



Back to Toronto writing workshop gives immigrant women a voice

## Toronto writing workshop gives immigrant women a voice

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In Althea Prince's class, students – immigrant women of all ages – are told to check the daily hustle and bustle of their new lives at the door.

This is a refuge where they are encouraged to pause and think, and most important, find a voice they don't usually have in their newly adopted homeland, said Prince, the writer-in-residence at [Newcomer Women's Services Toronto](#).

Prince's job is to motivate immigrant women to build self-esteem and confidence by voicing their feelings and thoughts through the written word in the six-week writing workshop launched in February.

"It is important for them to find their voice within," said Prince, a published novelist and Ryerson University sociology professor. "Immigrants' confidence is shaken when moving to a new place. The voice within the writing helps them feel acknowledged."

The unique program is the brainchild of Newcomer Women's executive director Maya Roy, who spotted the need to help immigrant women connect with each other and find time for creative pursuits.

Many newcomer women are sponsored to Canada by their spouses and often feel isolated by the overwhelming migration experience, said Roy.

When Roy first brought up the idea of the writing workshops last year, she was met with ridicule from immigrant women themselves, who doubted their ability in both writing and English.

But a four-week pilot was so well-received that it motivated participants to share their personal stories – and beloved recipes – in a soon-to-be-published cookbook, *Listening to Ourselves: Stories About Life*, to be launched at the Pape Ave. public library April 4.

Thanks to a \$7,500 Ontario Arts Council grant, the writing workshops are now a regular program and have a six-week waiting list.

In a recent session, participants started with a group meditation before their "creative visualization" routine.

"Imagine what it feels like with rain on your face," Prince said to the dozen participants in a crowded back room at Newcomer Women's Danforth Ave. office. "Think about it and make some notes about it. Remember not to erase anything. Keep the pen moving."

The women – all from different parts of the world – quickly scribbled on note pads and loose paper.

Participants are asked to tell stories based on objects they find in the classroom, such as flowers, baby dolls and bookends, or sometimes about strangers they see on a streetcar. Students sometimes jot down their thoughts in their mother tongue before translating them into English.

"I found a baby doll and it reminds me of the doll that I got during wartime in Turkey in 1974," said Havva Gizmen, a school lunch supervisor, who settled in Toronto with her family from Cyprus a decade ago.

"It was such a treasure that I kept it in the original box. It reminds me of my childhood memories with my parents and my brother. It is nice to share my stories with the class."

Some women said they have found "therapeutic value" in writing.

"So many things are happening around you and the world. You feel something is not right but nobody is going to hear you," said Sumati Bhala, a university lecturer from India, who joined her husband in Toronto in October.



Immigrant women listen, share and write down personal experiences during a writing workshop launched by Newcomer Women's Services Toronto.

TANNIS TOOHEY/TORONTO STAR

"But when you pen down your thoughts, it is out of you, out of your system."