

"But Where Are You From, Originally?" Immigrant Women and Integration in the Maritimes

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of integration as a complex, multi-faceted and gendered phenomenon that is substantially different for men than for women. We explore how volunteer community involvement provides immigrant women with a safe opportunity to explore, train and get acquainted with Canadian society, as this involvement serves as a means and a vehicle for immigrant women to break the isolation, make friends, enact citizenship through their activism for social change and even, sometimes, find employment. We also discuss reduced funding and its profoundly negative impact on the integration process of immigrant women into Canadian society.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine le processus d'intégration en tant que phénomène complexe, à plusieurs facettes et faisant l'équilibre entre les sexes qui est considérablement différent pour les hommes et pour les femmes. Nous explorons comment l'engagement volontaire de la communauté fournit aux immigrantes une occasion où elles peuvent en toute sécurité explorer, apprendre, et se familiariser avec la société canadienne, étant donné que cet engagement sert de moyen et de véhicule aux immigrantes de briser l'isolement, de se faire des amis, de promulguer la citoyenneté par leur activisme pour le changement social et même parfois pour se trouver un emploi. Nous discutons aussi des compressions budgétaires et de leur impact profondément négatif dans le processus d'intégration des immigrantes dans la société canadienne.

INTRODUCTION¹

The majority of Canada's immigrants came after World War Two (Kubat 1993). Until 1962 Canadian immigration policies were racist, and favoured European groups by systematically creating barriers for non-European immigrants (Kubat 1993; Agnew 1996). In 1967 immigration policy-makers removed these overt racial biases and established more equitable criteria that permitted potential immigrants who met the admission requirements "regardless of nationality and country of origin" to enter the country (Agnew 1996, 113). As a result, many people from non-European countries have immigrated to Canada. But although racial barriers have been removed, the current immigration point system, created in the 1960s, contains an inherent class bias that favours middle and upper-middle class immigrants.

Regardless of class or ethnic background, all immigrants undergo a process of settlement and integration. Although often taken for granted,

integration is a complex and multi-faceted process. For example, while the host society expects newcomers to "integrate," newcomers often resist total integration and seek to preserve aspects of the "old culture," thereby creating new ethnicities (Tastsoglou 1997). Such efforts and resistance can create tension and conflict in immigrant families as well as between immigrants and society at large (Miedema and Wachholz 1998; James 1995; Ng 1990; Nyakbwa and Harvey 1990; Miedema and Nason-Clark 1989). In this paper we examine the importance of community involvement in the integration process for forty immigrant women who recently arrived in the Maritimes.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK Immigrant Women

The term "immigrant woman" is a bifurcated one that describes legal as well as social status. An immigrant woman is a person who has acquired permanent residency status in Canada.

This status provides her with many of the same rights as Canadian citizens. But her social status is another thing entirely. As Ng and Estable (1987) observe, the term "immigrant woman" is socially constructed and rooted in the economic and legal processes of our society which in turn reflect sexist, racist and class biases. The common sense usage of "immigrant woman" generally refers to women of colour; it includes women from southern Europe and developing countries, women who do not speak English well or who speak it with an accent other than British or American, and women who retain lower positions in the occupational hierarchy (Ng and Estable 1987; Ng 1990, 185; Szekely 1990,127). It is important to recognize, however, that in the Maritimes many immigrant women are white, and regardless of their ethnic background, may have a good grasp of the English language. Here, however, we wish to focus on immigrant women who meet the following two requirements: (a) they have permanent resident status and (b) they are members of "visible minorities" or do not speak English well² or speak it with an accent other than British, American or Australian.

Integration

Taking into account previous theoretical debates and empirical findings, Driedger and Halli (1996), and Driedger (1996), attempted to develop an integration model that is not linear and static and that takes into account circumstances of individuals, the role of ethnic groups and the demands of the larger society. By combining a "conformity-pluralism continuum with a voluntary-involuntary continuum," Driedger and Halli's model for examining race and conflict allows for various degrees of integration among people from divergent ethnic groups.

Michel Page (1992) describes three types of (primarily cultural) integration: the multiple-cultural areas, the common-cultural areas and the private-public areas. In the first instance, various ethnic groups "occupy a suitable portion of the cultural area left vacant by the majority ethnic culture" (37-38). In the case of "common-cultural areas," minority ethnic groups do not occupy

separate areas; rather, the minority and majority groups occupy the entire space. Regarding "private-public areas," Page argues that no particular ethnic group can enjoy protection or autonomy.

By way of illustration, Page considers language instruction among newcomers. In a society based on "multiple-cultural areas," he suggests, ancestral languages would be taught as an extra-curricular subject and used largely to foster identity among the members of the ethnic group. In a society based on "common-cultural areas," Page argues, ethnic groups would still be taught their mother tongue but the purpose of the program would be not to create identity but to affirm the values of the group in question. Other students would be encouraged to learn the ethnic language in order to help bridge the cultural gaps. In a society based on "private-public areas," ancestral languages are seen as a private issue and can only be used as a facilitator to increase access to the educational system for minority children. As Page's development of these three models suggests, integration is not a linear process and it is greatly influenced by the position of various ethnic groups in society, the location and wishes of individuals, and the structure of institutions.

Nevertheless, Page and Driedger and Halli (1996) fall into a reductionist trap by ignoring gender. Problems of integration encountered by male immigrants are assumed to represent universal problems of immigrants. Yet significant evidence exists to suggest that the integration process is considerably different for women than for men. Immigrant women frequently have to overcome particularly formidable barriers that men do not. Ralston's (1988) exploratory study focuses on the lived experience of South Asian immigrant women in Halifax. Many of these women worked at home looking after their families, felt isolated, and had few friends. Those in the paid workforce experienced a "double burden" of work and family. Besides traditional family responsibilities, these women were also responsible for the retention of ethnic identity within their families.

Nyabwya and Harvey (1990) support Ralston's findings regarding the enormous stress

that immigrant women endure. For example, while appropriate employment is often key to being a successful immigrant, many immigrant women are not able to secure that type of employment (Ng 1981; Barndt et al 1982; Miedema and Nason-Clark 1989; Miedema and Wachholz 1998). Furthermore, changing family dynamics and familial conflicts regarding values occasioned by the migration experience can create much stress. In addition, many non-white immigrants in Canada experience systemic racism (Bolaria and Li 1988; Calliste 1989; Henry 1994; James 1995; Miedema and Nason-Clark 1989; Satzewich 1992). And if immigrant women are doubly disadvantaged because of their gender and status, black immigrant women suffer a triple jeopardy since they must also face the pervasive racism of Canadian society. In terms of adaptation, "their social networks are deficient, their life satisfaction is low, and they suffer from emotional isolation" (Nyakbwa and Harvey 1990, 138).

Ruble and Shaw's (1991) study suggests that the lack of English/French language skills, day-care and social mobility hinder immigrant women's integration into Canadian society. Their social and leisure activities were also negatively affected, thereby compromising the women's overall well-being. As a result, many immigrant women become isolated.

Djao and Ng (1987) argue that immigrant women's isolation, although frequently constructed as a psychological problem, is a sociological one. They argue that isolation is structurally created by such factors as the organization of neighbourhoods, the nature of housework, the climate, centralized conditions of shopping and the gender segregation of the labour market. In addition, they argue, governmental policies exacerbate the isolation of immigrant women by rendering them legally dependent on their spouses.

While empirical and feminist studies successfully avoid the reductionist trap, they either do not engage the discourse of integration or they take "integration" as a concept for granted. While the anti-racist literature better addresses the concept of integration, the gender dimension is absent. Small (1994), for example, recognizes the

importance of various kinds of integration (for example, non-segregation, interaction, harmony), but he conceives of integration primarily as "racialized parity;" that is, a process of access to and/or ownership of resources. In an effort to integrate feminist and anti-racist perspectives, we suggest there is value in seeing integration as a process of acquiring "racialized and gender parity." Such a yardstick helps us assess the integration process of the women in our study.

While integration thus conceived operates clearly on a group or macrosociological level, we have adopted in our larger research project³ a methodologically individualist approach which focuses on individual immigrant women's experiences, because it is on that level that we can gain an understanding of the concrete processes and barriers to integration as they are identified by the individual immigrant women, as well as their resistances or strategies in overcoming them, both as individuals and in groups. We have explored elsewhere whether immigrant women's economic participation is commensurate with their educational qualifications and prior work experience. In this paper we examine our subjects' perceptions and experiences of integration.

We avoided on purpose asking our participants what integration meant to them, and asked them instead about "adjustments" to Canadian society. The participants readily discussed their experiences creating a "home" for themselves in Canada, what helped them, what did not, and why. Rather than attempt to generalize about all immigrant women in the Maritimes, here we merely aim to explore the key themes that immigrant women themselves identified while speaking of integration through community involvement. We focus on community involvement because the immigrant women themselves emphasize its importance to their resettlement in Canada. Other important dimensions and meanings of integration, such as economic or labour force integration and political integration, lie outside the scope of this paper.

RESEARCH METHOD

The larger study on which this paper is based was carried out during the winter and spring of 1998 in two Maritime cities. Two research assistants conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with forty immigrant women. Interviews were taped, transcribed verbatim and the qualitative analysis program QSR NUD*IST was used to assist in the later phase of the data analysis. Participants were identified through a snowball sampling method. Two screening devices were used to generate our participants. First, to ensure that we were making appropriate comparisons, we set certain criteria that our participants had to meet, mainly that such candidates should be immigrant (as defined above) women, having migrated to Canada after the age of sixteen, and having lived in Canada for at least five years. Second, to capture all the variations of the same phenomenon (that is, the immigrant experience), we aimed to select as geographically heterogeneous a group of individuals as possible. In addition, we aimed at heterogeneity in terms of the extent of organizational participation but we had great difficulty in finding individuals who were "non-involved." Hence, we believe that we have an over-representation of women who were active⁴ in community organizing. One explanation for our difficulty may be that people are less available to researchers unless they participate in a group. After the interviews were analyzed the authors held information-sharing sessions with the participants and other interested women in different locations. Each of these sessions were very well attended.

Profile of Participants

The average age of the women who participated in this research was 46 years. Of the 40 women, 29 (73 percent) were married, 7 (17 percent) were divorced, 2 (5 percent) were widowed, and 2 (5 percent) were single. The average duration of the marriage of the currently married women was 19 years. Five (12 percent) women did not have children. For the women who did, the average number of children was 3. The

mean age of the children was 21 years.

Of the 40 women, 17 (42 percent) worked full-time and 11 (28 percent) worked part-time. Twelve women (30 percent) did not work outside the home. Of the spouses, 19 (65 percent) worked full-time, 3 (10 percent) worked part-time and 7 (24 percent) did not work outside the home (the majority was retired). For those 37 participants who reported it, the average family income was \$58,000; 7 (19 percent) had family incomes under \$20,000, 11 (30 percent) between \$20,000 and \$40,000 annually; 5 (14 percent) between \$40,000 and \$60,000 annually, 7 (19 percent) under \$80,000, and 7 others (19 percent) over \$80,000 per year.

The majority (68 percent or 27) of the women indicated that they had a religious affiliation (no questions about religiosity were asked). The women and their spouses had a high overall educational attainment: 11 (28 percent) of the women had a high school diploma or less; 15 (37 percent) had finished an undergraduate degree; 10 (25 percent) had completed a post graduate degree; and 4 (10 percent) had completed a medical degree or PhD. The spouses' educational attainment was even higher: only 5 (17 percent) had a high school or less education; 5 (17 percent) had completed an undergraduate degree; 6 (21 percent) completed a Master's Degree; and 13 (45 percent) had a PhD or medical degree. On average, the women came to Canada 16 years ago. Of the 40 women, 29 (73 percent) indicated that they spoke English adequately or fluently, and only 2 (five percent) indicated that their English language skills were non-existent upon arrival; 2 (5 percent) women were fluent in French upon arrival and 6 (15 percent) women were able to speak some French upon arrival. Of the 40 women 14 were Caucasian and 26 belonged to visible minority groups. We do not discuss the ethnic backgrounds of these women in greater detail in order to protect their identity.

Thus, in summary, the immigrant women who participated in this research were highly educated, with highly educated spouses and with higher than average family incomes. However, we want to point out that the women were not selected on the basis of their socio-demographic

characteristics (though an effort was made to include women from as many diverse cultural backgrounds and origins as possible). The primary criterion for inclusion was being an immigrant woman (as previously defined) who had lived in Canada for at least five years.

THE FINDINGS

Community Involvement

The women in this study had very diverse community involvements. Some women were members of only one group, others were involved in multiple groups. Group membership was dynamic not static; it changed depending on the needs of the women. For example, shortly after arrival, some women decided to become involved in ethnic-specific or multicultural groups and once their children entered school, they became involved with organizations such as home and school associations. Some women's children had life-time health or developmental problems and the women got involved with organizations that cater to the needs of these children. In short, group membership was fluid and at times reflected the integration stages the women were at, while at other times it reflected issues in their personal lives.

Many women were involved with their faith communities and remained so over the years. Besides ethnic-specific, multicultural groups and faith communities, the women were also involved in political, civic, cultural and women's organizations, such as home and school associations, art galleries, the Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), hospitals, community kitchens, the Kidney Foundation, Aboriginal women's issues, groups for children with disabilities, the Beijing Co-ordinating Committee, social justice groups and the Girl Guides. This list is not exhaustive, but does indicate the breadth of immigrant women's involvement.

Breaking the Isolation

For many research participants, involvement in community activities had the simple goal of "getting out of the house" and breaking the

isolation. As one woman put it: "I like to see people and talk to them. It is good to get out of the house too anyway, otherwise, the cooking and cleaning all the time and, especially when the kids were small..." (A33). Another woman stated that involvement had "...given me a lot of support. Since I am away from my family, I have been isolated. It relieves that isolation" (A1). Involvement has provided her with friends and a "family." Making friends seems to be a very important step towards social integration. Another woman stated that "I know through [volunteering] so many people. I enjoy to know many people" (A8). One woman explained that involvement:

...gives you a sense of fulfilment. It is social. Here nobody knew us and I used to feel sort of, kind of lonely and isolated a lot. Meeting people and when people recognize you it gives you a sort to "attached" feeling. (A32)

Organizing and involvement with organizations played an important role in alleviating the inevitable loneliness and isolation that is often part of immigrant women's lives. One woman stated that in order not to be isolated you have to get involved. She felt that integration is "a process that we have to make ourselves, it does not come to us, we have to go, do it. We have to make it" (A10).

One woman who was involved with an ethnic-specific cultural group drew strength from that involvement. She was grappling with culture shock. Initially she felt that her problems were personal but because of the interaction with a culturally specific association, she realized that her problems were not personal but "adjustment problems." She stated that integration was a difficult and long process. However, the cultural association with which she was involved allowed her to meet people with similar backgrounds. She felt that making friends made integration more bearable (A23).

One woman referred to her ethnic specific group as her "comfort zone:" "I do not have to be somebody else. I feel free because it's a familiar

area and I am dealing with my own people that have the same background as me and we speak the same language" (A11). Although few women described involvement with ethnic - specific groups in these terms, many seemed to feel that ethnic communities provided comfort and familiarity.

Although the majority of the women seemed to have positive experiences with community involvement, not every participant did. One woman was not comfortable in "mainstream" groups. She enjoyed being involved with her ethnic specific group as well as with multicultural groups. But "[w]hen you're doing stuff with mainstream it takes a lot of energy just to be there..." (A21). She was involved with a parent teacher group but did not enjoy it because:

[I was] the only [minority] person on the committee...the reception...the reception was not great. I tended to feel excluded...I was there, I contributed but I did not feel that I was doing much. Some of those things I did because I knew, I would be the only person there representing my son....

(A21)

Activism and Citizenship

For some women involvement meant more than breaking the isolation, it was a venue for activism. One woman mentioned that anti-racism work has given her "a lot of satisfaction [because] you are doing something against it, instead of sitting at home and complaining about it" (A1). For other immigrant women involvement meant a desire to effect change in society. "I think personally, [activism] has been fulfilling as well because of other things. It's given me an avenue to channel...the passion that I have for wanting to change and it has given me some wonderful friends" (A35). Another immigrant woman has been very involved in all kinds of groups to create change in society. Reflecting back, she felt satisfied that her involvement had contributed to making Canadian society more multicultural and more accepting of visible minorities and immigrant women (A25).

Many of these women who organized in order to explicitly bring about social change felt that organizing was a sign of belonging. One woman felt that organizing her cultural community was an indication that "we are going to stay here, we are not going to go" (A27). She reflected back on those days as being "exciting." Some of the cultural events she organized were attended by hundreds of people. The people came to "know who we are and we had something to share with them and they appreciated it" (A27). Later on, however, she realized that cultural events do little to break down stereotypes and racism. Hence, she started to focus her energies on educating the community about systemic racism. Yet another participant felt that being an activist made her "feel at home because I became part of the community" (A22). In the words of a leading activist "I became a Canadian citizen by doing community work. A real Canadian citizen by doing community work" (A2).

Activism in a multicultural society has been a very positive experience for several participants. They felt that involvement with multicultural volunteer organizations helped them develop spiritually and intellectually. "I [had] never met somebody from Kuwait, Korea or Iraq or other countries" (A5). Others concurred with the idea that being involved in multicultural organizations was a very positive experience. One woman stated that she valued her friends who are "from places I would never have dreamed of" (A3). She felt that her exposure to people from many parts of the world was very positive for her and for her child. Another woman made the same comment; she felt that getting involved in multicultural organizations shaped "the way I think" and that being involved in many diverse groups had broadened her perspective on life (A35).

Negative responses also emerged. One participant who was active in a national women's organization felt that her voice was not heard (A14). The local branch of the national group received external funding to carry out activities. However, she felt that the group's mandate and the conditions for the funding made the group "very academic." It was composed mostly of women

working in universities who were able to take advantage of the funds. She noted:

I came from a grassroots background ... and the funding that was given was basically for women who were doing academics. So I did not get to go. Although I was happy to be involved because there were only two immigrant women involved. I felt we needed to have a voice there...Most women that were involved were professors and I was the only student and not even middle class.

(A14)

This participant brought the issue of race, class and silencing to the forefront of the group and it was discussed. She had felt marginalized by the experience, but at the same time "enriched" by the subsequent group discussion for which she was the facilitator. She now feels that women's issues are often very diverse and women have "different needs" that ought to be recognized, even though the overall structural problem of being discriminated on the basis of gender is the continuous thread that joins these women together.

A Long and Demanding Process

Some women felt that integration through community involvement did consume a large amount of time. One woman got involved with a multicultural organization shortly after her arrival in Canada. But after she had given birth to her children, she moved her volunteer efforts to mainstream groups, that is, schools, so she could be involved in the children's lives. These activities kept her involved with her children yet they also took away time from other interests. She explained: "it meant I wouldn't be able to study or I won't be able to, you know, it was always sacrificing my time" (A30). This woman's pattern of volunteering was not uncommon. Several women stated that they had gotten involved in mainstream groups, often school and parent groups, so they could be "on top" of their children's lives.

According to some participants,

community involvement is not only a demanding process, it also necessitates a strong personality. One woman felt a positive personal attitude was needed in order to integrate into Canadian society. When she immigrated to Canada, she knew that she had to spend a lot of time and energy in learning a new language. "So, my brain was saying, I am going to do in Rome what the Romans do." She felt that in order to adjust and integrate she had to be self-reliant. "If I were not independent, I wouldn't dare to come to Canada on my own" (A5).

Regardless of how integration through community involvement is attempted, regardless of what kind of personal attributes and conscious political choices these women bring to that process, what was clear from the interviews is that community involvement is a long process. Making new friends, learning the language, the idioms and the idiosyncrasies of a new society is a slow, emotional and time-consuming process. When involved in organizations the women felt that they learned to negotiate and understand various aspects of Canadian society. When asked what involvement has meant to them, one participant answered: "...well, I think, basically, you learn, you know, from everything. Sometimes you come home frustrated, but quite often I think, you learn and you learn to get along with people" (A4).

One woman anticipated that coming to Canada was a "piece of cake" because she had been politically active in the country of origin (A3). She quickly realized that it was not a "piece of cake." However, being involved in the immigrant women's community helped her feel at home and more adjusted. Another woman felt that political activism in Canada helped her integrate. She stated that she now feels Canadian because "now I feel, I have learned a lot of skill in this society..." (A2). Thus for many women in the study, community activism was a positive learning experience that aided their self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Economic Integration

For many immigrant women who participated in this research, economic integration was achieved to some degree - mainly through their

husband's employment (see participant profiles). The average annual family income levels of the research participants was \$57,838. But average incomes skew the picture of reality for many; 18 of the women in our study reported their annual family incomes to be under \$40,000 and out of these, 7 had annual incomes under \$20,000. Furthermore, being economically dependent on a husband may not constitute a real or secure level of economic integration.

For many women who had not reached economic integration or who wanted economic independence from their partners, volunteer activity was seen as a means to economic independence. Several women joined volunteer organizations to secure Canadian work experience so that they would be more marketable when looking for paid employment. In fact, for several women this was a fruitful strategy. Their volunteer work turned into short term employment contracts with the organizations for which they had volunteered. These short term contract jobs were mostly located in the "multicultural industry." Unfortunately, it appeared that such work experience was not easily transferrable to "mainstream" jobs. This difficulty cannot be explained by a lack of education since overall the research participants had high educational attainment. Many participants were frustrated by their inability to move from short term and poorly paid multicultural "industry" contracts to more secure and better paying long term employment.

Conclusion

Many of the women made it very clear that community involvement, and in particular activities in ethnic specific and multicultural groups, provided a degree of comfort, safety, familiarity, and an opportunity to share familiar language and cultural customs. The members of these groups knew from first-hand experience what it meant to move from one country to another, from one culture to another. For example, one may be able to find somebody who can speak the language from the country of origin; certain festivals will be observed. Despite the occasional problem, the

immigrant women in this study experienced a positive impact from community involvement on their integration process. In fact, most of the women stated that volunteering, organizing and involvement helped them make a home for themselves in Canadian society. Volunteer community involvement and organizations provide immigrant women with a safe place to explore, make friends, build networks, become politically active and learn how to navigate Canadian society.

In this paper, we have demonstrated the significant role community involvement plays in integration, regardless of the level of participation. For immigrant women, socializing in their communities (community involvement) is perhaps the most important avenue towards integration available to them. Ralston (1988), Nyakbwa and Harvey (1990) and Djao and Ng (1987) have accurately recognized the negative consequences that exist when the integration process is hindered. Furthermore, as Djao and Ng (1987) argue, isolation is a sociological problem and not a psychological one. This distinction is important because when isolation is considered to be psychological, federal government funding agencies may feel less responsibility toward immigrant women.

Currently, the federal government is dragging its feet when it comes to addressing the needs of immigrant women in particular, and Canadian women in general. The existence of many community organizations is in jeopardy because of funding cuts to ethnic specific, multicultural and women's groups. This may, in the long run, have severe implications for the integration process of immigrant women into Canadian society. Immigrant women contribute much to Canadian society, and therefore it is important that the Canadian government provide women with services to assist them in that integration process.

ENDNOTES

1. The project this paper is based on was funded by the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration (PCERII). Special thanks to research assistants Ruramisai Charumbira, Shannon Lemire and transcriber Vanessa Crosswell-Klettke.
2. Lack of a translation budget as well as the exploratory nature of this study did not allow us to specifically seek and interview women who did not speak any English at all. For similar reasons, we had no access to immigrant women who are exclusively French speakers. Our intuitive sense, however, is that their number is rather insignificant in the Maritimes.
3. This paper is based on a larger study that has as its objective the examination of immigrant women's organizing, be it in mainstream, multicultural or ethnic-specific groups in the Maritimes and the latter's relationship with integration.
4. The term "active" ranges from being an officer or on the executive of an organization to just being a member, occasionally participating in events or simply receiving services (Tastsoglou and Miedema, forthcoming).

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