Immigrant and Refugee Women: Recreating Meaning in Transnational Context

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ABSTRACT: Migrating to another country is potentially fraught with both challenges and potential opportunities. This article examines ways in which mature Chilean, Chinese and Somali women who migrated to Canada deploy personal and communal resources to imbue shifting relations and novel spaces with new meanings. Through these activities, they create a place for themselves on Canadian soil while remaining linked to their homelands. I argue that the ability of immigrant and refugee women to reconstruct their lives—often under conditions of systemic inequalities—is evidence of their resilience, which consequently has a positive effect on health and well-being.

KEYWORDS: agency, Canada, health, identity, immigration, women

My oldest daughter went back to Chile because she wanted to find her roots, to find out where she belonged after so many years in Canada, she didn’t know where you belong. It’s like you’re a tree without roots. Psychologically it makes you feel like, who I am, where do I stand? So she went to Chile to find out and it was okay, it was good then because they said, we are half Chilean, half Canadian. —Esther

In the quotation above, Esther’s eldest daughter is described as a tree without roots. The embrace, however, of her transnational identity, forged by a return to the land of her birth, eventually allows her to branch out across multiple landscapes and cultivate a sense of belonging. In this article, I draw on research with mature Chilean, Chinese and Somali women who migrated to Canada to examine the ways in which they deploy personal and communal resources to imbue shifting relations and novel spaces with new meanings. Through these activities they create a place for themselves on Canadian soil while remaining linked to their homelands. I argue that the ability of immigrant and refugee women to reconstruct their lives, often under conditions of systemic inequalities, is evidence of a resilience that consequently has a positive impact on health and well-being. As Oakley (this volume) indicates, health and well-being offer an important arena in which to examine the complex and compelling tensions emerging from the dynamic intersections of gender, migration and socio-political context that are played out through a host of issues, including identity negotiation. Moreover, by focussing on the relationship among identity, health, migration and gender in this work we can attend to the ways in which cultural logic, social forces and personal resources operate in daily life.

Immigrant and Refugee Women in Canada: An Overview

A brief demographic overview suggests that the ability to flourish on foreign soil is substantially difficult. Statistics indicate that immigrants—primarily those from non-European source countries—are especially
vulnerable to poverty. Furthermore, within this category, women experience a more precipitous decline in socioeconomic status than men (Kazemipur and Halli 2001). After residing in the country for a period of more than ten years, non-European immigrant women also report a greater deterioration in health status than men from similar countries of origin and than their Canadian-born counterparts (Ng et al. 2005; Vissandjée et al. 2004). From a biomedical perspective, negative personal habits such as smoking, alcohol consumption and poor nutrition leading to obesity are regarded as the primary factors that contribute to poor health outcomes. Newcomers to Canada, however, are less likely to engage in these behaviours and are not more likely to be obese than the average Canadian (Ng et al. 2005). Social determinants of health, therefore, such as socioeconomic class and access to social support, health services and remunerative employment, appear to the most important contributors to this decline in health status (Dunn and Dyck 2000).

Generally, immigrant women are better educated than their Canadian-born counterparts; however, they are less likely to work in positions that are commensurate with their education and former occupational status than native-born women or foreign-born men (Chard et al. 2000; Statistics Canada 2003). Moreover, despite relatively higher levels of education, immigrant women are disproportionately located in the lowest-waged sectors of the Canadian labour market (Chard et al. 2000). Professional gatekeeping and demands for Canadian credentials and experience serve as additional—and significant—obstacles to the efforts of migrants to reclaim past occupational status (Bauder 2003; Bannerjee 2004).

While coping with downward social mobility, immigrants and refugee women must often negotiate new gender and familial roles, particularly in light of dislocated family and community networks that may have served as important sources of social support in their homeland. In addition, newcomers must contend with conflicting values, novel social pressures, potentially disparate gender ideologies and contesting ideas about health (Spitzer 2004; Thurston and Vissandjée 2005). Indeed, the primary purpose of this research project was to explore the ways in which mature women from three ethnocultural communities negotiate ideas about menopause and aging in the context of migration (Spitzer 1998). What emerged was a testament to the ways in which women were able to recreate meaning in new contexts while holding lightly to tethers linked to the land of their births.

To illuminate these issues further, I begin with a brief examination of identity formation in a transnational and multicultural context, followed by an overview of the research project. I then present perspectives from Chilean, Somali and Chinese Canadian women who uncovered ways to re-aggregate and realign themselves in Canada. I conclude with a discussion of the efforts by these women to reconfigure their sense of identity and belonging in a new, often materially and socially impoverished environment.

(Re) Making Identity and Belonging in Transnational Context

The traditional notion of culture as a set of beliefs, customs and behaviours situated in a particular landscape has been displaced by the observation that our world is characterised by global flows that interpenetrate communities north and south. These global ethnoscapes are evidence of an increasingly de-territorialized world where people, goods and ideas are highly mobile (Appadurai 1996). Both intensified connectedness and more frequent uprooting challenge the idea
that culture is a wholly stable entity quite literally grounded in a specific soil (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The relationship among space, people and culture is always a social and historical creation undermining the notion that there is a ‘natural’ national identity that can elicit firm allegiance from—and offer “authentic” identity to—individuals and communities (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). For immigrants and refugees, movement and resettlement necessitates a reconfiguration of identities and a re-calibration among meaning, identity and place that is further complicated by individuals’ confrontation with potentially novel physical and social locations.

Identity provides us with a sense of belonging, the discursively constructed ‘place to stand’ that links individuals and within whose networks meanings are shared. Identity is neither singular nor is it a fixed category, but is instead one that is constantly in a state of creation, maintenance and reconfiguration. Notably, we deploy multiple identities that render others both inside and outside of those groupings depending upon context. While identity can be regarded as both a process and a resource that can be deployed, it is also delimited by social location, socioeconomic status and cultural context (Dwyer 2000; Fortin 2002; Spitzer 2006a). Gender also plays a significant role in shaping the form and boundaries of identity formation. For example, under diasporic conditions, female gender roles and women’s bodies often serve as the markers of ethnic communities; therefore, their behaviours are intensely patrolled and rewarded in efforts to maintain ethnic distinction in pluralist societies (Spitzer et al. 2003).

In the context of immigration, feelings of belonging are informed by one’s migratory trajectory (Fortin 2002). Moreover, migratory conditions may challenge taken-for-granted spatial organisation that may underpin gender relations and ground identity formation. Disruptions in spatial relations may lead to increased opportunities to create new attachments with other members of society potentially resulting in enhanced social solidarity and altered identity constructions (Abdulrahim 1993; Ehrkamp 2005).

Travel between homelands can also lead to an increased sense of displacement that engenders further negotiation of one’s identity (Spitzer 2006a). Moreover, transnational linkages between homelands and lands of resettlement further contribute to hybridized identities in which multiple versions of self and community are constructed under conditions of inequity (Bhabha 1996). Rather than succumbing to the notion of ethnic minority cultures as bounded, pristine entities that can be juxtaposed against the backdrop of a dominant culture, hybridity embraces the messiness of ongoing negotiations between cultural formations of unequal stature where new discourses are shaped in the interstitial spaces between them (Bhabha 1996). For example, in their study of African Canadian women, Okeke-Ihejirika and Spitzer (2005) found that second-generation women successfully negotiated between the gendered expectations of their parents and their common desire to retain some form of African identity while integrating mainstream liberal discourses of individualism and choice.

Study

This article draws from a study undertaken in the mid-1990s in three Canadian cities, Edmonton (the primary site of data collection), Toronto and Ottawa. Thirty-three women—eleven Chilean Canadian, eleven Chinese Canadian and eleven Somali Canadian—were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide to explore the experience of menopause and immigration from the women’s perspectives. The open-
ended questions were designed to elicit women’s life stories in order to place meno-
pause in the context of the life cycle. In a life story, the focus is on the participant as an
actor in his or her life and social world. To assess the impact of immigration on their
experiences, I employed the concept of the ideal self, which encourages participants to
reflect on their personal and cultural notions of an ideal that can be contrasted with their
lived experience (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985).

The three cultural communities, Chilean, Somali and Chinese, were selected as they
differed in size and timing of immigration, degree of integration into Canadian society,
and the amount of ethnic community and infrastructure from which they could draw
support. Furthermore, I had personal contact in each of the communities through ongoing
volunteer work and some knowledge of one of the languages, Mandarin.

Women were recruited for the study via network sampling (snowballing); a tech-
nique that is particularly well suited to working in populations that may be difficult to
enter (Brink and Wood 1988). Interviews took place in one or two sessions and ranged
between two to six hours in total. They were held in the language of the woman’s choice
and took place in a setting selected by the informant. To enhance reliability, a single in-
terpreter, if required, was engaged for each language combination. Participation in the
study was voluntary and informed consent was either taped or obtained in writing. In-
terpreters also signed a confidentiality agreement. Pseudonyms are used in all cases
and some details of women’s lives were altered in all presentations to obscure their
identity. Interviews were taped, transcribed and coded using the qualitative data research
software Q.S.R. NUD*IST(N4). Transcripts were subject to theme analysis; the analyses
were then reviewed by two informants in each community.

For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the revelations in the life stories that high-
light these women’s experiences of recreating meaning in the context of identity in
Canadian society. These issues, I will argue, have implications for overall health and well-
being as they are critical to social support, a vital determinant of health.

**Chilean Canadian Informants**

Most Chileans came to Canada following the overthrow of the Allende government in
1973 with the intention that they would eventually return to their homeland. As the
Pinochet dictatorship persisted, new relationships were established in diaspora. As
children were born and raised on foreign soil, the prospect of returning to Chile perma-
nently began to fade. However, both longing for their homeland and concerns about the
nature of their departure continued to dominate the thoughts of informants. The decision
to leave home and the migratory journey were not relegated to the past, but were in-
stead constant companions in their current lives as they negotiated identity, community,
engagement, roles and employment (cf. Eastmond 1993). Furthermore, as their children
began to engage in their own active explorations of identity, and as General Pinochet
stepped back from the reigns of power altering the context for their exile, Chilean partic-
ipants deepened their reflection on and reinterpretation of these experiences.

Their political involvement in Chile inevitably led to their emigration. Their political
activities ranged from union and student organizing—or simply being married to some-
one who had been engaged in political activities—to voting for the democratically
elected Dr. Salvador Allende. Opposition to the military junta fostered cohesiveness
amongst Chilean newcomers to Canada in the 1970s despite political differences within
the coalition. As Chile reverted to a democratic government in 1989, this centrifugal force weakened, resulting in reflective and sometimes ambivalent feelings about political engagement and the price they paid for their even seemingly benign involvement. Although some women regretted their engagement with political activities, others shifted their energies from campaigning for the liberation of Chile to struggles in broader arenas of social justice, human rights or more local community issues.

Once the political situation in Chile stabilized, many returned for a visit that often served as a pivotal event affirming the decision to remain in Canada. Despite intense feelings of attachment to their homeland and to family relations and friends from whom they have undergone a prolonged separation—a separation that was highly charged under an atmosphere of political repression and fear—the lifestyle, values and obvious military presence compelled them to relinquish the dream of returning. Moreover, moving from Canada would also mean choosing between reuniting with parents or remaining with children who had known no other home. As Rosa said, ‘I don’t think we have a right to broke (sic) the family again’.

The decision to remain signaled the transformation from exile to transnational that led to more deliberate activities to establish a home in Canada while maintaining ties with Chile. As Esther noted in the opening quotation, one needs to nurture one’s roots to ensure that one has a place to stand. Teaching children Spanish, telling stories of home, encouraging children to participate in Chilean heritage and community activities were all part of nurturing those roots. Promoting identification with Chilean heritage was also effected through volunteer work in various community projects and provided an outlet for meaningful interaction with other members of the community. Most felt they sowed seeds of pride and knowledge of Chilean heritage, but they also respected their children’s efforts to branch out into their own identities as Chilean Canadians and these identities too proved to be flexible. As one mother told me, ‘If there is a Canadian soccer team playing a Chilean team, my son will cheer for Canada, but if Chile is playing another country’s team, he will cheer for Chile!’

Despite an ongoing longing for their homeland and for family members left behind, many women concluded that Chile may have provided a more hostile landscape for aging women than was evident in Canada. From their recollections, older women were frequent objects of derision and although men aged fifty and older reveled in their virility, women of similar age were believed to be decrepit and asexual. Furthermore, mandatory retirement for women in their fifties underscored their uselessness in the public arena.

In Canada, Chilean respondents believed it possible to push back the boundaries of old age. They felt able to reassert themselves in their relationships as sexual beings, desirous and pleasing, but also deserving of pleasure. In Canada, they reasoned, a woman in her fifties is not yet old; therefore she is not expected to retire from the workplace—or the bedroom. Furthermore, the practice of solidarity with other Chilean women as learnt through political work and forged through the shared experience of migration and re-establishing a Chilean community in the north helped encourage women to organize themselves in a variety of small activist groups that supported Chilean cultural activities, politically oriented events and discussion groups. Christina brought together other Chilean women for formal and informal gatherings to claim a new social space for themselves. Finding support and solidarity in the company of women, she said, we need to remind ourselves: ‘We’re perfect, we’re beautiful, we’re everything’. 
Somali Canadian Informants

Somalis comprise the single largest ethnic group on the African continent. A clan-based society ordered by kinship networks, social relations and extended family lies at the core of Somali communal life (Lewis 1994). For nearly twenty years, however, this life has been disrupted. An estimated 350,000 people were killed between 1988 and 1995 in Somalia in a civil war that precipitated a massive exodus from the region and that contributed to the current global Somali diaspora (Simons 1995). Under conditions of diaspora, familial networks were disassembled with members scattered in different directions and reassembled with various fragments absorbing orphaned children and grappling with the absence of the men who had been murdered or who were languishing in other refugee camps.

During the height of the conflict over 70,000 Somalis, predominantly women and children, found refuge in Canada (Spitzer 2006b). In this country, Somali refugees had to cope with the new phenomenon of single parenthood that thrust them into new decision-making and economic roles (Affi 1997; Spitzer 2006b). Moreover, attempts to reunite with family members were stymied by a policy that imposed a waiting period for Convention refugees who lacked identity documents. Coming from a predominantly oral society where few women possessed passports, driver’s licenses or other official documents during the midst of a civil war that obviated any attempts to secure such documents even if they were eligible for them, this policy had a profound impact on the Somali community in Canada (Spitzer 2006b). During the waiting period—initially five years and later reduced to three—refugee women could not sponsor family members to join them, nor could their children qualify for ‘Canadian’ tuition fees at post-secondary institutions, which were substantially less than those demanded of foreign students. As they were ineligible for student loans or bursaries, post-secondary education was effectively postponed or denied. They were unable to avail themselves of certain settlement services that were offered only to permanent residents. This delay meant that family members outside of Canada could become too old to sponsor as dependents, which at the time was defined as younger than nineteen years of age (Spitzer 2006b). As a result, women were often deprived of the presence of family and close kin and of services and educational opportunities that could have provided not only increased earning power through improvement of language and enhanced skills training, but a source of meaning and respect.

As women in Somalia age, they can anticipate garnering greater respect from their community, reaping the love and devotion from their children in whom they have invested substantial emotional and material resources, and entering a phase during which they can enjoy the unhurried company of friends and family. As part of entropy of the recent Somali diaspora, however, the bonds of community and family have been fractured and the sources of status and meaning that would normally accrue to mature women have dissipated.

Older Somali women in Canada often attempt to reassemble kinship ties, locating distant clan relations or former neighbours who find themselves among the predominantly female ranks of refugees from the Horn of Africa. In particular, female age-mates can recreate the nightly gatherings that may now take place in a cramped Toronto high-rise instead of a home’s airy verandah. These women’s gatherings become the focal point for micro-business enterprises where those assembled share wares such as Arabic perfumes and Somali dresses imported by traveling family members or foodstuffs
cooked at home and sold to other households in their apartment block. In addition, women may reconstitute traditional loaning circles, *hagbad*, which allow them to pool resources to the benefit of all members. Perhaps most important, women may gather together in Qu’ranic study. As Raqiya said:

> The best thing for my life at this age is when my final days comes is to be reading the Qu’ran, to die with the Qu’ran. To die with *aad aab*. *Aad aab* means when you watch God and when you follow all the things you’re supposed to do.

Religious practice does not require the presence of a sheikh nor need it be restricted to the location of a mosque; therefore, even in the absence of close familial relations or an extensive community, solitary or small-group prayer provide an important source of social support, spiritual solace and meaning.

**Chinese Canadian Informants**

All of the informants in this study were born in southern China although their life trajectories had some of them journeying to Canada via Vietnam, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and central China. In contrast to the other informants, most of whom were compelled to leave their homelands for political reasons, with the exception of one business migrant, this group of Chinese Canadians primarily came to Canada to accompany family members who were seeking better economic or educational opportunities. They were part of two waves of migration; one in the 1960s and the other in the 1990s.

In Chinese society, demonstrations of industriousness, rather than declarations of love and intimacy, traditionally validate human relationships (Potter and Potter 1990). Therefore, both waged and unwaged labour play a significant role in providing meaning to one’s life by offering opportunities to enact one’s dedication to family and to society. The informants who emigrated from China in the 1990s were used to a work-unit system in which employment was not only stable but also the centre of distribution for social goods, including housing and meal services (Walder 1986). In the planned economy, spouses could be assigned jobs in other parts of the country necessitating long periods of separation. Those who migrated in the 1960s, often to accompany family members or to join fiancés who were attempting to establish themselves in Canada, were also compelled to adjust to prolonged separation from family some of whom were scattered throughout other parts of the Chinese diaspora.

In China, midlife women, particularly educated urbanites, could be expected to enjoy a second youth, taking time to study calligraphy, *t’ai chi* or to visit friends. These urban workers retired at age 55, yet they could continue to be consulted by their employers or to work as volunteers, thereby continuing their work lives in which they were heavily invested. Women in rural areas were often still engaged in labour and assumed child care roles; therefore, while they were unable to enjoy this period of rejuvenation, they gained satisfaction from their role as workers.

For some recent immigrants who came to Canada as mature adults to join their adult children, migration severely constrained possibilities for work in the labour market due to age and language barriers. Professional couples from China who served their work units wherever they were directed now lived together for the first time and were compelled to take on tasks like cooking that were novel experiences. Some experienced a reduced sense of usefulness in the family due to the busy lives of their children and their unfamiliarity with their surroundings. But not all Chinese Canadian women expressed these sentiments. Ding, a former factory worker shared:
Migrating here has broadened my scope of knowledge and insight. I lived in Shanghai for forty years. Life was monotonous. . . . Everything was routine as a clock; nothing exciting, no challenges. When I came to Canada, the environment was totally different and I was faced with challenges, looking for jobs, making a living and making new friends.

Some informants, like Ding, enjoyed the new challenges and potential opportunities that life in Canada offered. Ding found satisfaction in the first position she acquired in Canada as a child-minder for a family who wanted their children to learn Mandarin Chinese. Indeed a number of respondents found great pleasure in volunteer work teaching Mandarin to children or organizing events at the local immigrant women’s centre.

Furthermore as education is also highly valued, many respondents took advantage of continuing-education courses, English-as-a-Second-Language classes, and the resources of the public library system. In contrast to their experiences in China, many of these services were available free of charge or at minimal cost, allowing even those who were economically disadvantaged to gain access to settings where they could enjoy solitary contemplation or spend time learning and socializing with others.

**Conclusion**

Migrating to another country is potentially fraught with both challenges and potential opportunities. In this article we have seen how women from three disparate ethnocultural communities, drawing on both personal and community resources, have tried to reconfigure their social support networks, identities and sense of belonging in Canada. Despite tremendous challenges wrought by social, political and other, more proximate forces, these immigrant and refugee women are able to recreate meanings for themselves by forging new linkages and imbuing different activities with new meaning. Some of these renegotiations are precipitated by return visits to their birthplaces where imaginings of home are disrupted and where the pull of life in Canada overwhelmed.

As immediate attachments around Chilean politics came undone, some of the Chilean Canadian women respondents shifted their efforts to other platforms for social activism, and/or became involved in the promotion of Chilean heritage. Many encouraged creative links with other women and on an interpersonal level, renegotiated marital relationships. In both public and private domains they refuted old-age labels and asserted themselves as intelligent, capable and sexual beings who were very much alive.

Somali women informants who are traditionally embedded in bilateral kinship networks found themselves without the broad ties to social support and meaning that accrue to mature members of these networks. A loss of kin networks, exacerbated by government policy that limited the inflow of Somali refugees by demanding official documentation and delaying reunification, have meant significant loss of status because roles are relational. In Canada, they recast those ties to engage with others in Qu’ranic study and in socializing with other age-mates as a way of creating a space for themselves that resonates with home while in Canada.

Chinese Canadian informants talked about taking advantage of new opportunities to volunteer, to share their heritage and skills with younger generations, and to avail themselves of public services such as libraries that offered materials free of charge.

Notably, all of the ways in which these women reconfigured their lives were constrained and structured by broader social and institutional forces. Generally, they were confined to low-socioeconomic status conditions precipitated by lack of recognition of
their credentials and experience—and for some—their age of migration. Furthermore, government policies that inhibited family reunification had significant repercussions for women in terms of limiting access to social support and compelling them to redefine gender roles. Yet despite these obstacles, women have found ways to make sense of their new contexts, to re-aggregate with others around hybrid identities and places of belonging. Informants integrate variant discourses around gender, age, self, and work to create altered identities that enable them to sustain themselves in Canada. For example, Chilean women draw from emerging discourses of aging that insist women in their fifties and sixties are still vital and sexual. Chinese women too draw on notions of healthy aging and of individualism to support their efforts to become active adults and to engage in solitary activities that contrast with their more social existences in China. In Canada, Somali women are often able to transcend clan divisions to create spaces where they can avail themselves and provide for mutual aid.

Imbuing new activities or shifting emphasis onto existing ones offers new avenues for reasserting values and soliciting support in this new environment. Importantly, these renegotiations alter but do not dramatically challenge gender ideologies as they intersect with ethnic identities. Chilean informants’ recreation of meaning is organized around cultural transmission to the young and one’s role as a wife. Somali women build on the key identifiers of their culture, Islam and kinship, to enhance their support and sources of meaning. Chinese women who are focussed on work and family are also engaged in volunteer activities that underscore both the value of work and enculturation of the next generation.

As noted at the beginning of this article, female migrants to Canada from non-European countries tend to experience a decline in health status over the long term. Furthermore, social determinants play the most significant role in informing this trend. The association between low-socioeconomic status and poor health are well established and the dynamics of downward social mobility also appear to be associated with poor health outcomes (National Forum on Health 1997; Krieger et al. 2001). Social support is also an important factor in contributing to health that is particularly salient for migrants who may be extracted from social support networks and who cope with different amounts and sources of social support in Canada (National Forum on Health 1997; Stewart et al. forthcoming). In their analysis of Canada’s National Population Health Survey, Dunn and Dyck (2000: 1582) found that: ‘Immigrants who reported that they did not have “somebody to make them feel loved” were more likely to report fair or poor health status’. The immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study, while facing considerable challenges in Canada, are not wholly bereft, and their efforts to reorient themselves, making contributions to young persons, becoming active in their community, or finding strength in individual pursuits are evidence of their resilience, which serves to mitigate the ill-effects of their social and material marginalization. Although not all migrant women or men will respond to migration in an identical way, the processes of emigration, immigration, adaptation and recreation of meaning is organized around cultural transmission to the young and one’s role as a wife. Somali women build on the key identifiers of their culture, Islam and kinship, to enhance their support and sources of meaning. Chinese women who are focussed on work and family are also engaged in volunteer activities that underscore both the value of work and enculturation of the next generation.

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refute the dominant discourses that portray immigrant and refugee women solely as helpless victims, lacking in agency or resources to make positive changes in their lives or the lives of those around them.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Although we tend to distinguish between immigrants as voluntary migrants and refugees as involuntary migrants, the categories in reality are often blurred. In this study for instance, some Chileans entered Canada as immigrants; however, they emigrated for the same reasons and with the same haste as some who arrived as refugees. Moreover, some women who enter the country as voluntary migrants may in fact have had little say in the decision to emigrate and in reality may be reluctant immigrants following their husbands or children.
3. Convention refugees are individuals who are determined to meet the standards set out by the 1967 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

References


