

Thus, despite its considerable shortcomings, this work - or at least portions thereof - has value for those who seek to understand the issue of abortion in Canada.

M. Maureen Killoran
McMaster University

Immigrant Housewives in Canada: A Report. Roxana Ng and Judith Ramirez. *Toronto: Immigrant Women's Centre, 1981. Pp. 76.*

This modest little book packs quite a wallop, and should have considerable impact not only on the study of immigration in general and of immigrant women in particular, but also in the areas of social action and social policy. As well as adding a good deal to our knowledge of the daily lives of immigrant women, it pulls the rug out from under a number of the most cherished traditional assumptions about immigration and immigrants in Canada.

The conventional wisdom on immigration - which is reflected in nearly all the literature - is that people choose to immigrate to improve their material well-being. Until recently most studies have assumed that men and women were similarly affected by the process of immigration. Ng and Ramirez show that is simply not true for the women in their study (and, as a growing body of work suggests, is probably untrue for most immigrant women).¹

It was in part the stupidity of statements about immigrants' lives, caused by the malestream bias in the literature on immigrants, that impelled Ng and Ramirez (themselves immigrants) to undertake this report. Ramirez, a feminist community activist of some renown, was a co-founder of the Immigrant Women's Centre (a grass-roots self-help oriented resource centre) in Toronto in 1975. Frustrated by the lack of information on the needs and everyday lives of working class immigrant women, she and others carried out a series of 100 interviews with the women using

the centre during 1976. The project ran out of money and energy and nothing further was done with the interviews until 1979-80 when the idea was renewed and further interviews were done. (It was at this point that Ng, a recognized feminist researcher and doctoral candidate in Sociology at OISE, became involved). The women interviewed were housewives, mostly from Portuguese, Italian, or Spanish backgrounds, from rural or semi-rural areas in industrially underdeveloped countries. Their husbands worked here in skilled or semi-skilled blue collar jobs.

The report is divided into three major sections, the first of which is concerned with explaining the framework and methodology of the study. The second and longest section discusses the findings of the study in several chapters. The main concentration is on the changes in women's everyday lives and work caused by the immigration of the family into a money economy; changes in women's unpaid work (housework and family management work) inside the home; and women's paid work outside the home. A further chapter examines the effects of "institutionalized processes" (i.e., immigration policy, the segregated labour force) on these women's lives. Finally, the authors consider the negative and positive consequences of immigration for these immigrant women.

The methodology for this study was based on "the standpoint of women," that is, beginning from the everyday experiences of women, and locating those experiences in the context of control by outside interests (employers, the state and its agencies, men) over these women's lives. The method was developed by Dorothy Smith, with whom Ng has worked for a number of years. Not surprisingly, such an approach produces information and conclusions markedly different from those of conventional studies upon which much immigration and settlement policy is based. For example, many of immigrant women's problems are labelled as "cultural adjustment" issues - when in fact "culture" has very little to do with

it. Women's poverty, dead-end or no jobs, isolation, language needs, subordination, dependence and vulnerability to violence, cut across "cultures" and are not restricted to immigrants.²

Ng and Ramirez show that the situation of these immigrant women was actually made worse by immigrating. Their workload was increased while their resources were decreased. As a consequence they became dependent to a new extent and in new ways upon their husbands, thus increasing the inequality between husband and wife and rendering the women even more powerless.

How can their workloads increase and resources diminish, with access to modern conveniences and higher family incomes? Simply put, they lose access to womanpower. At home, women could cooperate to set the pace of their work, to share tasks, and to give each other material, social, and psychological support. Their daily lives were quite visible to each other. Often the men were gone for long periods of time, so the women could maintain their own community. In Canada, these women are isolated from each other. Each woman does her own work - shopping, cleaning, cooking, child-minding, whatever - in her own house. What goes on there is not on public display for other women to see, thus, not under the influence of other women. Each is truly on her own - other hands, heads and hearts are no longer within easy call. Here, the pace of her work is set by her husband's job schedule, by the location of services and institutions (shops, laundromats, bus lines, schools, banks). In the face of the new demands of the urban industrial setting, she needs more support, more resources, but gets less; she comes to depend more on her husband partly because he brings in the money (and now she is in a cash economy, money is how you survive in Canada) and partly because she has no one else to depend on close at hand.

As well as intensified physical workloads, women have intensified and diversified family management tasks in Canada. For example, they must "manage" the money (which is "his" not "theirs"), or what she gets of it, to cover all their expenses. If it does not stretch, she is an easy scapegoat. Her most important job is to screen her husband from daily hassles (with kids, bureaucracy, life in general) so he can keep going to work and bringing home the money they all depend on. His earning power (and his willingness to "share" earnings with her) is the family's key resource. It is also largely outside her control,³ although her unpaid work is crucial to the family's continuation and survival on what is usually a tight budget.

Her paid work is often crucial too. Ng and Ramirez point out that immigrant women are part of a "captive labour pool," who get pulled into and pushed out of jobs. Immigrant women have little chance of advancement into decently paid, secure jobs, and usually get stuck in marginal, low paid dead ends. Of course part of this problem (as is common for most women in Canada) is due to the precedence of their unpaid family work over their paid work. As well, these women get located into socially determined pigeonholes by employers, agencies and other institutions - what Ng and Ramirez describe as "institutional processes that reinforce immigrant women's dependency."

There is some confusion in the authors' discussion about immigration regulations as they affect immigrant women. (I hasten to add that I agree with the authors' conclusions that immigration policy and practices tend to reinforce immigrant women's subordination to their husbands.) The authors imply that various practices originate with the 1976 Act (effective in 1978), when in fact they often go back decades. For example they point out that the new Act removes domicile protection (i.e., number of years here after which immigrants become permanent residents and can apply for citizenship if they wish),

so that immigrants here for many years can still be deported as subversives. Yet domicile in the past did little to protect immigrants from political deportation; even naturalised citizenship does not guarantee absolute security. Moreover, the discussion of immigrant women's dependent status is unclear, at times giving the impression that all or most immigrant women are legally sponsored by their husbands, when such is not the case. In fact, according to the 1978 regulations, the husband can be the legal sponsor only when the couple married after he immigrated to Canada. If they are married at the time he applies to immigrate, all family members would be processed at the same time and share the same category vis-à-vis Immigration; if he is in the independent category, so is she, whether or not she is listed as intending to work in Canada. He cannot withdraw his sponsorship in such a case because he is not her sponsor. Because most of the women interviewed would have immigrated before the 1978 regulations were in force, the provisions of the earlier Act could usefully have been discussed. Also needed is some indication of the percentage of the interviewees who were legally sponsored by their husbands (as opposed to being included with him in whatever arrangements got him over here, be that as refugee, family class, assisted relative or independent immigrants).

I would certainly not challenge the study's point that employers, husbands, and husband's kin and others terrorise immigrant women by threats of deportation. Even if there is usually little or no legal basis for such threats, it is reasonable for women to be frightened. Immigration has in the past deported immigrants arbitrarily, and the Department has sometimes violated its own regulations in the process - which is somewhat surprising as it has always had incredibly sweeping powers. Most immigrant women are scared and not likely to know their rights, especially if they do not speak English well. Further, Ng and Ramirez are certainly correct in the discussion of bureaucratic barriers to services and

education, erected and maintained by immigration and settlement and social services policies and agencies on the federal, provincial and municipal levels. And the economic dependence of these women upon their husbands, reinforced by their economic subordination in general as women and as immigrants, imprisons them more effectively than the existing Immigration regulations.

The discussion of the segregated labour force is brief and to the point. Some of the consequences of this segregation are specific to immigrant women, others are general to most women in Canada, or to most immigrants. For the latter, immigrants are often told to take a low-level job just to get Canadian experience. Later, the low level of that experience rises up to haunt them, as it is used to limit and keep them down, instead of as a helpful entry point to better things. This is less likely to be true for men, unless they have come as refugees, because their admission presumes a transfer into jobs related to their previous skills and experience. Immigrant women are likely to work as private domestics, or in the lower levels of service occupations as cleaners, or in restaurants, or in small business, such as a retail business serving an immigrant clientele; or in light manufacturing, in plastics, textile or garment manufacturing. Most of these jobs are not unionised, or the unions are weak. When unions do turn their attention to immigrant women, often their efforts are handicapped by little real understanding of the women's needs or situation.

Finally, Ng and Rameriz consider where to go from here. Reiterating that "the immigration process is by and large oppressive to immigrant women," they point out some positive possibilities created by the process. Although most immigrant women do not earn enough in Canada to live well, they learn that they can earn a living of sorts. Thus they can live without their husbands if they so choose. Their settlement experience of dealing with Canadian red tape and bureaucracy

can give them a feeling of competence and independence. And independence is the reverse side of isolation: they do have more choice here (still within narrow limits) about what they want to do with their time and resources; this can be addictive. In Canada, their unpaid family work is absolutely necessary to keep the husband able to go to work and the family together. This, plus their earning power may be parlayed into more bargaining power in the family. As power shifts in the family, women may get a little bit more (or they may get battered. Ng *et al.*'s Vancouver study and others suggest that men use battering to try to re-assert their power over their families).⁴ Finally, some immigrant women are getting uppity and demanding more resources and services appropriate to their needs. Small changes, but a start.

For me, the report raises questions and suggests new areas of research. Ng and Ramirez point out that the patterns they examine cut across the "cultural" boundaries of several immigrant groups, and appear to be broadly representative of the experiences of immigrant housewives from rural areas. I would go further. Many of the patterns of power relations within the family and within the society and economy in general seem to me to be related to gender and class rather than ethnicity or immigrant status. Studies by Lillian Rubin of working class US families in the 1970s; by Meg Luxton of Flin Flon Manitoba families from the late 1920s to the 70s; by Laura Oren of British working class families in the early decades of this century, show similar patterns related not to immigration but rather to other kinds of marginalization and subordination. In all cases we have women's assignment to unpaid family work, and the consequences of that work for the labour market, for capitalist social organisation, and for male-female relations within and outside the family. To what extent are phenomena we label as "immigrant" in fact characteristic of most women in Canada?

Whatever the broader implications of their work, Ng and Rameriz have done well with this study. Their brief report will be invaluable to those involved in research, teaching, social policy and social action related to women's studies, immigration studies, labour studies, women's, family and oral history, and umpteen areas in sociology. I hope it inspires more of the same.

Barbara Roberts
University of Winnipeg

NOTES

1. For example, Sheila Arnopoulos, *Problem of Immigrant Women In the Canadian Labour Force*. (Ottawa, Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1979); Ann Martin Mathews. "The Case of the Migrant Wife: Looking At The World From The Underdog Perspective" in M. Stephenson (ed.), *Occasional Papers of the McMaster Sociology of Women Programme*. 1, Spring 1977; A. Alberto and G. Monterro, "The Immigrant Woman" in G. Matheson (ed.) *Women In The Canadian Mosaic*. (Toronto, Peter Martin, 1976); see also the study on four groups of immigrant women in Montreal coordinated by Micheline Labelle, University of Quebec at Montreal, in progress. There are many others that could be cited.
2. On this see also Roberts and Juteau Lee (eds.), *Ethnicity and Femininity*. special issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, Jan. 1981, especially articles therein by Roberts and Juteau Lee, Ng, and Cassin and Griffith. See also B. Bernier, M. Elbaz and G. Lavigne, "Ethnicité et luttes de classes," *Anthropologie et Sociétés*. 2, 1.
3. On similar binds see Lillian Rubin, *World of Pain: Life in The Working-Class Family*. (New York, Basic, 1976); Meg Luxton, *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work In The Home*. (Toronto, Women's Press, 1980); Laura Oren, "The Welfare of Women in Labouring Families: England 1860-1950" in L. Banner and M. Hartman (eds.), *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives On The History of Women*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1974).
4. M. Epstein, R. Ng and M. Trebble, *The Social Organisation of Family Violence: An Ethnography of Immigrant Experience in Vancouver*, (Vancouver, Women's Research Centre, 1978); see also Roberts, "Peace Studies And The War Against Women: A Survey of Research", unpublished paper, for additional references.