



AMSSA

# *Cultures* West

Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC

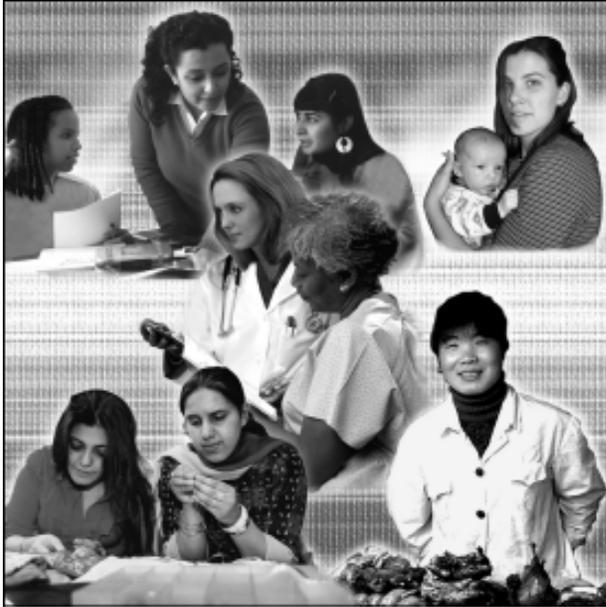
Vol. 23, No. 1: Spring 2005



COVER ART BY TONY SAMSON

*Transitions: Immigrant & Refugee Women in BC*

## *Transitions:*



## *Immigrant & Refugee Women in BC*

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AMSSA is an affiliation of member agencies providing immigrant settlement and multi-cultural programs in communities throughout BC.

#### **VISION:**

AMSSA believes in a just and equitable society which values Canada's cultural diversity.

#### **MISSION:**

AMSSA provides leadership in advocacy and education in British Columbia for anti-racism, human rights, and social justice. AMSSA supports its members in serving immigrants, refugees and culturally diverse communities.

#### **GOALS:**

1. To build Member Agencies' capacity through effective communication, facilitation, and collaboration
2. To advocate for social justice and equity in immigration, multiculturalism, anti-racism, and human rights
3. To increase AMSSA's profile as a provincial organization

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This issue of *Cultures West* funded by BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch.

ISSN 0844-1715

## Message from the President ...



This year is the 28th anniversary of the United Nations resolution inviting countries around the world to honour women with International Women's Day. Celebrated on March 8th, the day affords an opportunity to reflect on the progress made to advance women's equality, to assess the challenges women face in contemporary society, to consider future steps to enhance the status of women and, of course, to celebrate the gains made in these areas.

This edition of *Cultures West*, with its focus on the experiences of immigrant and refugee women, is a small tribute to those women in our communities across British Columbia. In the past 28 years we have seen tremendous gains in the lives of women, but many glaring gaps still remain. The gaps are perhaps wider for women who come to our shores either seeking a safe haven for themselves and families or at the very least expecting to provide a more favourable way of life than was possible in their country of origin.

We don't have to look very far to see that we still have a long way to go in meeting the needs of immigrant and refugee women in BC. For example, the provincial government's cuts to legal aid and social and welfare services are having a major negative impact on these women more than on any other sector of the population. The reality is that more women than men access these services. And with cuts to services such as childcare, the result is that 26% fewer women are able to take advantage of ESL and other services that are available to ease their integration into Canadian society. The same holds true for cuts to legal aid services which, again, women use more frequently than do men. Our story *Legal Aid Cuts and Marriage Breakdown: Women and Family Law in BC* does an excellent job in illustrating this impact.

At the same time that government is reducing funding to the immigrant and refugee serving sectors, many agencies are responding with innovative programs and new ways to continue delivering quality services. We profile two such programs – the Cross Cultural Peer Support Group and ESL & LEAD.

Immigrant and refugee women face many complex and diverse issues, and in *Cultures West* we are only able to scratch the surface. Within our pages we touch on issues such as reuniting families after years of separation, challenges in accessing health care, barriers to entering the job market, and more. You'll even read one woman's personal story about her experiences. There's also the popular Mind Buster Quiz, filled with interesting facts and stats to test your knowledge about immigrant and refugee women. And as usual, we include a short bibliography of resources where you can find more information on this important subject.

The Spring 2005 edition of *Cultures West* is dedicated to shedding some new light on the experiences of immigrant and refugee women in BC. And while there is still much room for progress, immigrant and refugee women are already making outstanding contributions to life in Canada.

Jean McRae  
President



# Recent Immigrant Women Enjoy Excellent Health

by Leslyn V. Johnson (ed)

A recent study on women's health shows that the vast majority of women immigrants report good to excellent health for the two years following their arrival in Canada—but this sense of positive health diminishes over time. In 2000–2001, immigrant women who had been in Canada at least 10 years were 30% more likely to report fair or poor health than Canadian-born women—even after taking into account various demographic, social and economic factors. In contrast, immigrant men who had been in Canada for at least 10 years were about as likely as Canadian-born men to report fair or poor health.

These findings appear as part of three new chapters of *The Women's Health Surveillance Report*, a report that was jointly funded by the Canadian Population Health Initiative and Health Canada and originally published in September 2003. This report features some of the latest research on women's health in Canada written by experts from across the country. These new chapters focus on three issues: ethnicity and immigration, health care utilization and the relationship between income and health.

"Migration to a new country can have a profound impact on a woman's health," says Bilkis Vissandjee, researcher at the University of Montreal's School of Nursing Sciences. "Immigrant women are often vulnerable to the stress that comes from meeting the basic needs of their families in a new country, learning a new language and the social isolation that comes from leaving family and friends behind."

The rate of reporting good to excellent health drops most notably for immigrant women in low-income households: 93% of recent female immigrants in low-income households rated their health as good to excellent, compared to a rate of 73% of immigrant women in low-income households who had resided in Canada 10 years or more, and 79% of Canadian-born women in low-income households. The fact that immigrants who have been in Canada for some time are more likely to self-assess their health negatively may be explained, in part, by the effects of aging. However, immigrants in higher-income households report good to excellent health at similar rates to Canadian-born individuals: 95% in the first two years of residency in Canada, and then 87% after living in Canada a decade or more—compared to 93% of Canadian-born women in high-income households.

"Learning how economic and social status relate to health helps us to understand why some groups of people are healthy and others are not," says Jennifer Zelmer, Vice-President of Research and Analysis at Canadian Institute for Health Information. "Increasing our knowledge of how migration influences health, for example, can give us important insights into how to improve the health of all Canadians."



*"Immigrant women are often vulnerable to the stress that comes from meeting the basic needs of their families in a new country, learning a new language and the social isolation that comes from leaving family and friends behind."*

## KEY FACTS

- Language skills in English or French are clearly a health determinant for immigrant and refugee women.
- Many immigrant and refugee women endure significant stress and anxiety that may have a negative impact on their mental health.
- Older immigrant and refugee women are particularly vulnerable to social isolation, poverty and to carrying the burden of informal care-giving.
- Family and job responsibilities make it difficult for many immigrant and refugee women to use existing health care resources.
- Culturally appropriate health promotion and health care enhance both the accessibility of health services, and the health status/behaviours of immigrant and refugee women.
- Many immigrant and refugee women migrate under spousal sponsorship which may make them more vulnerable to family abuse and violence.

The Women's Health Surveillance Report is available in its entirety at [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/whsr-rssf/index.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/whsr-rssf/index.html).

Key Facts are courtesy of Advancing Policy and Research Response to Immigrant and Refugee Women's Health in Canada by Mary Lou Mulvihill, Louise Mailloux and Wendy Atkin.

# Achieving Equal Access to Health Care

by Angela Sasso

*While the Achieving Equal Access to Health Care study reflects findings about the immigrant population in general, research shows that it is mainly women who access health care services and/or make health care decisions for the family. We, therefore, felt it was appropriate to include the summary of the research findings in Cultures West.*

Between 1991 and 2001, British Columbia received a total of 424,000 new immigrants. Of those, half were unable to speak, read or write English. While the majority of newcomers do go on to communicate effectively, the communication barrier is often the first substantial hurdle that they face. Their ability to overcome this hurdle depends on the resources available to assist them in integrating into their new community.

Every day, thousands of people living in BC face the life-threatening possibility of not being able to access the universal accessible health care to which they are rightfully entitled. Why? Because across this province there is a patchwork of responses, gaps in service provision, and a general lack of awareness of the importance of language services in removing barriers to care. In the Lower Mainland, a growing number of health care facilities are realizing the necessity and benefits of professional interpreter services. In communities outside of the Lower Mainland, however, there is a mélange of responses to patient needs often involving ad hoc resources such as family and friends of patients.

This inconsistency in health care access is what prompted AMSSA's Multicultural Health Committee to shape the *Achieving Equal Access in Health Care* project. The project follows on the recommendations outlined in its previous report *Interpreter Services in Health Care: A Call for Provincial Standards and Services* to broaden the scope of the investigation and develop a snapshot of current practices. The primary goal of the project is to improve access to health care services in communities outside the Lower Mainland. The project sought to develop a snapshot of current language services practices across the province, and to recommend a provincial response as a method of ensuring that services for non- and limited-English speakers meet similar levels of standards regardless of community and location.

## Findings

Across BC the consistent theme is one of community-based crisis response. Non-profit immigrant and multicultural agencies are filling the gaps created by non-existent language services. Where there are no formal immigrant service agencies, community volunteers "through their good heartedness" oblige themselves to assist community members.



*"...across this province there is a patchwork of responses, gaps in service provision, and a general lack of awareness of the importance of language services in removing barriers to care."*

The project found that in all of the five communities where interpreter services exist, the agencies providing those services have contractual agreements with government agencies such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development (one of the higher frequency users of interpreter services across the province), Ministry of Human Resources, the RCMP, local school boards, and the Insurance Corporation of BC. In all but one case, health care is consistently and noticeably absent from this list by agencies that have a more progressive approach to the inclusion of language services.

Health care systems that do not provide language services place unfair burdens on local immigrant and multicultural services agencies, many of whom are already under-resourced and under-funded. They also place the responsibility squarely on volunteers within minority communities to "take care of their own." Is this a reasonable and methodological approach for a health care system?

The project was designed in collaboration with the Provincial Health Services Authority's Provincial Language Service Program (PHSA/PLS) and National Primary Health Care Transition Fund Initiative (PHCTF) with funding from the Vancouver Foundation, PHSA's En Francais Initiative.

*Angela Sasso is a consultant who works extensively in the areas of diversity and anti-racism.*

# Voices of Immigrant & Refugee Women: Learning from their Stories

by Janey Smythe



For two days in November 2004, the 9th Annual Cross-Cultural Mental Health Conference took place at SFU at Harbour Centre, with great success. The theme for 2004 was “Voices of Immigrant & Refugee Women: Learning from their Stories”. More than 150 people attended from various backgrounds, including health care practitioners, policymakers, settlement practitioners, volunteers, sponsors, educators, general practitioners, psychiatrists, multicultural liaison workers, translators, other human-related service providers, not to mention a great turnout of immigrants and refugees themselves!

The symposium provided an opportunity for participants to hear stories from immigrant and refugee women about their adaptation process, learn about a local trauma-recovery model and about coping with depression and anxiety. Attendees were also able to hear about promising local practices, develop self-advocacy skills, and network among participating individuals, agencies, and organizations. Honourable Senator Mobina Jaffer launched the event as the keynote speaker, delivering a very well received address in which she shared her experience as a refugee, as a new Canadian, and her work in the Sudan. In addition, the symposium featured the videos *Three Worlds* and *Do You Speak Canadian?* as part of The Multicultural Youth Action Team’s Redefining Canadian Video Project.

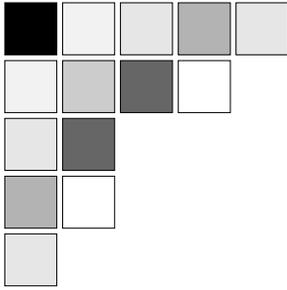
The feedback was favourable, and participants especially valued hearing personal stories and specific experiences from immigrant and refugee women, in addition to learning about local existing programs for refugee women. Overall, the participants described the event as “informative,” “moving,” and “inspiring.” The symposium ended on an uplifting note with an interactive story told by Comfort Ero about a young African woman who immigrates to Canada in the hopes of finding a better life.

The theme for this year’s symposium will be *Intergenerational Issues*, as many of the symposium participants chose this theme on the evaluation questionnaire. The planning committee is also celebrating the 10th anniversary of this cross-cultural mental health conference by launching “The Spirit of Hope Award” to honour an individual, community group, specific program, and/or agency/public institution that has made a significant contribution in addressing the mental health needs of immigrants and refugees in British Columbia. More details regarding the nomination process will be announced. So, mark your calendars for the next Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health Symposium scheduled for October 27 & 28, 2005 and stay tuned!

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*Janey Smythe is a mental health professional who has been coordinating the Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health Symposium for the past five years. To join the distribution list, email [symposium@shaw.ca](mailto:symposium@shaw.ca).*

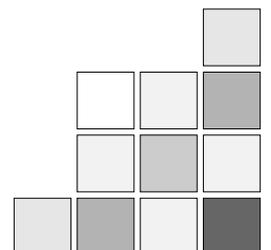
*“...participants especially valued hearing personal stories and specific experiences from immigrant and refugee women, in addition to learning about local existing programs for refugee women.”*



# mind buster quiz

- Often the first barrier immigrant women face in immigrating to Canada is finding a place to live. Landlords frequently discriminate against immigrant women on the basis of which of the following?
  - country of origin
  - presence of children
  - employment
  - all of the above
- Women make up \_\_\_\_ percentage of the refugees who came to BC between 2000 and 2001?
  - 40%
  - 45%
  - 50%
  - 55%
- Which of the following statements is *not* true?
  - At the end of the 19th Century white women were encouraged to immigrate to Canada as domestic workers.
  - Immigrant and refugee women are more likely to find paid employment than their male counterparts.
  - Immigrant women generally take jobs in manual labour, even though they may have the training and education for other kinds of jobs.
  - Thirty percent of all Canadian women are immigrants or refugees and this population is growing four times faster than the population of Canadian-born women.
- This woman came to Canada as a refugee and now occupies a position of power that dates back almost 400 years. Who is she?
  - Adrienne Clarkson
  - Jeanne Sauve
  - Kim Campbell
  - Mobina Jaffer
- March 8 is International Women's Day. When do Canadians celebrate Women's History Month?
  - March
  - June
  - August
  - October
- When did Canada first start to commemorate Women's History Month?
  - 1972
  - 1982
  - 1992
  - 2002
- Sixteen percent of Canadian-born women report living below the poverty line. What is the corresponding percentage for immigrant and refugee women?
  - 16%
  - 20%
  - 25%
  - 32%
- A recent report suggests that interpretation in health care is a complex process which can be coloured by three key factors. Which of the following is *not* considered a key factor?
  - country of origin
  - age
  - sex/gender
  - class dynamics

**For answers to Mind Buster Quiz, see page 17.**



# Legal Aid Cuts and Marriage Breakdown: Women and Family Law in BC

by Alison Brewin

*"AFTER BEING DENIED legal aid in 2002, I represented myself twice in court...I didn't know what I was doing and it felt like nobody listened to me. My ex-partner's lawyer was brutal towards me. No one in the courtroom recognized that I was representing myself or that English is not my first language. I was standing there alone trying to protect the boys...I had practiced going to court and representing myself, but this did not matter because I cannot argue with a lawyer. I am not a lawyer. I am just a mother."*

*"The experience has caused me a lot of stress and unhappiness. Not only do I not have custody of my children, but I feel isolated from my community, friends and family because of the stigma they attach to women who lose custody of their children."*

In 2002 the BC government announced massive cutbacks to provincial services that severely affected family and poverty law legal aid. Legal aid exists so that Canadians and Canadian residents get legal help when they need it. Our legal system is based on the fundamental principle that individuals with a legal right, or faced with a claim from government or another individual of a legal right, can use the courts to resolve it.

When a marriage breaks down, family law helps resolve disagreements about custody and care of children and the right to property and financial support. If a couple cannot resolve matters, they can turn to the legal system. With the cuts to legal aid, not everyone can get a lawyer if they need one but cannot afford it. And it is women who are feeling the impact of that more than men.

In Canada when a marriage breaks down, men's income goes up substantially while women's goes down substantially. Women are more vulnerable to poverty, likely to be caring for children and other relatives, and have less access to full-time, well paid work. The inability to get legal help in family law is proving to be devastating for women and their children.

For new immigrant women the Canadian legal system can be especially challenging. Legal aid is available for family law issues only in 'emergency' situations where one person's safety, or that of their children is at risk, or if there is a danger that one parent will try to flee the country or province with the child. While couples with ties to other countries are more likely to face the latter situation, and therefore require legal aid, the condition that violence be present in the relationship is wholly inappropriate.



Questionable immigration status, loyalty to one's cultural or religious community, culturally-specific abuse and control (e.g.

women are sometimes controlled through threats to friends or family members back home), language barriers, and concern about sharing culturally-specific parenting norms: all these things can make it profoundly difficult for new immigrant women to publicly admit and accurately describe incidences of domestic violence. Women from immigrant communities are often not willing to bring police or other state officials into their lives, yet it is these women who most often need help navigating a foreign legal system.

How can an individual get help if she needs it? While there is no simple way to get a family law lawyer to represent you fully if you cannot afford to pay one, following are some resources that can help.

- 'Family Law Duty Counsel' - a lawyer available at some provincial courthouses to assist with basic needs.
- LawLine (1-866-577-2525) where individuals can speak directly to a lawyer.
- Multi-lingual booklets and information available at legal aid offices and online at [www.lss.bc.ca](http://www.lss.bc.ca).
- Legal clinics at many immigrant-serving agencies such as SUCCESS
- Law Courts Education Society provides classes on the court system.

*This article is based, in part, on "Legal Aid Denied: Women and the Cuts to Legal Services in BC," a joint study by West Coast LEAF and the BC Centre for Policy Alternatives and available at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca).*



*Alison Brewin is the Program Director at West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (West Coast LEAF), the BC branch of a national organization founded to advance women's equality and the promise of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.*

# Women's Equality and Religious Freedom

by Avigail Eisenberg



Is sexual equality threatened by freedom of religion? On December 2-5, 2004, West Coast LEAF<sup>1</sup> invited participants to a Consultation on Women and Freedom of Religion which focused on the potential impact that the accommodation of religious minorities will have on women's equality. Two issues were central: 1) the experiences of women in Bountiful, the polygamous Mormon community in Creston BC and 2) the potential introduction of Muslim law in private arbitration in Ontario.

Both central issues became more complex as the discussion progressed. On one hand, accommodating religious freedom is a recognized means by which all people, including women of faith, are treated with equal respect in Canadian society. So denying religious freedom by curtailing the rights of women to practice their faith, may be a form of religious discrimination and may not fully respect women of faith.

At the same time, there is no doubt that women throughout the world are victimized by male-dominated religious practices. According to participants from Bountiful and those representing the Canadian Muslim Women's Association, women within these communities are certainly no exception. Women become more vulnerable by religious accommodation laws that place power in the hands of a male elite and rely on the simplistic notion that women can just leave their communities if they don't like its practices.



Participants came to understand that the Muslim law issue is also affected by the post 9-11 atmosphere in Canada, which isolates and threat-

ens the Muslim community, and the wide diversity of views within Canada's Muslim community about Muslim personal law, and general cultural accommodation.

While the incorporation of Muslim law in BC's arbitration laws is not currently an issue (our Attorney general has said he does not intend to incorporate religious law in the arbitration process), it may be one eventually. When couples of faith face marriage breakdown they refer to religious laws, principles and leaders. How this affects women is a question that needs to be addressed as family breakdown often leaves women vulnerable to poverty and isolation. Communities of faith can assist those vulnerable women in many ways, but can also contribute to that vulnerability where the faith does not apply its principles and values with equality for women in mind.

All participants recognized the weekend-long event as a beginning. There are many faiths that were not represented at the consultation, nor were there enough religious scholars able to talk about the ways in which faith-based interpretations of religion might be applied to family law in positive ways for women. West Coast LEAF plans to continue the consultation by sharing the final report of the project with the public, and consult with representatives of other communities and religious groups.

To participate in the discussion, please contact West Coast LEAF at 604-684-8772, 1-866-737-7716 or at [info@westcoastleaf.org](mailto:info@westcoastleaf.org).

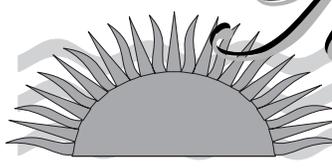
Avigail Eisenberg is a faculty member in the Department of Political Science and a Faculty Associate of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria.



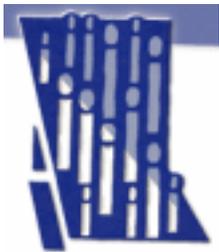
*Women become more vulnerable by religious accommodation laws that place power in the hands of a male elite and rely on the simplistic notion that women can just leave their communities if they don't like its practices.*

<sup>1</sup> West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund is the BC Branch of an organization founded to advance women's equality and the promise of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

# BC Regional Roundup



**Agency: BC HUMAN RIGHTS COALITION**  
**Project: HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM**



The BC Human Rights Coalition operates an ongoing province-wide educational program designed to build awareness of human rights legislation and to help prevent discrimination before it happens. The Coalition invites settlement agencies and multicultural societies to host workshops geared towards supporting new immigrants in their settle-

ment and integration into Canadian society. These sessions assist newcomers by introducing them to the BC *Human Rights Code* as it applies to employment practices, job interviews, etc.; identifying specific grounds and areas where discrimination is prohibited; defining and discussing different forms of discrimination and harassment; describing the formal complaint process of the BC Human Rights Tribunal; and explaining what to expect should they be involved in a complaint. Customized sessions are also available to teach immigrant settlement workers and volunteers how to identify a *prima facie* case of discrimination on behalf of their clients and how to advise clients on moving a complaint forward within the system.

For more information please contact Terri Kennedy at 604-689-8474.

**Agency: RICHMOND INTERCULTURAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**Project: 2004 – 2010 RICHMOND INTERCULTURAL STRATEGIC PLAN AND WORK PROGRAM**

Since its inception in 2002, the Richmond Intercultural Advisory Committee (RIAC) has been acting as the eyes and ears of the community. It also actively responds to intercultural issues that the City and residents bring to its attention. RIAC recognizes that the success of initiatives for promoting intercultural harmony depends on various stakeholders, including the City, working together.

As a result of year-long community consultations with stakeholder and public forums as well as focus group sessions, RIAC developed the 2004 – 2010 Richmond Intercultural Strategic Plan and Work Program. The Intercultural Strategic Plan includes a vision for interculturalism in Richmond, that of making Richmond “the most welcoming, inclusive and harmonious community in Canada,” along with guiding principles for action. It presents twelve strategic directions accompanied by suggested actions for implementation. It also proposes roles for the City and various stakeholders in promoting intercultural harmony in the community.

For further information please contact Lesley Sherlock at 604-276-4220.

**Agency: NORTH SHORE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY**  
**Project: IGNITING COLOURS OF RESISTANCE**



Igniting Colours of Resistance is a dynamic team of youth who are passionate about presenting anti-racism and social justice issues to their peers. They have extensive diversity training on concepts regarding

prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination and they are ready to bring acceptance, understanding and respect to our community. The presentations are a perfect fit for schools or organizations that value addressing diversity and social responsibility.

There is also a monthly email newsletter, ‘e-news’ which provides diversity news & up-coming events, opportunities for training (Planning 10), partnerships with other schools and community organizations, support on initiatives and sharing of ideas.

Teachers, service providers and students are encouraged to call the group to book anti-racism workshops for their schools, community organization or anywhere else youth gather. The ‘e-news’ invites submissions that profile a youth who is doing incredible work in strengthening the social justice cause. Show them how much you value their work!

For bookings or submissions, please call 604-988-2931 or email youth@nsms.ca.

**Agency: THE JUSTICE INSTITUTE OF BC**  
**Project: EMPOWERING IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE**  
**WOMEN WHO ARE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**  
**IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**



JUSTICE INSTITUTE  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Justice Institute of BC is currently working on a research project *Empowering Immigrant and Refugee Women who are Victims of Violence in Intimate Relationships*. The purpose of the study is to examine those factors that empower immi-

grant and refugee women as they seek help from the health, social services and/or justice systems, in an effort to end the violence in their lives. These findings will be used to make recommendations for improving how the justice, health and social service systems respond to immigrant and refugee women who are victims of violence.

The Justice Institute will be conducting the research over the next few months in communities within the Lower Mainland, Victoria, Kelowna and Prince George, and hopes to conduct individual interviews with women who have experienced violence and to facilitate focus groups with service providers who provide support to these women.

If you would like further information, please contact Caroline White at 604-528-5620 or [carolinew@jibc.bc.ca](mailto:carolinew@jibc.bc.ca)

***Still Available!***



**AMSSA's 2005**  
**Multifaith Calendars**

For more information visit  
[www.amssa.org](http://www.amssa.org)

or phone 604-718-2784 or  
 1-888-355-5560 to place an order.

# Kudos



L-R: Dr. Godwin Eni, Dragan Paunovic and Hon. Minister Patrick Wong. Dragan Paunovic was honoured for his 30 years of service with VMS.

**W**e congratulate the Vancouver Multicultural Society for celebrating 30 years of multiculturalism. The milestone was observed last November with a gala event attended by more than 350 organizations, individuals and government officials. "The Society is proud to have led our communities towards the cultural accommodation of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or religious belief," explained VMS President Dr. Godwin Eni.

The evening's program included a keynote address from the Honourable Justice Wallace T. O'Ppal as well as greetings from municipal and provincial representatives. VMS also presented special awards to recognize individuals and organizations for their outstanding work and contributions to the promotion of multiculturalism and diversity. The recipients of the VMS 30th Anniversary Awards were: **Dragan Paunovic**, for his contributions to the Vancouver Multicultural Society since its inception; **Kelly Ip**, for his work in initiating citizenship outreach services in ethnic communities and neighbourhood centers and for promoting good citizenship and multiculturalism in the community; **Beverly Nann**, who has pioneered, led and consulted on the development of community multicultural and immigrant service organizations in BC; and **Michelle Lee Williams**, for contributing to the social, economic and cultural interests of the Black community in BC since 1982.

Congratulations VMS and we wish you at least 30 more stellar years!

# Immigrant and Refugee Women in the Workplace

by Leslyn V. Johnson

So many things change when a family moves to a new country, whether that move is voluntary or not. In the case of bilingual Canada, immigrant and refugee families face issues such as language barriers, culture shock, disenfranchisement and the all too prevalent barriers to entering the labour market. Often times it is the mother who will opt to take on a “survival job” in order to provide for the family. Single mothers and women whose husbands are unable to join them in Canada for whatever reason often have no other choice.

Fortunately in BC, the provincial government provides funding for training programs to assist women with gaining skills to enter the job market. Unfortunately, most of these programs, while well meaning, tend to funnel women into the traditional gender specific roles such as house keeping, hospitality and home support. These are positions where the women usually earn minimum wage, lack job security and have little room for advancement.

Community agencies are coming to the rescue as they recognize that the very programs designed to benefit immigrant and refugee women are in fact shortchanging them. The community-based programs are client focused and address the holistic needs of the individual. The community-based trainers take into consideration the women’s aptitude, interests, family situation and health. The goal is for the client to have input in the process so that she can be successful.

Examples of these innovative training programs include Trade Works Training Society and the West Coast Domestic Workers Association. Trade Works provides skills training for women so that they can learn a trade. The West Coast Domestic Workers Association provides ESL training as well as Family Day Care Training where women, including but not limited to former nannies, learn how to operate a Family Day Care.

Shauna Paul, with the Immigrating Women in Sciences Project (IWIS), works with already skilled women who arrive in Canada only to experience what she terms “settlement shock.” For the first time these women find that employers do not recognize their education and/or experience and want them to prove that they are in fact skilled. She says, “Sometimes this disables the women and discourages them from accessing even those services that are available.”

Shauna describes the government-sponsored programs as “a bit like factories” and cites the IWIS mentoring programs for women in science, engineering, trades and technologies as ones that do work. For example, the program for women engineers is organic and allows women to connect informally to share experiences, network



*Unfortunately, most of these programs, while well meaning, tend to funnel women into the traditional gender specific roles such as house keeping, hospitality and home support. These are positions where the women usually earn minimum wage, lack job security and have little room for advancement.*

and also participate in workplace tours. IWIS convenes an annual panel where immigrant women can interact with accreditation bodies, accredited immigrant women engineers and women who are working within the industry. In addition, IWIS is actively working on other projects such as trying to establish workplace internships and advocate funding for enhanced language training.

With initiatives like Employment Access for Skilled Immigrants (EASI), the BC government is making an attempt to address the systemic barriers to job access for women. However, there are funding constraints and government funding generally does not value the work of community agencies. The bottom line remains that even in a Canada that prides itself on being tolerant and celebrating diversity, we still have a long way to go in resolving the substantive issues of gender equality.

# Leading Women to Success

by Jean Maloney

**P**acific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS) is a Vancouver based agency that has been providing services for immigrant and refugee women and their young children since 1975. The programs help immigrant women improve their English, make friends and contacts, gain self-confidence, learn about Canadian society and institutions and explore and celebrate our cultural diversity. They include English as a second language (ESL) programs that focus on practical, everyday English and literacy skills as well as a group participation. There is also a support and leadership training program (LEAD) that supports immigrant women in becoming more active in the community in meaningful ways. All programs include quality on-site care and education programs for children aged 18 months to 5 years.

ESL classes are offered at the literacy, beginner and intermediate levels, and take place in elementary schools, neighborhood houses and community centres in neighborhoods where potential participants live. Participants attend two mornings or afternoons a week over 33 weeks (September to June); programs do not run during the summer or during winter or spring school breaks as many women with school aged children need to be home at these times. Policies regarding attendance and the length of time that women can stay in the program are flexible and take into account the real life circumstances of the participants, e.g., seasonal work, childcare issues, etc. The staff team consists of a certified ESL teacher, childcare staff who are qualified Early Childhood Educators and a bilingual/bicultural Participant Support Worker who provides referral, bridging and support services. Volunteers are an integral part of the program and assist in both the ESL and childcare programs.

PIRS offers the LEAD three times a year (September, January and April intakes) for two mornings or afternoons a week over 12 weeks. It is for women with enough English skills to participate in group discussions and includes such topics as leadership and group skills; immigrant women's issues; personal planning and goal setting; communication skills; stereotyping and discrimination; and volunteerism. One of the highlights for participants is the annual

visit to City Hall where they are able to observe a council meeting and meet the mayor. An experienced group facilitator leads the group, and part of her role is to mentor a volunteer assistant who is a graduate of the LEAD program.

Both the ESL and LEAD programs have an active recruitment/outreach component that lets potential participants know about programs. In addition, it helps them to understand how the program benefits them, their children and their families; identifies and deals with potential barriers to access; and builds trust and credibility in the community. Both programs aim to create a welcoming, non-threatening learning environment; provide opportunities for participants to develop confidence through experiencing success; encourage social interaction, cross-cultural sharing and peer support; and find opportunities to involve participants in program planning and evaluation. Both offer play based childcare programs to support the participation of women with young children, provide opportunities to address issues related to parenting in a multicultural society and promote the social and language development of ESL preschoolers.

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*Jean Maloney has been the Executive Director of the Pacific Immigrant Resources Society since 1986.*



*This year PIRS will celebrate 30 years of providing services for immigrant and refugee women and their young children. For more information about PIRS activities and 30th anniversary events, visit our website at [www.pirs.bc.ca](http://www.pirs.bc.ca).*



## Parent Support Circles: a Parent's Perspective

by Merly Destor

*Merly Destor is a member of one Parent Support Circle run by Parent Support Services Society (PSS) of BC. She spoke about her personal experiences at the Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Symposium: Voices of Immigrant and Refugee Women: Learning from their Stories. Here are edited excerpts from her presentation.*

**P**arent Support Circle is a self-help group where parents share experiences and feelings in an environment that is confidential and non-judgmental. A regular Circle meeting would start with a check-in where parents share how they have been feeling during the past week. This is very useful to the group in understanding where a member is coming from. The group agrees that a member who is in crisis situation be given more time to talk and share about her situation. Then at the end of the meeting, the group has a check-out to give members an opportunity to give feedback after sharing their experiences and revealing so much about themselves.

Whenever there is a new member, the group does a welcome where long-term members would introduce the group. It is confidential and non-judgmental, and gives the new member an idea how the group meeting operates. Members also reassure the new member that it is



In the 30 years since PSS was founded, the populations of BC's Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley, and Coastal areas have grown and diversified ethnically and culturally, and the pressures on many BC families have changed. PSS has kept pace by structuring Parent Support Circles to meet the specific needs of grandparents, stepparents, and Aboriginal, Chinese, Filipino, Hindi-Punjabi, and Latin American parents.

There is a natural life cycle that sees Circles constantly being created to meet needs in some communities while winding down in others when the need has been filled. Over the years PSS has served thousands of people in hundreds of Circles.



Members of this Parent Support Circle reflects Vancouver's increasing ethnic diversity.

okay for them to cry, not to say anything and just listen. And whenever they are ready to talk, they will always have the opportunity to talk and share.

From the group, I have learned a lot of important things, one of which is how to be assertive. I used to react negatively to a lot of things immediately. Most often, these negative reactions were directed at my co-workers. But these stayed with me even when I got home so my children were also badly affected. All these negative feelings not only hurt the people around me especially my children, but they also made me feel bad and mad at myself.

(...) As an immigrant, I got to know about other resources and services in the community through the Circle. I have accessed various services that help me and my family establish ourselves and adjust to the life in Canada. These services are in the areas of family support, counselling, job search, child welfare, language support, credentials accreditation and other life skills support like assertiveness, dealing with anger, enhancing self-esteem and self-care.

My participation in the Circle has made me feel that I am not alone, that there are people who support me as a single parent in raising my children. The Circle has made me realize that I am not the only one who is faced with difficulties and challenges. During Circle meetings, I feel free to speak about my emotions, as I know that I will not be judged or criticized for what I say. I feel safe sharing my experiences with the other members of the group because we observe confidentiality. All information that we share should stay in the room. Parents also come to the meeting to listen. So while I go to the meeting to help myself, I am also able to help and support other members as they also learn something from my situation.

(...) Being a self-help group, Parent Support Circle is really for and about parents. In the Circle, parents are helping and supporting each other. All these experiences that I have with the Parent Support Circle have made me feel better about myself and my situation being a single parent and as an immigrant

# Cross-Cultural Peer Support Group Program for Immigrant and Refugee Women

by Carmen Munoz

Since 2001 the Cross-Cultural Peer Support Group Program (CCPSGP) at Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISS) has been providing mental, physical and social support to immigrant and refugee women who experience challenges during their integration process. The program empowers newcomer women by creating safe, confidential and supportive environments where they can gain validation and understanding of the complex issues of adjustment and integration. It is a place where these women come to break their isolation and forge new friendships. It also serves as an opportunity to exchange coping strategies and celebrate their strength and resilience.

Focusing on the needs and care of immigrant and refugee women is important because their value system, language and culture is constantly questioned and challenged by western society. As a result, when adapting to their new homes, they experience intense culture shock, isolation, depression, frustration and an overwhelming sense of confusion, which in turn, not only manifests itself mentally, but through physical reactions as well.

Many of the women come to Canada as political refugees, fleeing war-torn countries in which they have witnessed violence, lost family members, experienced torture and persecution or some other form of trauma first hand. Therefore, not only are refugee women burdened with the stress of coping with past traumas, they do this while dealing with the challenges of adjusting to a new life as well.

Each year (September to December) the CCPSGP, in collaboration with the Self-Help Resources Association of BC, trains 15 to 20 newcomer women to become "Volunteer Peer Support Group Facilitators". The comprehensive 80-hour training takes place over 12 weeks and is taught by leading experts from various fields who

graciously donate their time and expertise to build up the skills-base of women working towards becoming community leaders and role-models. The women learn about mental and physical health, self-awareness, communication skills, violence against women, human rights, discrimination, parenting, career and job exploration, self-care and conflict resolution skills among others.

Once the training is complete, the volunteer facilitators are placed into teams of three. They create session plans together and assist program staff with outreach and support group promotions. They then go back out into their communities and deliver 10-week peer support groups for other immigrant and refugee women facing challenges integrating into their new lives in Canada.

Free child-minding, snacks and transportation subsidies are made available so that no woman is excluded from the opportunity to attend. Most of the groups are held in first language, although each year we try to deliver at least one Multicultural, ESL-based group open to women of all communities. One participant described her experience this way, "Getting into this program is like winning a big, big prize in the lottery of life!"

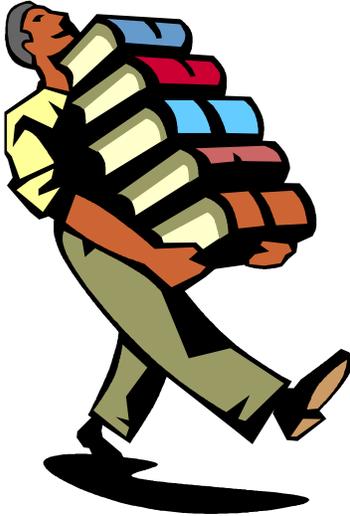
Some of the ethnic communities we have worked with in the past include: Afghan, Iranian, Former Yugoslavian, Russian, Filipino, Latino and Sudanese communities. This year we will focus on the Chinese, Rwandese, Burundian, Latino, Afghan and Sudanese communities.

As a result of their participation in the groups and in the trainings, the women have reported an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence, encouraging them to pursue new employment or educational opportunities. It is common to hear comments like "The group boosted my moral. It changed my spirit" or "I am proud to be a woman. Before I was ashamed." Others have mentioned a decrease in their stress and anxiety levels, which has helped them to cope with their depression and/or other mental health issues. Many have formed lasting and supportive friendships that have allowed them to break out of their isolation and exclusion. And lastly, the program has given the participants the opportunity to become more aware of the various services and resources available to them as well as a better understanding of "Canadian culture."

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*Carmen Munoz is the Program Manager for the CCPSGP. The initiative receives funding from the Sharon Martin Trust Fund of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.*

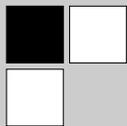




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## mind buster answers

1. d) all of the above
2. c) 50%
3. b) Immigrant and refugee women are more likely to find paid employment than their male counterparts.
4. a) Adrienne Clarkson
5. d) October
6. c) 1992
7. b) 20%
8. a) country of origin

## Living in Kelowna

by Sarah Cooper



I interviewed three women from an adult ESL (English as a second language) class in order to understand the issues and challenges facing immigrant women in Kelowna. The women were Mamta (from India), Shahin (from Iran) and Zinaida (from Moldova.)

For these women, getting around is hard when their husband is the only one who drives, so they often use public transportation. Mamta commented that not as many women drive in her homeland of India, and that she must learn English in order to understand the written drivers license test in Canada, which she would like to take.

Employment is an ongoing issue for these women. According to them, it can be hard to raise children, cook and clean, attend English classes and work.

All three women agreed that Kelowna Community Resources Settlement Services offers useful information on translating documents, employment, different social organizations, as well as answering many other questions that these new Kelownians had.

Mamta, Shahin and Zinaida all agreed that Kelowna is a beautiful place to live, and they were happy to be building their lives here, no matter what the struggle.

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*Sarah Cooper is a Practicum Student with Kelowna Community Resources Settlement Services*

# Refugees Families Need Speedy Reunification

by Leslyn V. Johnson (ed)

**F**ifty percent of refugees who arrive in BC are women. For many, their most pressing concern is for their families left overseas. Like anyone else who has been separated from family against their will, they are anxious to be reunited. The fact that they are refugees adds another layer to their concern: in many cases, their family members have been left in precarious and even dangerous circumstances. As long as their loved ones remain at risk, refugees cannot fully enjoy the relative security of being in Canada.

Unfortunately, many refugees wait years for that moment of reunification with their families, despite the fact that Canadian law and policy seek to promote refugee family reunification. Too often the experiences of refugees trying to bring their families are in painful contradiction with the good intentions of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* and the officials who implement it. The stories of these refugees reflect a systemic cruelty that dishonours Canada. Nick Summers, President of the Canadian Council for Refugees, says that "Keeping families separated is cruel, unnecessary and unworthy of Canada."

Refugees in Canada may face several different barriers to family reunification. The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* promotes refugee family reunification by allowing refugees recognized in Canada to include family members overseas on their permanent residence application. Despite this, in half of the cases, refugees have to wait more than 13 months for their family members to be processed. One in five refugees has to wait more than 26 months. At the slowest visa office, half of the cases involve the family having to wait more than 27 months. And some refugees wait much longer. Delays of up to six years are not uncommon.

The long delays prolong risks to family members overseas, who may be in conflict zones or refugee camps. Families are often subject to

the same risk of persecution that caused their spouse or parent to be granted Canada's protection. Living conditions may endanger their health and the children's education, leading to increased social costs when they finally come to Canada.

Psychologically, the toll of such long separations is heavy. Many refugees say that their family members suspect them of not wanting them to come, because they cannot believe that a country like Canada could be so inefficient in its processing. Families that finally reunite after years of separation face the stress of trying to live together after having grown apart. Some families don't survive.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognizes the need for speedy family reunification for refugees. In 1977, the UNHCR Executive Committee, of which Canada is a member, stated that: "it is desirable that countries of asylum and countries of origin support the efforts of the High Commissioner to ensure that reunification of separated families takes place with the least possible delay." Summers champions the UN position. "We call on the government to solve the problem by allowing families of refugees to travel immediately to Canada to be processed here."

Radhika, a Sri Lankan, came to Canada in April 1998 with two daughters, leaving three other children and her husband in India. In March 2000, Radhika was accepted as a refugee and she applied for permanent residence for herself and her family members. It took two years for Radhika and her daughters in Canada to become permanent residents. The security clearance for the family members in India is still pending. Radhika has now been separated from her husband and three of her children for more than six years.

When Mindondo came to Canada in August 2000 she left her two children with a friend in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her husband fled separately and later joined her in Canada. In January 2002, Mindondo was accepted as a refugee. In December 2002, her 13 year old son was assassinated, having been targeted as a member of a persecuted family - the reason Mindondo was recognized as a refugee. Despite this killing, Mindondo's daughter is still in the Democratic Republic of Congo, running from village to village to hide from the rebels, sometimes unable to contact Mindondo.

*Families that finally reunite after years of separation face the stress of trying to live together after having grown apart.*

*Some families don't survive.*



*This story is based on the November 2004 Canadian Council for Refugees report entitled "More Than a Nightmare: Delays in Refugee Family Reunification," and available at <http://www.web.net/~ccr/nightmare.pdf>.*

# Post Script

## Assessing the Long-Term Impacts of the Live-In Caregiver Program

by Geraldine Pratt & the Philippine Women Centre

Does the possibility of Canadian citizenship compensate for 24 months working as a live-in domestic worker? In our assessment, it does not. Thousands of women – typically university-educated Filipino women – come to Canada each year on temporary work visas to work as live-in caregivers. Although this is not an immigration program, those who complete 24 months as a domestic worker (within a 36-month period) are eligible to apply for an open visa and eventually Canadian citizenship. Unlike many other countries, Canada is unusual because it offers migrant workers an opportunity for citizenship. Nonetheless, since 1996 we have dedicated our research to documenting the various short and long-term costs and benefits of the program to domestic workers and their families, in order to assess whether the promise of citizenship is sufficient compensation, and whether the program can be restructured to minimize some of the costs and traumas associated with it.

In the first phase of research, we documented the experiences of domestic workers registered in the Live-in Caregiver Program. Domestic workers were immensely frustrated with being unable to practice their professional skills, mostly in midwifery, nursing and teaching, and also angry that many Canadian employers did not comply with their labour contract, or the provincial regulations for minimum hourly wage rates. We documented the many ways in which Canadian employers violated or ‘wiggled around’ regulations. For example, one employer reduced the costs of a live-in servant, who cared for their child, cleaned their home, and cooked their meals, to just \$500 a month. They did this by inviting a neighbour, for \$700 a month, to bring their child to their home to be cared for by their nanny. This subcontracting arrangement violated the federal government’s temporary visa regulations and made the domestic worker vulnerable to deportation. Such practices are very common.

More recently, we have documented the experiences of women almost a decade after they leave the Live-in Caregiver Program and attain Canadian citizenship, to try to weigh the costs and benefits over the long term. This is a difficult calculation because we must weigh the benefits of remittances sent to the Philippines to pay for educating sisters, brothers, nephews and nieces, the health care of parents, or new houses in the Philippines against the many costs endured by individuals in Vancouver. These hardships include



deskilling, long-term reduced professional standing, low quality housing in Vancouver, and profound family dislocation.

One of the highest prices of the Live-in Caregiver Program is paid by mothers who labour in Canada to support their own children in the Philippines. At the moment we are studying families who suffered this period of separation and are now reunited in Vancouver. By doing in-depth interviews with different family members, both parents and youth, we hope to better understand the challenges of reunification. Filipino youth appear to face significant challenges in Vancouver schools. For example, analyses of BC Ministry of Education data for lower high schools show that a dramatically higher proportion of Filipino students, compared to a selected range of other groups (including those who speak Punjabi, Vietnamese, Chinese and English at home), perform ‘below expectations’ on grade ten assessments for math, reading and writing competence. While we have no means of determining what proportion of these Filipino students are children of domestic workers, we do know that many domestic workers migrate to Canada expressly to better the futures of their children. Poor educational achievement among their children due to long-term family separation would be a very high cost indeed.

*Post Script is a Cultures West tradition that allows readers to revisit topics we highlighted in the previous edition. Our theme in our Fall 2004 edition was “Settlement and Integration Research” and this submission presents more available research on that topic.*

*Geraldine Pratt is a Professor in the Department of Geography at UBC and also a senior researcher with Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis.*

*For more details, including policy recommendations for the Live-in Caregiver Program, see Working Paper 03-18; <http://www.riim.metropolis.net/research/policy>.*

# AMSSA Member Organizations

Abbotsford Community Services (ACS)	Canadian Red Cross	Kitimat Multicultural Society	SUCCESS (United Chinese Community Enrichment Services)
Adult Learning Development Association (ALDA)	Central Okanagan Society of Immigrant & Visible Minority Women (COSIMMW)	Kiwassa Neighbourhood Services Association	Surrey-Delta Immigrant Services Society (SDISS)
Association des Francophones et Francophiles du Nord-Ouest (AFFNO)	Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (CVIMS)	Langley Family Services Association (LFS)	Taiwanese Canadian Cultural Society (TCCS)
Association of BC TEAL (Teachers of English as an Additional Language)	Chilliwack Community Services	Legal Services Society of BC (LSS)	Terrace & District Multicultural Association (TDMA)
Association of Neighbourhood Houses of Greater Vancouver (ANH)	Chimo Crisis Services - Richmond	Little Mountain Neighbourhood House Society (LMNHS)	Trail & District Multicultural Society (TDMS)
BC Association of Social Workers (BCASW) - Multiculturalism & Anti-Racism Committee	Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH)	Mennonite Central Committee of BC - Refugee Assistance Program (MCC- RAP)	Vancouver & Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services (VLMFFSS)
BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils	Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS)	Mission Community Services Society (MCSS)	Vancouver Association for Survivor of Torture (VAST)
BC Heritage Language Association (BCHLA)	Comox Valley Family Services Association (CVFSA)	Multicultural Helping House Society (MHHS)	Vancouver Citizenship Council (VCC)
BC Human Rights Coalition (BCHRC)	Cowichan Valley Intercultural & Immigrant Aid Society (CVIIAS)	Multicultural Heritage Society (MHS) - Prince George	Vancouver Cross-Cultural Seniors Network Society
BC Settlement and Integration Workers Association (BCSIWA)	Crisis Centre - Vancouver	Multifaith Action Society (MAS)	Vancouver Multicultural Society (VMS)
BC Teachers Federation – Social Justice Program (BCTF - SJP)	ELSA Net	North Shore Multicultural Society (NSMS)	Vernon & District Immigrant Services Society (VDISS)
Big Sisters of BC - Lower Mainland	Family Education and Support Centre	OPTIONS: Services to Communities Society – Surrey	Vernon Multicultural Association
Boundary Multicultural Society (BMS)	Family Services of Greater Vancouver (FSGV)	Pacific Community Resources	Volunteer Vancouver
Burnaby Multicultural Society (BMS)	Gay & Lesbian Educators of BC (GALE BC)	Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS)	WATARI
Campbell River & Area Multicultural & Immigrant Services Association (CRMISA)	Immigrant & Multicultural Services Society (IMSS)	Penticton & District Multicultural Society (PDMS)	West Coast Domestic Workers' Association (WCDWA)
Canadian Cancer Society – BC & Yukon Division	Immigrant & Visible Minority Women of BC (IVMW)	Progressive Inter-Cultural Community Services Society (PICSS)	Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre – Multicultural & Diversity Services (WMDS)
Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) - Pacific Region	Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISS)	Quesnel Multicultural Society	Westcoast Family Resources Society
Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) - BC Division	Inland Refugee Society of BC (IRS)	Richmond Intercultural Advisory Committee	YMCA Vancouver International
	Institute for Media, Policy & Civil Society (IMPACS)	Richmond Multicultural Concerns Society (RMCS)	YWCA Vancouver International
	Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA)	Scouts Canada - Provincial Social Planning & Research Council of BC (SPARC)	
	Jewish Family Service Agency (JFSA)	Social Planning Council - North Okanagan	
	Kamloops Cariboo Regional Immigrant Society (KIS)	Society for Community Development	
	Kamloops Multicultural Society	Storefront Orientation Services (SOS)	
	Kelowna Community Resources Society		

