

WOMEN, from page 11.

Fighting for their rights is a new experience for most Chilean women in Canada. Previous to the Allende government in Chile, the status of women was implemented through social doctrine and was not a separate issue.

The Chilean government was interested in productivity and encouraged women to work. They were given four months pregnancy leave with pay. Working mothers had a free hour daily to nurse their children and employers of more than 20 women provided free daycare.

"Chilean women are amazed at all the women's groups and their political activity in Canada," say members of the Chilean Women's Commission in Vancouver. "Before the coup, women in Chile never had to organize for their rights. Now it is hard."

The current Chilean government has cut back on all programs and legislation for women. There is regression now where once women balanced men in the professions, were active in community organization and in all levels of political life.

In Chile, women traditionally retain their maiden names after marriage. Coming to Canada, they submit to bureaucratic pressure to adopt their husband's names. Only in rare cases do Chilean women who speak English well insist on Social Security numbers and medical plans in their own names.

Coming from a reign of terror in Chile, the women refugees are grateful to be in Canada, but they find it a little cold and unfriendly. They have been meeting with Vancouver women's groups to make the transition easier.

Native Women Are Divided

In British Columbia there are several native women's groups with numerous chapters throughout the province. The only feminist Indian women's organization is the Ad Hoc Committee on Indian Rights for Indian Women. It was set up three years ago to advise native women about their rights under the Indian Act.

"The native women are divided," says Ms. Phyllis Lavallee, Assistant Executive Director RSW for the Vancouver Indian Centre. "We can't seem to get together because some are status Indians and others are not."

The native women who marry non-Indian men lose their rights to live on reserve and their children band inheritance rights. They lose their birthrights as Indians.

"When I got married, the Department of Indian Affairs handed me a piece of paper to sign," says Ms. Cantryn, Executive Director of VIC. "In those days you did what they said. There was no explanation. We didn't find out what it meant until it was too late."

"Today I would simply refuse to sign the paper," she says. "We know we will not be recognized by the government but it hurts to be banished by your own people. You can't help who you fall in love with."

Currently the women's movement is quite concerned with marital property laws. Ms. Carol Nessman, a VIC counsellor, is matter-of-fact about it. "When you are poor, there is no property to divide up and you can't afford a divorce. We just separate and live common-law with someone else."

What is the basic problem for native women, whether they live on or off the reserve, whether they are status or non-status Indians? "Everything," says Ms. Vivian Ignace, a VIC aid. "Keeping the family together, furnishing your home, nutrition

are all a problem if you don't have enough money."

Family responsibility usually falls on the native woman. This is not so much because of the motherhood role but because many of them are single parents. "Mothers help one another," says Ms. Cantryn. "We take care of each other's children. You'll never find an orphan among us."

These days, some of the young native women with ambition and some advantages eventually become nurses, teachers or social workers. But the majority drop out of school by grade 10 and end up on welfare "on the streets".

Contrast this to a past in which many coastal tribes in B.C. had a matriarchal tradition. The women owned the wealth each band as well as its culture. The women were the nobility.

"Some young women are more eager to become chiefs than the young men," says Ms. Nessman. "Today, the men are the figureheads but the women do all the politicking." (Out of 188 Indian Chiefs B.C., 10 are women).

What is the major barrier between white and native women? "Many of us have no mobility," says Ms. Ignace. "Even if we could get around we are demoralized because we can't dress as well as white women."

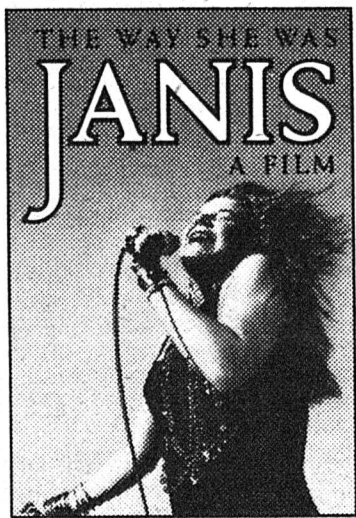
Another problem is the way white women view them. "The Indian woman is shy in public, soft-spoken. People think we are backward because we don't speak up. But we are vocal amongst our friends," she says.

There is a theory that native women's rights will follow from the settlement of Indian land claims. Until then, many of the B.C. bands are refusing government financial assistance. Some of the hardest hit will be the single parent women.

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