all the credit, and left her with all the blame. Instead of complaining to management, she moved to another company, and has since become well respected in the community, as well as extremely successful financially.

While discussing accents, you will find the story of this interviewee interesting. She was a teacher in Hong Kong, and, after immigrating to Canada with her husband, she applied for a teaching job in Ontario. One day, she received a call from one of the school principals, who chatted with her over the phone. At the end of the conversation, she was told she was hired and to report to work. She thought that had to be the easiest job interview she had ever had. When she reported to work and met the principal, he was shocked that she was not an English woman! He made a mistake with the spelling of her surname. You see, she speaks English without an accent. If she had had an interview face-to-face, it might not have been so easy.

Immigrant women who are isolated, and who do not have the necessary language skills to identify resources, or to communicate their needs, may be open to physical and mental abuse. And, even if they do know resources exist, would they access them? There are cultural barriers to be considered. The language used by social workers, legal professionals, and

health care workers may be foreign to even those born in Canada. So, in the case of immigrants, both language and cultural interpreters are required if the gap is to be bridged between mainstream communities, and new Canadians.

In order to receive the help they need, well informed immigrants are organizing their own self-help groups. An example is a group called “Spirit of Life” of which I am the honorary Patron. This particular organization is for families with children who are perceptually handicapped.

A new report entitled “*Nowhere to Turn? Responding to partner violence against immigrant and visible minority women*”, recognized the need for a more coordinated approach by different levels of government. It concluded:

“comprehensive, coordinated and culturally appropriate strategies are needed to reach out to immigrant and visible minority women in Canada who are abused by their husbands or partners.”

Statistics Canada has found that nearly one woman in three is victimized in their homes, and that the rate for immigrant and visible minority women is lower. But, since the survey was only done in French and English, how accurate is this figure? Studies have also found that while women, in general, are reluctant to report abuse to the police, visible minorities and immigrants are the least likely to file reports, or to avail themselves of counseling services. The reason may be that in their countries of origin extended families often served in the role of social services.

I know immigrant women who have to work at a number of jobs to help feed their families, besides looking after their children. For that reason, there just isn't enough time to take language lessons. When immigrants come to a new environment, with stress over language, finances and job-seeking, abuse is more likely to occur.

When the woman becomes the primary breadwinner because she is more willing to take any job, and her husband or partner is unable to find work, the role reversal can, and does, increase the likelihood of abuse. In the Chinese culture, men traditionally deal with the external, and women with internal harmony in the home. The reversal of roles can be very difficult for the men.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in communities like that of the Chinese Canadian community, reporting abuse means “losing face”. By reporting abuse, individuals risk isolation from their families and friends. Most immigrant communities, particularly from the Asia Pacific region, are patriarchal, and wives are expected to defer to their husbands. Keeping the family together, and resolving conflict within the context of the family, may take priority over one’s own safety.

Under these circumstances, trust is essential. This can only develop if language and cultural interpreters are readily available. So far, to be blunt, not enough money has been made available to catch-up with Canada’s increasingly large immigrant population. Currently, 13% of Canada is visible minority, and by 2017, this demographic will grow to 20%. Here in Toronto, it will make up 50% of the total population. Therefore, public education, as well as outreach, are crucial.

A model for what could be done exists in an organization called SUCCESS, a settlement agency in Vancouver. Besides many other functions, it provides specialized counseling for battered women, and anger management for men. The number of battered Chinese women seeking help at SUCCESS (SUCCESS) has risen over the last few years, however, underreporting remains common in immigrant communities.

In the case of Chinese immigrants, it is interesting to note that, when abuse is reported, the batterers under counseling would not admit to violence, and 90% of the battered women are looking for ways to save their marriages, and thereby restore harmony in their families. Drinking, or substance abuse, were not the usual cause of battering.

In Toronto, there are agencies that address issues relevant to immigrant and visible minority women. I have been involved with the Working Women’s Community Centre, the Centre for Information and Community Services (CICS) and the Maytree Foundation. There are other organizations, such as the Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), which provides information and research services. An initiative of METRAC’s justice service, the Ontario Women’s Justice Network (OWJN) is an online legal resource. These organizations understand the issue of isolation, and are working to provide appropriate social and legal services.

One very interesting organization is the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), which has a Train the Trainer Workshop on Domestic Violence against Immigrant Women. The project was launched to train settlement workers to enhance services to immigrant women at risk of violence. Since this project was launched this year, its progress will be carefully monitored.

LEAF is a defender of women who are under privileged and oppressed. It is in this effort that I would invite LEAF to understand the issues of language, culture and traditions of immigrant women. Essentially, coalitions must be formed so that the complex issue of resources and education can be addressed.

It goes without saying that different levels of government have important roles to play, beginning with giving information to immigrant women on arrival on Canadian soil about their rights, and to making services easily accessible in diverse languages from within the various communities.

It's interesting to note how Statistics Canada views the issue of isolation. In 2004, Statistics Canada's report on the "isolation index" found that the number of "ethnic enclaves" in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver had grown from 6 in 1981, to 253 in 2001. Of these, 157 were Chinese, 83 South Asian, and 13 black. Haroon Siddiqui, in his column in the *Toronto Star*, responded by asking "isolation from whom?" The growth in these ethnic enclaves merely points to the change in the face of Canada, and the need for outreach and training within these communities so that their members can provide effective and appropriate services. In a city like Toronto, which is the most multicultural city in the world, the word "mainstream" is becoming less and less relevant.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the challenges facing visible minority immigrant women, and look forward to LEAF helping to reduce the existing equality deficit.