

# New Experiences for Refugee Women

by Joy Simmonds

Latin American refugee women new to Toronto, have tremendous obstacles to overcome in settling here. Disorientation, unemployment and an inability to communicate in English, prevent them from integrating into their new society. Over the past four years New Experiences for Refugee Women (N.E.W.) has developed a unique programme that addresses these and other problems.

The goal of the programme is to assist refugee women with their social, cultural and economic integration into Canadian society. To achieve this we focus on each woman as a whole person with many varied and interrelated abilities, experiences and needs. We see her as a woman first, as a refugee, a mother, a wife, a social being, a worker. Our three-component programme of English, Orientation and Employment has been designed to build on all of these.

## Who Are the Refugee Women at N.E.W.?

The refugee women at N.E.W. come primarily from Central America, mainly from El Salvador and Guatemala. These women have been forced to leave their countries due to the escalation of civil war. They have seen and experienced violent repression in the form of killings and disappearances of family members and in some cases have themselves been in prison and tortured. They have been forced to leave their homelands and make the long and arduous journey to Canada.

Many have been fortunate enough to have been sponsored by the Canadian government and so have come here directly. Others have had to go via the illegal and dangerous route through Mexico, crossing into the U.S., and slowly proceeding north to Canada. Some of our participants have taken years to get here and have lost family and friends along the way to illness, death and deportation. While still dealing with the emotional, psychological and physical trauma of the past, these refugee women arrive in Toronto and are bombarded by the demands of a new society. Most are mothers and wives and have the awesome responsibility of holding their families together. Marital and family problems often include abuse and violence. Many have limited work experience and those who have skills find that they are not recognized in, or transferable to the Canadian labour market. Financial crisis is common. Affordable housing is practically non-existent. The women often have less access to English classes than their husbands and children and so become isolated from Canadian society. The loss of community and familiar surroundings, coupled with an inability to fend for themselves leads to a loss of identity and self-worth.

## N.E.W. Programme

N.E.W.'s programme is six months long and is offered to refugee women in groups of fifteen.

The first fourteen weeks of the programme take place on the premises of N.E.W., and involve classroom training, including:

- English as a Second Language (ESL).
- Orientation/Information/Life Skills.
- Employment Preparation.

The final twelve weeks consist of on-the-job training and Canadian work experience. During the six months, each participant receives a training salary and a metropass.

## English as a Second Language

Intensive ESL instruction is provided to prepare participants to communicate effectively in day to day situations. Emphasis is on participants speaking English and role playing. Activities include field trips into the community, audio visual materials, and music. The programme is staffed by bilingual instructors and volunteers.

## Orientation, Information and Life Skills

This component specifically addresses the sense of alienation and the loss of identity and confidence experienced by Latin American refugee women in the process of settlement.

Through orientation/information sessions participants begin to understand the historical, political and economic context within which immigrants and refugees have come to Canada. They become familiar with the basic infrastructure of the community and learn how to access and utilize the resources. Finally they learn to know legal rights and responsibilities as a woman, a refugee, a parent and a tenant.

The life skills sessions include:

- Assessing personal situation of the Latin American woman in Canada.

### Reasons for Coming to Canada

The following results are from research conducted by N.E.W. in July 1986. The total number of people surveyed was seventy-five. The figures represent percentages.

Lives of family members in danger	54.6
No longer wanted to live in a state of war	52.0
Life in danger	49.3
Family members of friends:	
imprisoned	41.3
tortured	37.3
killed	22.6
To join relatives	9.3
To join husband	8.0
Other reasons	13.3

- Identifying personal needs and aspirations
- Developing communications and assertive skills
- Setting goals and making decisions.

Personal counselling is provided throughout this process.

## Employment Component

The Employment Preparation provides participants with an opportunity to assess past work experience, skills, education, and English levels.

Sessions prepare women to do job search, to conduct themselves in a job interview, to fill out application forms and employment contracts. Information is also provided on employment standards, labour legislation, employee rights and benefits and pay cheque deductions. They learn of possible entry-level employment opportunities and of their qualification requirements.

The work placement involves on-the-job training in an organization. Work placements are secured with the understanding that the participant will work and receive training for four months and will then be hired as a permanent employee.

The employment component has always faced somewhat of a dilemma. The reality of today's employment market, is that most of the entry level jobs currently available to participants in N.E.W.'s programme are found at the lower ends of traditional female occupations such as clerical work, community work, day care, home service and light manufacturing assembly work. Past experience has been that Latin American refugee women are primarily interested in jobs they can relate to and that have good working conditions and reasonable wages. It is inevitable that the majority of participants will find employment in traditional women's occupations.

*Joy Simmonds is the Community Liaison worker at N.E.W.*

## Service Delivery to Southeast Asian Refugee Women

by John Van Esterik

The delivery of services to refugees in three counties of upstate New York occupied much of my time and attention for almost four years in the early 1980s. As an anthropologist who managed a programme of educational and employment services to refugees, I was interested in applying an anthropological analysis to the delivery of such services.

The refugee population in the three rural counties of upstate New York covered at the time was mainly Southeast Asian. Almost half of the adult population had little or no education, the bulk of these being women.

Women are responsible for household operations in all Southeast Asian groups. Thus, women were particularly affected by the limitations attendant upon large family size and low incomes. Southeast Asian women play important roles in the household, participating in all family decisions and usually handling the family budget and income.

Yet, refugee women are especially disadvantaged in North American society since the majority of the women have much less education than local populations or refugee men. The women are responsible for the care of children in a society where child care is expensive and difficult to obtain. In their own societies, child care was often left to elderly relatives, friends, or neighbours, all of whom lived close by.

The programme of services sought to provide educational and employment placement services to all refugee adults in the three-county area. But it was soon discovered that refugee women faced problems that impeded the delivery of programme services to them.

## Education Backgrounds

Many Southeast Asian refugee women were very poorly educated and therefore unprepared for living in the modern, post-industrial society they were entering. Rural Southeast Asians often prefer to have males formally educated than women. Yet, refugee women wanted and expected to work and earn money. It became very apparent that a one entry-level salary family could not afford many consumer goods in the new society they had entered. Refugee women seeking employment had to face the problem of limited educational backgrounds and their continuing responsibilities of homemaking.



*A few students in the Beginning Class, St. Paul's Methodist Church, Ithaca, New York.*

## Day-Care Services

The English as Second Language (ESL) classes were held in space provided by two churches in the largest urban centre (population: 27,000) in the counties. A problem that arose immediately was day-care services. No provision was made for day care.