

## **Solidarity Symposium: Understanding Oppression-Re-imagining a New World**

### **Opening Words – Doris Rajan, Director of Social Development, IRIS**

While it is so exciting to see you all here today – we are aware of why we are here. It is because many people in this world have really, really difficult lives. And many of you here today know this, live this and have been working in so many creative, thoughtful, logical ways -- to change this.

But yet – little seems to change – in fact life for many is getting worse. We keep working hard to try and figure out what we can do. We worked at the community level but there never seems to be enough money or resources to make notable improvements. We talk to governments, write policy papers – do research to prove that there are even problems – although there is no doubt in the minds of people who live this!

And even when we do good work, which is often, it doesn't seem to result in actual 'systemic' change, that is the statistics on violence against women, poverty levels, inadequate housing etc. don't seem to go down.

Many of us in this room know that after a three-year project, it ends and we go back to asking ourselves - What can we do? What can we do to actually change the story of pain?

The pain of hunger and loneliness. The pain of living in broken down homes. The pain of never having enough money. The pain of being hated and not knowing why. The pain of not knowing where our anger comes from and the destruction that anger rages through our lives. The pain of being abused and the pain of fear. And worst of all - the pain of hopelessness.

It also seems so basic. Everyone wants to be able to know where their next meal is coming from. Everyone wants to live in a home where they don't worry about bugs, or mold or neighbours with guns. We all want our kids to be safe. How about a job? And some real money to give us this adequate life. Once we get these basic things, we want to be valued, respected and doing something meaningful.

And this room is full of fighters – it was intentional. We invited people who work for change everyday and/or live and fight through oppression – every day. Who go out and gather stories. Stories to show those who make decisions that things aren't right. We are constantly telling those who hold power that they need to truly understand how many people live in order for them to make things right.

But what happened to me and many people I know – we were starting to get tired. Tired of things not changing and tired of doing the same work for years, with little change. So, we go back to “*what can we do that will result in actual, sustainable change?*”

First - we started asking but who is this “we”? In my own story, I worked hard with the dominant, mainstream population and their systems – trying to explain oppression. But the whole idea of oppression was complex. Slowly I saw each marginalize group break away to work on their own to fight this. I was lucky because as a consultant, I was able to work with just racialized groups or migrant groups or people with disabilities or Indigenous peoples → always with a women’s and LGBT-Q perspective and intersection - particularly Trans women. Each of these groups were grappling with new strategies and approaches to addressing the “*what can we do to stop the pain*” question.

And I seemed to naturally land with the marginalized amongst the marginalized – and although I am not so thrilled with the term ‘marginalized’ all we mean here is those groups who face barriers, obstacles to getting all those basic things we all need and want.

Working in the area of violence and usually violence against women – I would work with women with disabilities but found women who have been psychiatrized or who live with the label of an intellectual disability – didn’t seem to be supported to participate in the work – thus their issues were often not at the table.

Or, I was working with newcomer, immigrant groups and yet the issues of refugees and/or people who have precarious immigration status – many who have fled from horrific situations– also were not at the table.

And well with Indigenous women and people at these anti-violence tables – they simply were just not there or if they were it felt tokenized as there was no reflection of the diversity within and across nations and locations.

These are the ‘marginalized of the marginalized’ - power operates even within oppressed groups.

So, these groups aren’t at the table - Yet these are the same groups that experience the highest rates of violence, again particularly women.

And violence is birthed from poverty and oppression.

So that’s the ‘we’! That is the we here today.

Since the fall of 2015 IRIS – the Institutes for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society has been working on a project entitled: ***Working Together: Combating Structural Violence against Indigenous, Racialized, Migrant Women and Women Labeled with Intellectual and Psychiatric Disabilities***

Plus: we are also working in the city of Toronto on a pilot project to address housing precarity issues for these very same populations – people with intellectual and mental health disabilities, Indigenous, racialized and refugee communities.

Our local teams are here today – co-hosting and welcoming you to this event. If you are able and willing, please raise your hand and stand up when you hear your organization:

- Warriors Against Violence – Vancouver, B.C.
- Inland Refugee Society of B.C. - Vancouver, BC
- Saint John Human Development Council - Saint John
- Inclusion Regina – Regina
- Riverdale Immigrant Women’s Centre
- Sistering
- The Empowerment Council
- Vasantham – Tamil Wellness Centre
- Across Boundaries - An Ethno-Racial Mental Health Centre – Toronto
- Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodations
- Native Women's Resource Centre – Toronto

And some people who have been involved in this work were invited because they are strong individual advocates connected to so many important groups:

- Samantha Gregory
- Patty Musgrave
- Miranda Haus
- Patience Umereweneza
- Michele Macaulay

And the incredible and inspirational - Susana Deranger!

Thank you for participating in the making of this marginalized peoples’ solidarity movement – I know its not always easy!

There has been a lot of activity across this country with Indigenous, racialized, refugee and people with intellectual and mental health disabilities coming together through these projects.

We focus on grassroots service providers – that is the front-line – the women and men – usually with lived experience themselves - who support individuals who live hard lives - every single day.

For those managers, academics, researchers, policy people – us - we have good hearts but working with the grassroots – the front-line is key to the learning – the learning of how to do this work. Learning how to listen. It has been so amazing and powerful doing that these past few years.

It is the only way we can really understand because we are so different – yet living through oppression means we also share many commonalities. Part of today is untangling this – that is, what does each group experience – how is it different and how is it the same.

Another goal of today is to begin to identify what we can do to make real change happen. We keep fighting to be let 'in'. Gain access 'to'. But what do we want to be let in to? What are we trying to gain access to? Maybe we want in to a system that was never really built with many of us in mind.

So, here's a challenge for us. The 'system' gives us the parameters to work within.

### **Sandbox picture up**

I think we might be stuck playing in a designated sandbox. But there is a whole park out there! So today is one of many opportunities to explore that park! Let's PLAY!