

**Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

**En Route to Success**

**Windsor Women Working With Immigrant Women**

**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Breakfast of Champions**

**June 11, 2010**

Good morning, honoured guests and friends:

I am delighted to be here in support of *Windsor Women Working With Immigrant Women*, and I wish to thank Sandra McLean for inviting me to speak to you today.

Before I start, I want to commend your group of visionary women, who, in 1982, recognized the unmet needs of immigrant women and their families in Windsor, and a year later, founded this organization. I believe, with the economy the way it is, your help is needed even more today.

In recent years, it is getting much harder for immigrants to integrate. In many ways, it is due to the change in the source countries of immigrants to Canada, which used to be the British Isles and Western Europe. Today, most immigrants are from Asia and almost half of these immigrants have bachelor degrees or higher levels of education.

Despite the educational level and the international training of many of these immigrants, integration, especially economic integration, meaning jobs that are commensurate to the level of their education and training, is taking much longer than before. It is worrying to learn that those who arrived between 2001 and 2006 had a higher rate of unemployment, and a much lower average income, compared to previous groups of immigrants and native born Canadians.

This disproportionate level of unemployment among recent immigrants will affect Ontario's prosperity since all net labour growth is expected to come from immigration by next year. As of 2006, 28% of Ontario's population was already foreign born, the highest rate in Canada.

We all know that the high rate of unemployment is due to the lack of recognition of international training, racial background, language, culture, and the usual reason of "not having Canadian experience".

According to economist Sheila Block, who wrote a report for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, visible minority women earn less than

54c for every dollar a white man earns, because of sexism and racial discrimination that “pack a double wallop.” Of course, many of these women are immigrants from Asia. She also mentioned that visible minority families are three times more likely to live in poverty than white families.

Recent women immigrants face a double jeopardy in their attempt to overcome barriers. Like women everywhere, they are the primary caretakers for their families, and their homes. Unless they are single when they arrive, women are often weighted down by family responsibilities that may make it difficult for them to access the resources they need to integrate into Canadian society. Many of them also have less time outside the home to help them develop their language skills.

However, some of these immigrant women have been able to turn adversity to advantage. In Canada, they have a chance to start over in a new country, freed from the constraints of the past. As author Shauna Singh Baldwin says:

*“Women are responsible for the future. Quite often men are responsible for the preservation of the past and the continuity of the family line...”*

Terry Woo, author of *Banana Boys* agrees.

*“... for women who weren't valued as equal in terms of their potential, they're now free; they're almost more motivated to pursue their heart's desire.”*

Today, I am going to talk about the positive - the successes of immigrant women despite the obstacles they faced on entering Canada.

Elga Nicolova came to Canada from Bulgaria 10 years ago. She says that attitude was very important in achieving her present position as a Planning and Evaluation Consultant with *Helping Organizations Break New Ground*.

*Elga says: “No matter what happens in your life it will turn for the better and turn as a learning advantage....I have remained optimistic and positive all the time. One thing I have learned about immigration is that no matter where you go you are the same person. If you have succeeded in one place you may succeed again.”*

Zahra Parvinian came to Canada from Iran in 1988 as a political refugee. She said she had two choices: to work in a coffee shop or to follow the path of her dreams, which is as a women's and labour activist. As a single mother with

two children, she continued to work on her English skills at George Brown College, because she saw this as crucial to her success in Canada, despite her having a degree from one of the best-known universities in the Middle East.

*She said: "There are many, many obstacles for immigrant women, but in order to overcome them, you should have a strong personality... I came with a middle class mentality. I was aware of the kind of life I wanted to live. I did not want to live on social services forever. I remained positive all the time. I'm going to make it....all the steps of my life were a struggle."*

Zahra studied at York University in 1994, then applied and was accepted into the MA program. In 2006, Zahra became the Team Manager at *Food Share*.

For the well-educated immigrants who have had professional training, they face more subtle barriers. These barriers have less to do with the characteristics of the immigrant, and more to do with the characteristics of our society, which has yet to make the necessary adaptations to our new and very necessary labour force.

Internationally Trained Professional (ITP) immigrants to Ontario suffer from a lack of information about how to access professional regulating bodies, difficulty in gaining recognition of foreign credentials, and the lack of recognition of foreign work experience by employers, as well as insufficient language or educational training in Canada, specific to their professionals. For that reason, only one in four immigrant professionals manages to obtain a license in one of Ontario's 37 regulated professions, and this is detrimental to the economy of Ontario.

A very good example is Ira Metani\_who came to Canada from Albania in 2003. Despite her experience as an English Language Instructor at Tirana University, in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, and having a Masters degree in Education, she couldn't find work. Every time she picked up the phone, the same question was asked, "*Do you have any Canadian experience?*" The lack of Canadian work experience didn't leave many options, but she tried to always be optimistic.

*She said, "It was a great risk to leave one's home, culture and jobs. Nothing is free nor are there shortcuts in life....there is no such thing as an overnight success. Learning, growing, becoming more has always meant for me a willingness to take risks."*

Ira worked hard towards her certification as a teacher, and she was successful in completing this programme and became a teacher.

I understand very well the reason why the professional associations need to uphold their standards, but I often find that there is a lack of understanding that all learning is relevant, no matter where you obtain it. According to the Maytree Foundation, if all immigrants' foreign learning and learning credentials were recognized, between \$3.4 and \$5.0 billion would be added to the Canadian economy every year.

Now, I would be the last person to suggest that all foreign credentials should be recognized due to the lack of standardization. However, since we live in a globalized world, global experience is necessary for Canada to move forward as an economic power, and as a leader in the Western World.

Speaking from a personal perspective, because I have lived in Asia, Europe and now Canada, I find that I think very differently from most Canadians who have lived here all their lives. I recognize that Internationally Trained Professionals (ITP), especially the women, are the professionals who can help Canada grow.

As women, our real strength as leaders stems from our patience, flexibility, and tendency to build relationships and mentor others. And, most of us are experts in multi-tasking. Any woman in this audience will know that we relate to one another differently than men do. We are mothers, caregivers, and household managers, and we tend to carry these skills to our work place.

Women ITPs, with overseas training, and global experience, combined with real and tangible flexibility of mind, created by having worked in different settings, in varied cultural contexts, are huge assets to Canadian institutions.

I will tell you the story of Hamdi Mohamed from Somalia. She is now the Executive Director of the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO), a non-profit organization dedicated to accelerating the settlement of immigrants and refugees. As a refugee herself who lost everything fleeing war-torn Somalia, Hamdi understands the situation faced by refugees and immigrants coming to Canada better than anyone born in Canada.

I had the pleasure of inviting Hamdi to speak on Parliament Hill at an annual Breakfast I host for diverse high school students from the Ottawa region. Hamdi spoke about what it was like growing up in Somalia, in a large extended family. She had a lot going for her at the age of 24 with a Bachelor degree in teaching, and 3 other diplomas in business, and international relations, when in a

blink of an eye, she lost everything! But, she had not lost her skills and her ability to speak Canada's two official languages, plus Arabic, Somali, and functioning Italian.

Upon coming to Canada with few material assets, Hamdi took advantage of her strengths, making friends with people from all backgrounds, and becoming actively involved with the community. She went on to further her education, finishing an M.A. in international diplomacy at the University of Ottawa, as well as a Ph.D in History.

Here's what Hamdi had to say about some of the obstacles she faced along the way.

*"I learned that you are never a victim unless you accept victimization. You always have the power to choose the path for your life. While I have experienced the legacies of colonialism and have been victimized by sexism, racism etc throughout my life, I never thought of myself as a victim."*

Because of the diversity of experience in a global context, ITPs are usually multi-lingual and multi-cultural like Hamdi. They have the potential to look at situations differently from Canadians, and have the flexibility of mind that can be very useful in thinking outside the box. These skills can lead to establishing different types of organizations, more creative human resource management, and countless innovations.

New immigrants and their children I meet are often polymaths. They have their work, but they also have many other interests and talents. Many of them tend to be artistic as well as musical, and they still find the time to give back to the community.

I travel to Asia every year, visiting different countries, especially to Hong Kong, where I grew up, and I can tell you that the entrepreneurial environment there is incredible. Entrepreneurial spirit is part of the Chinese culture, and one can see this reflected all over China. The pace of development and progress is unimaginable to many Canadians.

I understand India is as entrepreneurial even though I have yet to visit that country. So, you can imagine that people from China and India would have a different worldview from Canadian business. They often see opportunities where those born in Canada may not.

I was first introduced to Cindy Lee at an entrepreneurial gala event in Toronto a few years ago. Cindy came to Canada in 1976 from Taiwan with a university degree in accounting. Her first job was in bookkeeping for \$5.00 an hour.

One rainy, winter day in Vancouver, Cindy went grocery shopping in Chinatown with three young children in tow. The shops were small, cramped, and there was little parking. Her 5-year old nephew had to go to the bathroom, but there was none in sight. He wet his pants and the shopping had to be abandoned, and Cindy took her troupe home. That experience planted a seed in her mind that became the T&T Supermarket chain we know today.

Cindy Lee wanted an Asian grocery store that she would like to shop in, with well-lit, wide aisles, and clean, well-stocked shelves, as well as washrooms, and, T&T was born. Initially, she nearly went bankrupt, and she sought advice from her entrepreneurial father in Taiwan. He told her to present a composed front to stave off potentially fretful suppliers, and to surround herself with people who were better and smarter than she was, fast.

Cindy credits her father's advice and her own understanding as a woman, who knows how and where women like to shop for their groceries. She said, *"It's very simple...be the customer....then you'll find out easily."*

T&T is now the largest Asian grocery chain in Canada with 18 stores. It is so successful that Loblaw's recently bought the company for \$225 million in order to break into the ethnic food market, and Cindy remains at the helm, at Loblaw's insistence.

Our current immigration legislation emphasizes the need for a high level of education among immigrants to Canada. Highly educated immigrants come here with the expectation that they will work in their fields. Many of them are very disappointed when they arrive by the seemingly endless hurdles to meaningful employment. Many would never have left their homelands, had they been aware that finding employment that utilizes their skills would be such a difficult undertaking.

Most immigrants have family members or friends living in our large cities. For that reason, not many are willing to settle in smaller centres where they will do better economically. Degreed immigrants earn a mere 70% of the incomes that native-born Canadians do in Ontario, in comparison to 90% in Prince Edward Island.

The same pattern can be observed in cities. In Toronto, the average income of immigrants is less than 60% of that of native-born Canadians. Interestingly, degreed immigrants in cities like Thunder Bay, Kingston and Sudbury, earn higher incomes than their Canadian born counterparts.

Here in Windsor, where immigrants make up almost a quarter of your population, there is a disparity between the incomes of immigrants and the local born counterparts, but the gap is not as wide as in Toronto.

Clearly, larger cities are having more trouble absorbing recent immigrants, and adjusting to the change in demographics. While language obstacles may sometimes be an issue, India has English as an official language, and many immigrants from China and Hong Kong have studied English in their schools. But then, there is always that problem with speaking one of the official languages with “an accent.”

Some ITP women come to Canada with both official languages, such as Manishi Sagar, a post-graduate of Punjab University, who immigrated in 1990 to Montreal with her husband and daughters.

*She said, “The worst thing that could have happened was that the government did not recognize our degrees. This became a positive thing, however, as it inspired us to create our own opportunities.”*

While Manishi and her husband were looking for childcare for their children, they realized there was nothing suitable and bilingual. Since they speak 5 languages, they felt that the least they could do for their daughters was to offer them bilingual daycare. So, Kinderville came into being.

The group runs many daycare centres and private schools in Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, U.S.A. and the United Arab Emirates, employing 400 professionals. Kinderville has ranked in Canada’s Top 100 Companies in *Profit Magazine*.

Manishi, like Cindy, drew on her own experience, as many women do, to start a business that actually filled a vacuum she saw in society. She offered the following advice:

*“If you believe in something, and you have principles, stick by them. Being brown may give you your own set of problems, but counteract that with your own brilliant performance. Give the best of yourself in whatever you’ve chosen to do. Don’t water down your ideals, stand by them....”*

Manishi has been honoured as one of the 100 most powerful women in Canada by the Women's Executive Network, and by the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivy School of Business.

In 2006, the Government of Ontario passed the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act, and subsequently established the office of the Fairness Commissioner, led by my former colleague, the Honourable Jean Augustine. The office assesses the registration practices of certain regulated professions.

The federal and provincial governments recently signed the new Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications, so that foreign-trained workers who submit an application to be licensed, or registered to work in certain fields, will be advised within one year whether their qualifications will be recognized. This agreement is linked to the federal government's establishment of the foreign credentials referral office.

All of this points to a growing awareness, in the different levels of government, of the need to address the barriers facing ITPs, but much more needs to be done if we are really going to take full advantage of all the skills ITPs have to offer. The major problem remains that, employers and governments often don't see the invisible assets that ITPs bring with them to Canada which cannot be put on paper.

Increasingly, we are seeing success by first generation immigrant women, such as Dr. Indira V. Samarasekera, the President of the University of Alberta. Indira is from Sri Lanka, where she received her first degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Ceylon, A brilliant engineer and university administrator, Indira is bringing a new kind of leadership to the University of Alberta.

What your organization is trying to achieve, with immigrant women, can be summed up in the words of Nelson Mandela:

*“There is no passion to be found in playing small, ... in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”*

Thank you.