



the struggles of migrant women activists. an exhibition at the immigration museum

THE exhibition *Trailblazers: Migrant Women Activists* – developed by the Immigration Museum and the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne, together with the Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health and the Immigrant Women Domestic Violence Service – was held in the Immigration Museum in Melbourne between 8 March and 27 July this year. The Museum, steeped in Victoria’s multicultural history, which was shaped by the many and diverse experience of immigration from the 1800s to the present day, pays a timely tribute to the efforts spent over the past thirty years by women migrants in their struggle to attain progress in women’s health issues, family planning, child care, and protection against domestic violence.

Swept up in the aggressive and progressive women’s movement with the 1975 Australia-wide celebration of International Women’s Day, these problems were perceived as being a part of the greater feminist push within the political and industrial arenas. However, migrant women’s services did not receive attention until the landmark findings of the 1978 Galbally Report which marked the beginning of the government’s acknowledgement of the specific problems faced by migrant women.

The exhibition’s text panels illustrated the context of migrant women’s achievements over three decades through the often stark poignancy of newspaper articles, photographs, documents, leaflets and an abridged ABC Four Corners

documentary of 1976 on the plight of migrant women in Melbourne’s factories that was made in response to the report “But I wouldn’t want my wife to work here...”.

Italian migrant women’s groups and activists figured extensively throughout the exhibition, alongside other migrant women’s rights activists from many other nationalities. The exhibition recorded the work of the first community organisations to provide welfare services specifically targeted at migrant women, such as Co.As.It., which has been catering for the welfare needs of Italian migrants since 1967. Co.As.It. was not only the first ‘ethnic’ service to establish a women’s refuge for migrant women escaping domestic violence but it was amongst the first community based organizations to provide child

care for working migrant families. The FILEF Women's Group, an activist group based in Melbourne, and the Working Women's Centre also played an important role in lobbying government and unions for improvement in services to migrant women.

The exhibition showcased the 1976 multilingual Working Women's Charter, which recognized migrant women's needs in the workplace and insisted on equal rights and equal participation at work, in unions and in society at large. The WICH initiative, launched in 1977, was the first to provide education programs on women's health and contraception through factory visits. The Anne Sgro Children's Centre, founded in

1984, was the first child care centre to be jointly established by government, industry, community and union support.

Even though today there are strict workplace health and safety regulations, the issue of exploitation of newly arrived migrants, especially women, continues as it did thirty years ago. Thirty years ago the plight of migrant women was compounded by communication and cultural issues, such as the language barrier and the women's own reluctance to talk about their problems, especially those that are from more conservative cultures and backgrounds.

It is important that we are aware of the historical genesis of the present, both so as not

to take for granted the progress made, but also to be conscious of the recurrence of old problems in new forms and changed circumstances. *Trailblazers* fostered just this awareness, while also alerting us to the challenges faced by migrant women in a future likely to be characterised by an increasingly conservative atmosphere.

One of the principal objectives of this exhibition was a reminder to remain vigilant to forms of discrimination, racism and disrespect, especially in periods characterised by regressive social and economic trends.

Valeria Bianchin