

# Battling racism

By BARR JOY  
Special to the Beaver

**A**n upsurge of Asian refugees that brings with it the seeds of racism has "a strong relevance" for Oakville and Halton residents, claimed the managing director of the Halton Multicultural Council.

At Thursday's meeting sponsored by the Women's Information and Support Centre of Halton, Meral Kesbi said Asians are more likely to be the targets of racism because of the differences in language, customs and even religion they bring with them.

"It brings in an added dimension to multiculturalism," she said. "Whereas traditionally immigration has come from Europe — especially Great Britain — now the Asia-born from countries like Hong Kong and Sri Lanka have been rapidly increasing over the past five years."

Because Asians "come from a different perspective," racism has raised its ugly head in Halton. Kesbi noted the "season" in White Oaks High School where 30% of students come from different countries. She said fights have broken out between various ethnic groups and the Heritage Fair has tried to recruit students.

To counteract this, the Halton Board of Education has linked up with a worker of the Council's Race Relations Committee to try to "bridge the gap" and to help immigrant students adjust to their new school system.

However, the greatest threat of the Council focuses on assisting the 6,189 immigrants who came to Halton between 1988 and 1992 (as well as those who came after those latest figures were published). At least half of them were between 30 and 39 years of age and, according to the statistics, women outnumbered men. (However, Kesbi was unable to find out if female children were included in the figures.)

Of all the immigrants coming straight from their own countries to Halton, about 60% were able to communicate in English while the rest could speak neither English nor French.

Why did they come to Halton? Kesbi said she asked this question of some newcomers.

"They said they told the immigration officer what type of place they had aspired — maybe not too crowded but close to a large centre and with a nice



Meral Kesbi with map showing immigration trends. (Photo by Jeff Thomson)

family environment. The officer said 'Oh, that's Oakville! You'll love it.'

And so they came and, with the Council's help, got work, found housing and enrolled their children in schools. But, because they were "different," they were often treated in patronizing and even cruel fashion, as a video shown at the meeting illustrated.

After watching it, Grace Pereira said she could well relate to the woman of Indian origin who wept on screen when she remembered her cruel treatment of her younger sister who had fallen and hurt herself. She had blamed her bleeding, sobbing sister with "Get up! People are looking at us. They'll think all Indians behave this way."

**INTERNAL TORMENT**  
Pereira, whose parents came from the Azores, said she, too, was embarrassed to be "different" and had gone through an "internal torment" striving to fit into an established Canadian.

At the Oakville school she attended, she said she had been taken out of regular classes and enrolled in the English as a Second Language curriculum, even though her grades had been good.

"I don't know why I was, except maybe because my first name," she said, "being misheard for your talent just doesn't work."

The second part of the video followed a young woman's struggle for self-dignity and independence in the face of racism. Of South Asian parents, she felt "marginalized" by the racism

remarks and actions of others who dismissed her heritage as off-handedly. She wanted to fight back. So she began wearing her Indian sari to school in "symbolic protest," spoke her own language whenever she wanted to, talked about her demanding experiences with others and took part in community activities to find out if others had had the same experiences. They had. She concluded that immigrant women should hold their heads high, re-capture their self-esteem and stand together for mutual support.

**Following the video, Kesbi reported** that the children of immigrant parents who "are trying desperately to become part of the community," have a difficult time of it, torn as they are between mismatched traditions of their parents and the (often) conflicting lifestyles of a modern world.

For instance, while young Canadian women often face no problem accepting divorce as the end to an unhappy marriage, many immigrant women regard it as undesirable. Even if allowed by their husbands, a very few may leave briefly and live in a shelter but the need for familiar surroundings often forces them home again.

"Besides, they have a completely different understanding of their role within the family than we do," said Kesbi. "Still, a lot of research work needs to be done for abused immigrant women but, unfortunately, the funding isn't there."

Ties to the homeland can sometimes alienate Canadians. For instance, one woman in the meeting recounted her Croatian friend's insistence on her child marrying a Croatian.

"I thought: What's the matter with us (Canadians)?"

But Kesbi pointed out that the mother's concern probably revolved on her ability to converse and share friends with her child's mate and even on the willingness of that mate to care for her in her old age. In short, a Canadian might not be as comfortable as a Croatian-in-law.

1994- Meral Kesbi, Executive Director, Halton Multicultural Council, discusses emerging immigration trends in the Region of Halton.

30<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary

Halton  
Multicultural Council