

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LIFE OF
THE SINGLE ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMAN IN WINNIPEG:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

BY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Social Work

Thesis Advisor: Professor Esther Blum

**School of Social Work
University of Manitoba**

August, 1987



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the life experience of single Asian immigrant women in Winnipeg (over a four-month period of time). The sample consists of eight single Asian immigrant women who are residents of Winnipeg. All have been residing in Canada for two to five years with ages ranging from 21 to 58.

The study uses an exploratory qualitative methodology with a two-tiered interview strategy. The first part of the interview is structured and focusses on gathering socio-demographic data. This is followed by an open-ended, in-depth interview which explores the life experiences of the participants.

The study identifies five major themes which describe the single Asian immigrant woman's experience: 1) "Being Lost Between Worlds and Insecure"; 2) "Being Isolated and Lonely"; 3) "Being Anxious"; 4) "Being Different" and 5) "Feeling Trapped". The intensity and importance of these themes varies with the individual. However, they all have experiences attributable to being single, immigrant and female i.e. the so-called "triple jeopardy". While the major problems derive from their being immigrants, these immigration related issues aggravate the experiences of being single and female.

The women all seem to cope in their own unique ways with the resettlement problems of isolation and loneliness, unemployment and economic difficulties, and with the societal expectations of being single and female. The most frequent coping strategy mentioned is the need to acquire a spouse. Having a spouse is perceived to resolve all three areas of difficulty at the same time.

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CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION

For anyone, leaving one's country of origin can be a very traumatic experience. Of the thousands of Asian immigrant women in Canada today, many have left their homeland for economic, political, familial and personal reasons (1). They have come to Canada to seek a better life. For most of these women, immigration is a transition characterized by radical change and a series of losses - one's homeland, financial security and social network of kin, friends and neighbours. Among these, the loss of the woman's social support network is probably the most troubling type of loss (2). The Asian immigrant woman may, in the process, also lose her sense of security, self-identity and self-esteem.

Upon her arrival to Canada, the Asian immigrant woman may for the first time in her life find herself living in a large urban centre rather than the small village to which she was accustomed. She may go out of the home to work, and may learn to express herself in a new language. Regardless of what her life experience may be prior to immigration, coming to Canada inevitably drastically alters her social position and her old behavioral patterns and the cultural norms which guided her are no longer really relevant. The social relationships she develops in the new society often are superficial and temporary in comparison to the extensive network of relationships in her country of origin.

Whatever the case, the immigrant experience is a new and a dramatic one; each woman's experience remains uniquely personal but at the same time it is heavily influenced by the larger socio-economic and socio-political processes and practices of the host country.

Many of the difficulties the Asian immigrant woman faces today in adjusting to life in Canada are due largely to the compound problems she must face as both a female and an immigrant. A mainstream Canadian woman may have difficulty attempting to reconcile the conflicting demands of a paying job, homemaking, mothering in addition to coping with other obstacles such as lack of employment and educational opportunities for women, lack of childcare facilities, wife battering, and so on. These problems are, however, magnified for the immigrant woman who must in addition deal with a whole raft of difficulties which accompany the initial settlement phase for all immigrants. These may include some or all of the following: feeling discriminated against, cultural and language barriers, problems related to finance and employment, lack of Canadian life skills, and limited knowledge of, and access to, services and information about her legal and political rights. Hence, she runs the risk of becoming a non-entity. The double negative of being female and foreign born is further aggravated if the immigrant woman is not a member of the preferred groups such as the Americans and the British (3).

To further compound issues, the Asian immigrant woman has lost access to the social support networks at home that provided her with the necessary material, social and emotional support. However, these needs

are rarely met again with the same appropriateness of response. In the face of new demands associated with taking up residency in a western, highly industrialized society and its complexities which she may not be prepared for, the immigrant woman now requires more support, more resources, but gets less.

Being single can further complicate the Asian immigrant woman's life experience. This group of immigrant women experiences what may be called the "triple jeopardies" of being single, female and immigrant. This is because "singles" in our society are still regarded as a somewhat deviant group, different from "normal" married adults. Until very recently, single immigrant women have been neglected as a subject of serious research, despite experiences of varying types and degrees of discrimination attributable to the single marital status (4).

The experience of isolation is well noted amongst singles. According to J. L. Barkas in his book Single in America, "loneliness is the most often cited consequences of singleness", (5). Without a mate, the single individual is more susceptible to depressive consequences of life strains which is worsened by a lack of an alternative social support system (6). The importance of a workable social support network is supported by S. M. Johnson, who, in his book First Person Singular: Living the Good Life Alone, pointed out that "to achieve autonomous adulthood two basic skills must be mastered: 1. you must perform the social tasks involved in the acquisition and maintenance of a well-operating social support group; 2. you must be able to live autonomously and perform all self care functions.... A

working social support system is necessary for a fulfilling life for almost everyone, no matter what his life circumstances may be." (7).

Both the literature review and conclusions drawn from the researcher's own personal experience indicate that the single Asian woman's situation is aggravated by immigration, especially the initial stage of settlement and adaptation to a new cultural and linguistic milieu. The immigrant experience is marked by numerous losses, as above noted, and these losses, compounded by the above mentioned factors, lead to the experience of isolation.

While there is an increasing number of studies on Asian immigrant women in recent years, the single Asian immigrant woman has not been the subject of study as such. Little attention has been paid to her contribution to Canadian Society and even less to her own perception of it. There is no research in the area of social work theory and practice which has, to my knowledge, examined the nature and specificity of the isolation experienced by the single Asian immigrant woman in relation to her social support network. This current study aims to collect descriptive data that will be derived from the woman's own perspective; it will attempt to capture the uniqueness of the single immigrant woman's experience (of varying degrees) of isolation during the early years of settlement and adaptation in the new country.

This study has two objectives. The first is to focus on the specific manifestation of isolation in the daily life of the single Asian immigrant woman. The second objective is to determine the relationships between her experience of isolation, and the presence or

absence of a social support network for her. The study will in the process attempt to provide the beginnings of answers to some of the following questions: What exactly is the nature of the single Asian immigrant woman's experience? How does the single Asian immigrant woman cope with the experience of isolation? How is this experience different or similar across ethnic groups? What is the role of a social support network? What social work interventive strategies can alleviate the isolating experience? What are the implications for social services delivery? Single immigrant women from the Filipino, East Indian and Chinese ethnic groups are the interviewees. They have been chosen for the study based on the fact that between 1981 and 1983, Filipinos, East Indians and Chinese constituted the three largest non-refugee groups in Manitoba whose mother tongue is not English (8).

1.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

In the context of service delivery in Manitoba, the few services that are targeted specifically for Asian immigrant woman focus mainly on pre-employment job skill development. The Immigrant Women's Employment Centre is one agency delivering such services. However the psychological and emotional needs of immigrant women are not always recognized or addressed. To date, there have been no concerted efforts on the part of service planners to deal with the isolation experienced by this special needs group, although it nonetheless greatly affects the women's functioning. Whatever services are available (e.g. the Laotian Women Association, the Immigrant Women Association) lack the personnel, and financial support necessary for effective functioning. In fact,

many of the problems associated with isolation do not come to the attention of the various services until they reach the crisis stage. Due to a lack of understanding of the Asian immigrant women's needs, the problems they face are most often labelled by the helpers to be only "cultural adjustments" and "value conflict" issues.

While services that are normally available to mainstream Manitobans are also available to Asian immigrant women, as residents of this province, they however remain inaccessible to this population for a number of reasons:

1. Society in general tends to take a middle class, individualistic orientation to health and social policies. Consequently, addressing special needs is assigned as the responsibility of those who are affected by the problem, rather than the responsibility of the society at large. That is, the concerns and needs of the Asian immigrant women tend to be seen as the responsibility of the Asian immigrant community. Yet the latter does not have the fiscal or human resources essential for the successful delivery of long term comprehensive health and social services (9).
2. Fragmentation in service delivery. Due to the lack of understanding of the interrelatedness of certain issues such as immigration, employment, health (physical and mental), which the Asian immigrant woman faces, the unique concerns of the Asian immigrant woman have not been comprehensively addressed by the program of any one of the government departments (10).

3. Lack of long term funding of services to immigrants in general. Consequently there is an absence of continuity in service provision and therefore a lack of overall experience in service delivery to this special needs population (11).
4. Lack of crossculturally trained and multilingual professionals and para-professionals sensitive to the needs of Asian immigrant women.
5. Institutional discrimination in service provision by three levels of government departments. This is especially true in the areas of access to language and skill training programs to Asian immigrant women in their language and community setting (12).
6. Tendency by the service planner to lump the needs of the Asian immigrant women with the general immigrant adjustment programs with lack of special attention given to their special needs.
7. On the part of the new immigrant, a lack of language and Canadian life skills. This inhibits his/her accessing services.
8. Asian Immigrant women who come from countries where services are relatively unknown do not understand and are suspicious of institutionalized services (13).
9. Poor coordination of service provision between community resources and the immigrant communities. This results in an inadequate response to the needs of Asian immigrant women (14).
10. Stereotyping and discrimination towards Asian immigrant women by some members of the population-at-large, obscure the unique needs of the Asian immigrant women (15).

11. Lack of flexibility and support services in delivering English As Second Lanague/French As Second Language program (16).
12. Lack of grassroot outreach programs to help immigrant women access services and express their needs (17).
13. For professional and technically trained Asian immigrant women, the lack of available requalifying programs offered by professional and trade associations, hinder and prevent these women from passing certification examinations which will allow them to practice their professions (18).
15. Asian Immigrant women and immigrant groups in general have not been politically organized enough to achieve political "clout", and generally lack lobbying skills (19).

In other words, Asian immigrant women, as residents of this province, presumably entitled to receive services as any other Manitobans have in fact been systematically denied quality and relevant services. The problem is more acute for the single Asian immigrant woman because recognition of the need for special services for this target population is almost non-existent.

The study shall provide first hand knowledge on isolation from the standpoint of the single Asian immigrant woman herself. The experience of isolation can expand our knowledge base in at least three spheres:

- I. In social service delivery, the woman's experience may shed light on:
 - a) Helping interventions which can reach the single Asian immigrant woman, especially the non-English speaking woman who

experiences isolation. It will attempt to confirm or refute the researcher's own thoughts on the following:-

- (i) outreach as an effective technique to serve this group (20).
 - (ii) the need to develop comprehensive information and skill development training programs to help the single Asian immigrant woman to access service and to develop other life skills.
 - (iii) the need to develop a drop in center.
- b. Gaps in service delivery, especially in the fields of resettlement and mental health. This may help determine, for example:-
- (i) the need for a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of service delivery targetted to the single Asian immigrant woman.
 - (ii) the need for a redirection and/or expansion of present services to meet the needs of this group.
 - (iii) the need for affirmative action programs for the single Asian immigrant woman.
 - (iv) the need to expand the roles of volunteer and ethnic associations in service delivery focussing on the needs of this group.
 - (v) the need for the development of group work services such as peer support groups.

II. In the social sciences, this study will contribute insights into:

- i) The adaptation and resettlement process as experienced by the single Asian immigrant woman.
- ii). Society's perception of the single Asian immigrant woman's adaptation.
- iii) The interplaying roles of gender, marital status and ethnicity as factors in the adaptation and resettlement process.

III. In social work education and training, we may be able to use the above materials to develop workshops and curriculum materials appropriate for working with the single Asian immigrant woman.

This proposed study may provide insights into some or all of the above areas. Because the single Asian immigrant woman is a woman and an immigrant, the knowledge gained in this study may also shed light on the other immigrant population groups. Regardless, the study will provide initial themes and categories for further research and analysis into the experiences of the single Asian immigrant woman. This in turn will provide the profession with a better understanding of the problems and challenges of the single Asian immigrant woman, and hopefully will specify actions for change.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

2.1 SINGLENESS

Single people of both sexes constitute a distinct minority in today's society (21). They experience social discrimination and stigmatization due to their single status, largely because adulthood and emotional maturity are held to be synonymous with marriage and parenthood in our society. The attitude prevails that those who remain single are deviant or in some way inadequate for adult roles. In the area of career development, single people are perceived to be less responsible, dependable or capable of commitment to their career (22) in spite of the fact that careers are often found to be more central to the single person's life than to the married adult's life (23). Very often, married individuals are given preference in the workplace over single people with the same qualifications and the same level of experience (24). Besides facing discrimination in the workplace, Peter Stein in his book Single comments that a high percentage of single men and women report experiencing discrimination in obtaining credit or loans, as well as in the areas of housing, insurance or taxation (25).

Single women particularly, "do not have the psychological freedom of not marrying while men (to some extent) do." (26). Until recently, society has tended to judge women's success or failure in life largely on the basis of marriage. While single men are often perceived to be "swinging bachelors", single women are seen to be "old spinsters" or "old maids" who have failed to acquire husbands (on whom they can

depend). Single women, more so than single men, experience discrimination in more forms as a result of being both female and single. This is especially true when it comes to advancement on the job, which to a certain extent is determined by one's marital status as well as one's gender (27). It is often assumed by many that marriage would make the single man more responsible whilst it would eventually cause the woman to give up her job.

According to Angus Campbell et.al. in their book The Quality of American Life, "...marriage and work make the greatest difference in the lives of women in our society." (28). Discrimination in the area of employment therefore bears significant impact on the lives of single women, because work is very often paramount; it provides them with economic independence and through their co-workers, emotional support. The latter was noted by Warren (1980), and Gladieux (1978) and also Stein (1976) (29). Financial independence for the single woman is particularly important since it promotes a sense of dignity and self-esteem. Activities of the Women's Liberation Movement, and an increase in educational opportunities for women have contributed to increasing women's participation in the labour force (30). In fact, in 1981 more than 60% of Canadian women aged 15 to 24 were in the labour force, with single women 20 years and over having the highest labour force participation ever (31). As a result of these economic and social trends it has become more acceptable to be employed and unmarried (32).

Focusing on the experience of the single immigrant woman, what are the specific issues this group has to face, besides being single?

2.2 IMMIGRANT AND FEMALE

Campbell et.al. suggest that an individual's sex and race affect the quality of one's life (33). Like her male counterpart, the immigrant woman experiences discrimination because of her ethnic minority status. "Minorities are stereotyped as less desirable workers in a variety of ways (e.g. laziness, unreliability, dim-wittedness, uncleanliness, etc.)..." (34). According to the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, the minority worker, especially the new immigrant, is often the last to be hired and because of the seniority principle, the first to be let go (35). Compared to their male counterparts and to native born women, immigrant women, especially those who do not speak either of the official languages, are more likely to be disproportionately employed "... in the poorly-paid labour market sectors where they work as domestics, chamber maids, building cleaners, dishwashers, waitresses, sewing machine operators and plastics workers. Ignored by unions and inadequately protected by provincial labour legislation, they occupy the bottom rung of the "vertical mosaic". (36). In fact, about one third of all immigrant women are employed in poorly paying service and manufacturing sectors compared to one fifth of Canadian born women (37). This is in spite of the fact that immigrant women display a pattern of higher labour participation rates compared to native born women (38). This appears to reflect their memberships in two "negative status" groups: female and foreign born (39).

Patricia O'Brien in her book The Woman Alone indicates that since women are raised as marriage material, many experience problems in

facing life alone without men; they face loneliness which derives from their dependency on men (40). For women of marginal groups, such as immigrant women, M. Eichler in her article "Sociology of Feminist Research in Canada" argues the existence of a "state of double dependency -- that is, the negative effects of their marginal status (of being minority) is reinforced by being female and being female predisposes them to a more marginal status than comparable males." (41).

2.3 SINGLE IMMIGRANT WOMAN

In addition to experiencing the double "whammy" of being female and immigrant, as a single immigrant the immigrant woman belongs to a lower income group, than her non-immigrant counterpart (42). The single immigrant woman is therefore found to experience the "triple jeopardies" of being single, female and immigrant.

For the single immigrant woman who comes from a family centered system which emphasizes traditional values, may experience a conflict because her culture views marriage with procreational goals as the preferred state. Thus, being single creates a conflict that may be difficult to resolve. By coming to Canada, she often finds herself being caught amid three cultures -- the one from which she came, the mainstream culture within which she now finds herself, and her own ethnic community in the host society -- all of which value and promote marriage, with the woman being dependent on her husband. Yet, with the severance of ties and roots as a result of immigration to Canada, the single immigrant woman is under pressure to be self-reliant in our

society where there exists different and sometimes conflicting values regarding self-reliance in women. Although the same could be said about the society from which the immigrant woman came, there, at least, the woman would still have her social support network to fall back on if necessary.

2.4 ISOLATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK

The term "isolation" is used here in a broad sense to refer to include physical, social and emotional isolation and the various types and varying degrees of emotions that are consequences of these different forms of isolation. Salient to the various forms of emotionality is the feeling of loneliness that come as result of being physically, emotionally and socially isolated (43).

The term "social support" network refers to a "set of interconnected relationships among a group of people that provides an enduring pattern of nurturance (in any or all forms) and provides contingent reinforcements for efforts to cope with life on a day to day basis." (44). That is, it provides the individuals with support in structuring his or her reality, as well as helping immensely in terms of providing both practical expertise and emotional and social supports which help the individual feel less isolated (45). According to Stephen M. Johnson, in his book First Person Singular: Living the Good Life Alone "... a working social support system is necessary for a fulfilling life for almost everyone no matter what his life circumstances may be." (46). Stein finds that "the greatest need single people feel in their

departure from traditional family structure is for substitute networks of human relationships that provide the basic satisfactions for intimacy, sharing and continuity." (47) In the settlement and adaptation processes, social networks assist immigrants with acculturation to the new society and help them maintain their emotional well-being. S.D. Nguyen notes in his paper, "The Psycho-Social Adjustment and the Mental Health Needs of Southeast Asian Refugees", that separation from family members was a major factor that caused the refugees depression and anxiety, and impede the adjustment process (48). A social support network therefore provides a kind of "buffer zone" needed for the immigrants to deal with the stress and change of immigration.

In examining isolation in relation to singleness, the single woman and her social support network, there appear to be conflicting views. Some authors, such as Weiss, and Pearlin et.al., perceive single people to be socially vulnerable individuals who are susceptible to isolation and mental health problems (49); while others, such as Holmes, view them as individuals whose life experience is not much different than the population at large (50). All three writers cite a social support network as the critical counteractant that will alleviate the isolating experiences prevalent amongst single persons.

This can be applied to the experience of single Asian immigrant women as well. However, in addition to the loss of the social support network incurred as a result of immigration, the single Asian immigrant woman also experiences numerous other losses in addition to difficulties in the initial settlement phase -- all of which render her more

vulnerable to isolation than her married counterpart, the mainstream Canadian woman, or the Asian immigrant man.

2.41 The Immigration Process: Its Potential Contribution To Isolation (51)

In her study on the effects of the migration experience on migrants, J. Huntington in her paper "Migration as Bereavement: The Use of Analogy in Social Work Research" explores the analogy between migration and bereavement; both migration and bereavement are seen as stressful life events that have to do with issues of attachment, separation, loss experience and behaviour (52). Migration is perceived as a psycho-social transition in one's lifespaces, and one's lifespaces embodies not only aspects of one's biography and identity, but one's own social reality as well, which threatens our sense of total well being (53).

Migration, then, is characterized by the loss of self-identity which is experienced through:

1. Loss of "taken-for-granted" inner and outer equilibrium (54).
2. Loss of place and culture which embody one's biography (55).
3. Loss of social support network (56).

The migrants' social support networks which form parts of the migrants' previous life spaces and biographies are no longer physically accessible and available to them.

How does the loss of self-identity affect the single Asian immigrant woman? Is she more vulnerable to isolation than her male

counterpart? Several studies (Huntington, Ng & Ramirez, O'Leary, Bonapanna, Nguyen) have indicated that indeed the immigrant woman in general faces greater isolation in comparison to her male counterpart.

For the single Asian immigrant woman, relocation and migration are very stressful and isolating life experiences. As a female she is socialized into the role of being family oriented. Her world, according to Jessie Bernard, is basically a world of "Gemeinschaft". "Gemeinschaft" is a parochial, limited world in which "blood and soil" or rather kinship ties and locale are fundamental bonds (57). By moving away to a distant land, the woman "disturbed not only the local ties but also the personal kinship ties ...(thereby) making them harder to maintain" (58). Because of her dependence on her roles as friend, kin and neighbor to provide support for her sense of self (59), there is greater vulnerability to actual or threatened loss of relationships with a high incidence of depression (60). Moreover, due to the presence of stronger filial piety bonds in Asian cultures than in the Western cultures, the identity of the Asian immigrant woman tends to be more tightly linked with her family and kin. For this reason, the loss of her social support system will have a greater impact on her life. As a single person, the Asian immigrant woman in the initial stages of settlement and adaptation, does not have the support of a spouse. As well, she may have little or no alternative forms of social relationships. The single Asian immigrant woman may therefore find herself facing this major life crisis with little or no support from others. In preparing for her paper "Women's Place", Sylvia Fava in her

literature research on relocated suburban women, found that singles and minority women are two groups of women especially disadvantaged by relocation (61). These women are found to experience stress because of distances from their social support networks of kin, friends, work and services. For the single Asian immigrant woman, relocation across countries and cultures thus has an even greater impact on her life, because being single and in minority status, is further compounded by the relocation process.

Once in Canada, the woman initially may also find herself in a position where she suffers the following experiences:

1. A lack of awareness of, and access to information regarding essential services. She may also feel intimidated by service agencies because of her own lack of information and knowledge.
2. A lack of access to information regarding the laws of the land, including human rights, labour laws, and so on. It should be noted that many immigrants come from third world countries where rights are frequently abused if they exist, and government agencies are often oppressive.
3. Inability to communicate due to little or no functional English or French language ability. Language plays a major role in survival and life skills development. Women who have little or no capacity in one of the official languages lack an important tool of self help (62).
4. Disorientation because of the many physical differences between her