

**EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE  
WINNIPEG GARMENT INDUSTRY: GENDER,  
ETHNICITY AND CLASS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY**

by

KATHRYN MOSSMAN

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
The University of Manitoba in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Anthropology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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**Of**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the work and home life experiences of immigrant women in the Winnipeg garment industry. A case study involving interviews with twenty-three current and former immigrant women garment workers from a variety of backgrounds was developed. Participants were asked to share their experiences of coming to Canada, working in the garment industry, and balancing work and home life. They were also asked to share their views and opinions on the removal of quotas on imported textiles as stipulated by the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC), and the impact this has had on the local garment industry.

The findings of this research reveal that the immigrant women garment workers in this study have faced economic barriers and challenges throughout their lives in Canada. While strategizing to improve their situation and deal with these constraints, often through social networks, the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Clothing and Textiles has led to further challenges through the rapid loss of jobs in this industry. Thus, the increased liberalization of the garment industry through the WTO has intensified the inequalities workers have experienced, especially in a context where company owners are profiting from cheaper overseas labour while local garment workers are losing their livelihoods.

## Acknowledgments

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## **Dedication**

In loving memory of Heinz (*Opi*) Rummel, and Mary (*Grandma*) Mossman.  
One loved anthropology, the other loved to sew. Both shaped this research  
and will be greatly missed.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The garment industry has long been a significant part of the manufacturing sector in the city of Winnipeg. During the many years this industry has been in operation in Winnipeg, it has been driven largely by a workforce consisting of immigrant women. While the garment industry has waxed and waned throughout its history in this city, the future of its manufacturing operations is currently in question. This is largely a result of the removal of quotas on imported textiles as stipulated by the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Textiles and Clothing. Leading up to and following the elimination of these quotas in January 2005, many manufacturing jobs have shifted from developed countries to less developed countries. Thousands of garment workers have already lost their jobs, ironically often to some of the same countries they left to find work here, and this trend is expected to continue. Industry members perceive this movement to be a necessary development whereby production will move to countries where cheaper wages can be paid to workers, reducing their production costs to remain competitive in the world market. These changes have greatly affected the Winnipeg garment industry, especially the lives of local garment workers. The purpose of this research, then, is to examine the work and home life experiences of immigrant women garment workers during a time that some perceive to be the decline of garment manufacturing in the city of Winnipeg.

#### **Statement of Problem**

This study explores the experiences of immigrant women in the Winnipeg garment industry. The emphasis on women's experiences is an attempt to bring to light the ways that women interact with their world and make sense of it, a research area that

had been absent from anthropological analyses until the last few decades. In traditional anthropology, Reiter (1975a:12) notes, "Too often women and their roles are glossed over, under-analyzed, or absent from all but the edges of the description." Her work emphasizes the need to develop new anthropological studies that focus on women's views and experiences because "...the final outcome of such an approach will be a reorientation of anthropology so that it studies *humankind*" (Reiter 1975a:16). My study builds on Reiter's women-centred approach through its focus on women as research subjects. As well, the works of Rapp (1999, 2003) and Martin (1989) are particularly relevant to my research, as both focus on women's experiences and try to elicit them through a number of methods, namely in-depth interviews. My decision to focus on women also reflects their predominance in this industry where 94 percent of sewing machine operators in Winnipeg are women (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Manitoba Advanced Education & Training 2005).

An emphasis on the study of *immigrant* women is also an important area of research, considering that the political and social participation of immigrant women as well as their life experiences has been overlooked throughout Canadian history (Ng 1988). Migliardi (2001:7) notes that only in recent years have the experiences of immigrant women "...become part of the corpus of literature, as well as shaping groups of interests working toward their increased visibility and the improvement of their social conditions in the Canadian society." The intention of my thesis research is to contribute to this body of literature by examining the experiences of immigrant women as labourers in the present-day Winnipeg garment industry, highlighting the challenges these women encounter in relation to ethnicity, gender and class.

The garment industry in Winnipeg has been rapidly downsizing its manufacturing base in the last several years in anticipation of the removal of quotas on January 1, 2005, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs in this field. However, the question of who gains from the WTO phase-out of quotas in terms of the distribution of benefits between capital and labour has barely been raised (Hale and Burns 2005:219). Much of the discussion of this issue has focused on economic gains and losses for the garment industries of different countries. According to Hale and Burns (2005:219-220), "...since the

framework is set in terms of competing comparative advantage between regions and countries, there have been no openings for debating the global impact on the people who work in the industry. Yet this impact will be massive,” and millions of workers will lose their jobs. This research area should be further explored in order to develop an understanding of the impact of these job losses, as well as to push for debate on these issues and the consideration of the lives of garment workers in the building of policies and international agreements that affect them.

It is valuable to consider the experiences of those directly confronted by these job losses. Martin (1994:248) notes that, “Even as corporations downsize, unstaff, and delayer, we need deliberately to keep in mind the physical and emotional effects of these processes on the delayed workers in near or distant communities.” This is not to imply that immigrant women workers are powerless in this situation, but rather my study considers the agency of these individuals as they negotiate their positions in a context of tightening constraints and fewer opportunities. As Smith (1987:142) points out, we need to explore the dynamics of relations in which our lives are caught up, and how we are continually transforming the contexts of our struggles and our existence. Thus, the focus of this study is on the experiences of immigrant women in the Winnipeg garment industry, including how they are affected by and deal with current and impending job losses in the local industry. Drawing out the lived experiences of one’s informants – in this case, immigrant women garment workers – is an important part of conducting anthropological research.

### **Focus of this Study**

The focus of this case study is to explore the experiences of immigrant women who have recently worked, or are working, in the manufacturing sector of the Winnipeg garment industry. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, twenty-three participants were asked to share their experiences of coming to Canada, working in this industry, and balancing work and home life. They were also asked to share their views on the changes currently taking place in the garment industry, how these changes have

affected them and their co-workers, and where they might be looking for other job opportunities.

## **Methodological Issues**

### *Overview*

Anthropological qualitative research methods were used to conduct this study. The bulk of this research involved the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length with twenty-three current or former immigrant women garment workers. These interviews were conducted with garment workers of various backgrounds, including those working in different garment assembly areas, as well as workers from a variety of factories, cultural backgrounds, ages, time spent in the garment industry and time spent living in Winnipeg. Only consenting adults (those over 18 years of age) were interviewed for this research project. Interviews were recorded on audiotape with the permission of each participant.

In addition to interviews with garment workers, a joint interview with two union representatives, as well as one visit to a small factory, were conducted during the course of this research. My two-year participation as a research assistant in a study of the Winnipeg garment industry, conducted on behalf of the Manitoba Research Alliance on Community Economic Development in the New Economy (see Wiest 2005), also led to literature and web-based searches of relevant issues which were used in support of my primary thesis research. This research project also involved a number of plant tours as well as interviews with independent designers, factory managers, and company executives, some of which I personally conducted. This information was utilized in constructing research results, and shaped the ideas presented in this dissertation.

### *Recruitment Process*

Recruitment of participants began by contacting local organizations, such as unions, immigrant associations, employment agencies, and training centres, and inquiring if they had members or clients who were current or former garment workers. If the response was positive and the organization was interested in assisting with my

recruitment efforts, a letter was sent to a representative requesting written consent to specific recruitment activities with the organization.<sup>1</sup> This included posting notices about the research project at the site, requesting staff recommendations for potential participants, or my own interactions with organization members. Written consent was received from seven different organizations, through which twelve participants were initially recruited. Six participants were recruited through my own personal acquaintances and five were recruited through chain referral selection (also known as snowball sampling) (Schensul et al. 1999:241). In this form of sampling, the initial interviewees were asked to suggest other potential interviewees, in this case, immigrant women garment workers with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. This recruitment process of accessing participants through local organizations and chain referral selection was carried out repeatedly until saturation of information and ideas on relevant issues was achieved, resulting in a total of twenty-three interviews. Specific information gathered during the course of the interviews was kept confidential and not shared with those assisting in recruitment efforts.

Participant recruitment through organizations and chain referral selection proved to be a useful approach for the aims of this research. The methods employed for this study are similar to those utilized by Martin (1994:10) in her research approach, where contacts were met through organizations, and interviews were arranged depending on people's willingness to participate. Building trust with informants was a very important task in the course of this research. Chain referral selection allowed me to develop a rapport and familiarity with research participants through their knowledge that other friends, relatives and co-workers had also participated in the study, and that this research had the support of the organizations with which they were involved. It should be noted that the organizations and individuals who chose to participate greatly shaped this research. Those who were most interested and forth-coming during the interview process, including interviewees and the individuals who assisted with recruitment, contributed many of the insights that shaped the direction of this research. Notably, participants directed my attention towards the difficulties and frustrations they experience not just as

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1: Letter to Community Organizations

garment workers, but as immigrant women in general, and the strategies they employ to deal with these challenges. As Watson (1999:149-150) states, "It seems common experience amongst anthropologists...that the direction their research in the field takes... is determined by the availability of opportunities and the congeniality of the personal friendships that are struck up once in the field."

### *Interview Structure*

In-depth, semi-structured interviews involve pre-formulated interview questions with open-ended answers and the ability to expand responses at the discretion of the interviewer and interviewee (Schensul et al. 1999:149). Schensul et al. (1999:149) argue that "Semistructured interviews combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data." The decision to use this qualitative research tool was due to the nature of my research, where I already had enough information to develop a sense of the background issues in the garment industry, and my goal was to develop an understanding of the impact these issues have on garment workers. It was important to have focus during the interviews, but also to allow for meaningful dialogue and open-ended responses. As a result, there are instances where participants did not directly respond to particular questions in order to focus on addressing issues they felt were more pertinent to their specific life situations. In this research, then, I employed a directed but adaptable interview approach in order to elicit a discussion of the experiences of immigrant women garment workers both in the factories and at home, and in the context of declining employment prospects in the garment industry.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Use of Interpreters*

A number of participants in this study were not fluent in English, and as a result, interpreters were hired to assist in the translation of interview questions and responses with these individuals. In some cases, professional interpreters were hired to facilitate communication between the participants and me. In other cases, friends or relatives of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

participant acted as interpreters for the interviews. In both instances, participants were asked before the interview took place if they were comfortable with the particular interpreter translating the interview. Also, all interpreters were required to sign an interpreter confidentiality form at the beginning of the interview in the presence of the participant and me after the details of the form had been explained to the participant.<sup>3</sup> This confidentiality form acknowledged the interpreter's agreement to keep confidential all personal information disclosed and issues discussed during the interview. It also asked the interpreter to translate in a clear and precise way, and as closely as possible to the original statements. I attempted to monitor interpreters during the interview process to ensure careful and thoughtful translation. This involved watching whether or not the interpreter appeared to be listening carefully to my questions and the participant's responses. As well, my confidence in the translation usually stemmed from the knowledge that most participants spoke some English, and corrected the translator if necessary. The interviews involving interpreters often took more time to complete than those without interpretation, although this also varied with the participant and how descriptive they were with their responses. Compensation for those acting as interpreters for this research was discussed before the interviews took place. When monetary compensation was preferred, the amount was determined and agreed upon before the interview. Otherwise, I showed my appreciation for an interpreter's time and effort in assisting with this research project through other means, which often involved a gift of baked goods.

### *Informed Consent and Confidentiality*

A consent form indicating the goals of the research and the confidential nature of the interviews was reviewed with each participant at the start of the interview.<sup>4</sup> In some cases an interpreter explained the form to the participant in her home language to ensure comprehension. Only after the consent form was reviewed and signed by the participant did the interview commence. Each participant was asked if she felt comfortable having

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 3: Interpreter Confidentiality Form

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 4: Consent Form.

the interview tape-recorded, and if consented to, a section of the consent form dealing with tape recording was initialed by the participant. While many did agree to be tape recorded, some informants expressed concern that they might be nervous with the tape recorder, or felt that their English was not fluent enough to be recorded on audiotape. I respected their wishes not to record the interview in these instances, and instead took handwritten notes. Audiotapes were transcribed following each interview, and handwritten notes were typed on the computer.

With respect to ethical standards, I followed those of the Canadian Tri-Council guidelines by not engaging in any activity that might harm human subjects. Consent was obtained from all research subjects, and steps were taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. This included using pseudonyms and disguising personal information in all interview transcripts and related research documents, including my thesis manuscript.<sup>5</sup> Interview tapes were stored in a locked and secure location, and tapes were destroyed after they were transcribed. As well, a key with codes linking subjects' true identities with their pseudonyms was created for personal reference, and this key was kept apart from the participants' data, locked in a secure location, and carefully protected. All attempts were made to prevent unintentional or inadvertent breaches of participant confidentiality and anonymity. As a result, only I had access to subjects' identities and the information gathered from informants' interviews.

### *Reciprocity for Participation*

Monetary compensation was not provided to informants, and as interviews often took place in the informant's place of residence, the issue of reimbursing transportation costs never arose. In following the anthropological approach to research, I sought to generate a relationship of trust and confidence with my informants. Thus, I showed appreciation for the time and energy they donated to this research project through acts of reciprocity that often involved the provision of baked goods, depending on the time and resources available before the interview took place. Many seemed pleased to receive this

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<sup>5</sup> All names of participants referred to in this thesis have been changed for the purpose of maintaining their anonymity and confidentiality.



gift, and if appropriate, I also offered to assist them in finding information relating to job training or employment opportunities, which I then e-mailed to them with their permission. In one case, I sent information to a participant about cooking classes for herself and art classes for her daughter, as requested. In another case, I agreed to assist a participant in finding a new job, should that issue ever arise. A number of participants also offered me food and refreshments, which I happily accepted.

### *Participant Feedback*

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would like a copy of their transcribed interview notes and were invited to give their feedback, whether it involved clarification, comments, or questions about the interview content or the research in general. Many did request a copy of their interview notes, which was delivered to them either in paper-form, or electronically by e-mail with their permission. A small number of participants did contact me with feedback; two informed me that they were comfortable with the notes I had taken, and another two had corrections for a few factual errors in my note-taking. Most participants (19 of 23) requested a copy of the findings of my thesis; I offered this to them and will deliver a copy upon its completion. Comments and suggestions from research participants were taken into consideration and helped to shape the direction of the research and interviews that followed.

### **Analysis**

After audiotapes and written notes from interviews had been typed on the computer, I began the process of analyzing the data collected from these interviews, my interaction with members of different organizations, and collections of literature reviews and internet searches. Firstly, the interviews were divided up thematically in correlation to the questions asked during the interview and entered into an electronic spreadsheet. This process involved 1) thoroughly reading through each interview transcript and/or notes taken from the interviews, and 2) placing the responses into particular categories based on the questions asked and issues commonly expressed by participants. Comparisons across categories were then made to draw out notable themes, trends, and

contradictions from these data in light of literature relevant to this thesis. Once broad themes were developed, they were broken down into smaller themes, which were further explored as significant issues to be discussed in the research findings.

### **Study Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this research project. Due to the non-random sample size of twenty-three participants, this study cannot be considered representative of immigrant women garment workers in Winnipeg; instead, it is an exploration of the experiences of the selected participants. However, as Homans (1950:19) long ago pointed out in his use of case studies, wide coverage is sacrificed for the gain of intensity of analysis. In his view, it is the behaviour of people, often in small numbers, that "...has inspired the largest part of human literature and eloquence" (Homans 1950:4). It is my hope that this case study will contribute to the understanding of the impact of the elimination of clothing and textile quotas on immigrant women garment workers in Winnipeg and their experiences in this industry.

Not included in this study were garment workers who settled in Canada by applying for refugee status. Refugees are defined as having very different experiences from those of independent or sponsored immigrants who can be considered to have some choice in their movement to another country. In contrast to independent or sponsored immigrants, a refugee is defined as a person located outside of his/her country of origin due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country due to this fear (Bouchet-Saulnier 1992:127). As Sullivan (1996:96-97) notes, "Amongst the immigrants who today are seen as genuinely choiceless are refugees singled out for persecution because of ascriptive characteristics over which they have no control, such as racial or ethnic group membership," as well as wartime refugees. Also, refugees have presumably encountered previous situations of hardship and violence, and the distressed memories of these experiences may still be with them (Migliardi 2001:3). They face a sudden relocation often to unknown places, and are more likely to return to their home countries once

conditions there sufficiently improve (Migliardi 2001:3). As a result of their unique migration circumstances compared to that of other immigrants, refugees were not considered in this research project; their experiences could not be adequately dealt with in the scope of this study. Thus, the focus of this research is on the experiences of a group of immigrant women, both sponsored and independent, in the Winnipeg garment industry.

My study is grounded in a recent research project on the Winnipeg garment industry (Wiest 2005) and seeks to build and expand on its discussion of the experiences of garment workers in local factories. Homeworkers, or workers who are given garments to sew in the home, were excluded as research subjects. Since homeworkers are a largely hidden and unprotected workforce, they often experience a great deal of exploitation, and the many issues they face were not able to be addressed within the scope of my thesis research; instead, this study focuses on the lives of immigrant women presently or formerly employed in Winnipeg garment factories.

### **Profile of Research Participants**

One of the goals of this research was to interview immigrant women garment workers from a wide variety of backgrounds. A total of twenty-three immigrant women were interviewed between October 2005 and December 2005 for this research project. Fourteen of these women are currently employed in the Winnipeg garment industry, eight of which are sewing machine operators (SMOs), while two are employed as sorters/helpers, and one each are employed as a designer, quality inspector, sample-sewer and pattern-maker. Nine of the participants are no longer employed in this industry, seven previously working as SMOs, and two as pattern-makers (see Table 1).

The women in this study came to Canada from a total of twelve countries in a wide variety of regions, including East Asia (China and Hong Kong), South Asia (India), South East Asia (Philippines, Vietnam), Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine), Southern Europe (Italy, Greece, Bosnia/the former Yugoslavia), South America (Guyana), the Caribbean (Jamaica), and East Africa (Tanzania). Twelve of these women immigrated to Canada as sponsored/family class immigrants, and one woman became a landed

immigrant after marrying a Canadian citizen. Six research participants came to Canada after being recruited in their home countries to work in the local garment industry, and subsequently became landed immigrants. Two women came to Canada through the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), and another two accompanied their husbands who found jobs here through the PNP (see Table 2).

**Table 1: A Study of Current and Former Winnipeg Garment Workers: Current Positions in the Garment Industry (2005)**

<b>Position in the Garment Industry</b>	<b>Currently Employed Participants</b>	<b>Previously Employed Participants</b>
Designers	1	0
Pattern-makers	1	2
Sample Sewers	1	0
Quality Inspectors	1	0
Sewing Machine Operators	8	7
Sorters/Helpers	2	0
Total	14	9

**Table 2: A Study of Current and Former Winnipeg Garment Workers: Countries of Origin (2005)**

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>
Philippines	5
China	5
India	2
Bosnia/Yugoslavia	2
Hong Kong, Greece, Vietnam, Jamaica, Ukraine, Poland, Italy, Tanzania, Guyana (one interview with a participant from each of these countries)	9
Total	23

The participants were all adult women whose ages ranged from 25 to 72 at the time the interviews took place. Nine of these women were in their thirties, and another nine were in their fifties. Two participants were in their twenties, while three were sixty

years of age or older. The majority of the women interviewed for this study were married. Only two of the participants were single and unmarried, and one was divorced. As for language skills, eight participants spoke little English such that a translator was required for the interviews, while another eight interviewees spoke English with a high level of fluency. The remaining participants spoke slightly less fluent English, but had a high enough proficiency in the language for communication to be adequate during the interview process. Six participants were not visible minorities, i.e., Caucasian in background, and none of these women spoke fluent English when they arrived in Canada. Only one woman who was not a visible minority showed a high level of English fluency during the interview process.

### **Structure of Thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One describes the focus of this study, research methods, the analysis process, study limitations and a profile of those participating in this research. Chapter Two is a review of the literature relevant to this study, including a review of the global, national and local levels of the garment industry, and a discussion of the many challenges faced by immigrant women, working women, and garment workers. As well, theoretical considerations involving theories of globalization and agency are also explored in this section. Chapter Three examines garment workers' experiences in immigrating to Canada and their transition to Winnipeg, while Chapter Four discusses their experiences working in the garment industry; this includes an overview of their prospects for upward mobility, relationships with co-workers and supervisors, and other aspects of working in this field. Chapter Five explores the home life experiences of the women in this study, with an emphasis on their housework and childcare responsibilities. Chapter Six discusses the impacts of the WTO agreement on local garment workers, including their views and opinions about the phase-out of quotas, while Chapter Seven summarizes the findings of this research.