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Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Speakout

Summary

In 1982, Jenny Ow, of the Australian Council of Churches, organised the first Immigrant Women’s Speakout. Opened by Franca Arena a New South Wales parliamentarian, the speakout attracted 200 women from around the country, with the aim of encouraging them to speak out loud about the problems that migrant women confronted. Similar occasions followed in other capital cities around the country.

Two very important organisations grew out of this occasion. One was the New South Wales Immigrant Women’s Speakout Association, the other was the New South Wales Immigrant Women’s Resource Centre, which was established in 1985.

Details

The importance of the speakouts was that they offered women from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds the opportunity to share stories and solidarity. They allowed women the opportunity of breaking the stoic silence and to challenge stereotypes. A good example of this comes from a Japanese woman who ‘spoke out’ in South Australia in 1983:

‘I’m from Japan and I hope to express what my sisters feel. A lot of Asian women are quiet, we look submissive, small and very weak. But we are not so! Quietness doesn’t mean weakness.

I would like you all to help erase this stereotypical or mythical image of Asian women. I hope I share this with women of other nationalities too. I’m Japanese, so they all think I’m a Geisha! I’m not a Geisha. I smoke and I drink and I ride a motor bike.

So please help and let’s work together at erasing this traditional or I should say stupid image of women.’

And another paints a very gloomy picture:

“Today a few of us women who had the courage and freedom to present ourselves came here today.

There are many women at home that didn’t have the courage to come here and are slaves under the harsh working conditions and the bonds of their husbands.’

Published resources

Conference Proceedings
Records and Proceedings of the Speakout for Immigrant and Refugee Women, 1983

Book Section
Double Disadvantage: Migrant and Aboriginal Women, Sawer, Marian, 1990

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