

## **Immigrants in isolation**

### **Women newcomers who feel alone can pull themselves out of seclusion with a little help from specialized programs**

by Sacha DeVoretz, canadianimmigrant.ca  
(2011)

Despite living only three blocks away from Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House (a centre in Vancouver that offers a range of resources and opportunities to children, youth, adults and seniors, including immigrants), Shaheda, a new immigrant from Bangladesh, lived in relative isolation for the first nine months after her arrival.

Shaheda is not alone. Women immigrants and newcomers living in seclusion is common, particularly for those with young children. They live within the confines of their homes, leaving only to tend to very basic life necessities for themselves and their children; this can go on for months and — in some cases — years.

#### **Women isolated**

In the immigrant community this solitude is so prevalent among women that it is commonly understood that the three things women newcomers surround themselves with during this period of isolation are welfare, television and anti-depressants.

Shaheda, who is married with two small children, had little support other than a neighbour and her husband. Her husband, educated as an **accountant** in Bangladesh, took a job at a local convenience store, and Shaheda stayed at home to look after their children. The stress of her husband's shift work and caring for her children contributed to the isolation she experienced, as she had no family or friends in Vancouver to provide relief and support.

One night her daughter became violently ill, vomiting blood and causing great concern for both Shaheda and her husband. They had applied for medical care, but hadn't yet been approved at this time. Fortunately, their friend who had helped them previously intervened and he contacted 911 and called for an ambulance. After her daughter received care at the emergency, she received an invoice for the medical services at a cost of more than \$1,200.

Worried about the expense, Shaheda and her husband waited anxiously for a subsidy application for a period of eight months. Throughout this time, Shaheda felt as if she had no one with whom she could share her concerns. Shaheda was not familiar with how to access the resources that were available to her to start a successful life in Canada.

This sense of isolation affects immigrants and refugees alike. Lucia (not her real name) arrived at the Ontario/U.S.A. border crossing from Honduras. She arrived as a refugee with her two small children, one 10 months old and one two-and-a-half years old. Lucia had experienced domestic abuse and sought refugee status to get away from her violent ex-husband.

Even after safely arriving in Vancouver, as a result of the abuse she had experienced in Honduras she experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and suffered through a deep depression. Living with depression and the stress of her impending refugee hearing, Lucia lived in isolation with her children for her first 11 months in Canada.

Both Shaheda and Lucia encountered the daily stress of raising children coupled with the additional strain of starting a new life in this country. Blanca Salvatierra, community developer from the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, states that women newcomers living in solitude "lack awareness of the resources and programs that are available to them."

Newcomers contend with poverty and language and cultural barriers. This unique mix of challenges creates misery and isolation for many women arriving from other countries; they feel overwhelmed and are unaware of how to integrate into their new community.

### **Programs to help: HIPPY Canada**

In Canada, there are, of course, programs and services to assist women who endure this solitude.

**Citizenship and Immigration** Canada announced the start of a pilot project, called Practicing Citizenship, which is a collaboration between HIPPY Canada, HIPPY Britannia, Multicultural Helping House and MOSAIC, and is intended to support the involvement of newcomer women in Canadian society.

Debbie Bell, executive director of HIPPY Canada, says, “Over time, our organization has encountered many new Canadian women who felt isolated and unable to integrate . . . This type of program, we hope, will encourage more women to overcome any forms of isolation and integrate into their community much sooner.”

The HIPPY program (which stands for Home Instruction for Parents of Pre-School Youngsters) is a cost-effective family literacy strategy that is supported on four pillars: parents teaching children; role-play is used as the method of teaching; the educational activities are centred around a highly-structured curriculum; and parents teach parents. The program blends theory and skills for public participation with a guided opportunity to apply this knowledge to real-life challenges through community-based projects.

Programs similar to the Practicing Citizenship have helped newcomers like Shaheda and Lucia. The turning point for Shaheda, who was educated as a teacher in her home country, was when a person she knew gave her brochure about the Community Literacy and Learning Circles (CLLC) program, a partnership between Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, Langara College and Frontier College. It is a groundbreaking program for immigrant women who want to expand their literacy and essential skills, and who want to learn about and contribute in organizing and leading a community-based project. By using this program she has strengthened her English skills, her confidence has soared and she has broadened her support circle.

Lucia now has refugee status in Canada and says a change occurred for her when she was offered a safe haven in a local Latino support group. Lucia states, “Seeing my children play with the other children from the support group was the turning point for me. I wanted to have a better life for my children and needed to survive.”

The support group has been a stepping stone for Lucia who now recognizes that though there will still be challenges as a single immigrant mother in Canada, the problems “will be shared and I will not feel the stress of living in isolation in my head as two heads can solve problems together.”

Salvatierra concludes, “Women will break through their fear, isolation and find motivation through programs such as Practicing Citizenship. These programs are very much needed to diminish this period of isolation for women newcomers and their children and encourage a faster integration to Canadian society.”