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Aging experiences of older immigrant women in Québec (Canada): From deskilling to liberation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines experiences of aging of older immigrant women. The data are based on qualitative research that was conducted in Québec, Canada with 83 elderly women from different ethnocultural backgrounds (Arab, African, Haitian, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Romanian, etc.). The results on how such immigrant women deal with material conditions of existence such as deskilling, aging alone, being more economically independent, and the combined effects of liberation from social and family norms associated with age and gender in the light of the migration route, will be presented. For the majority, migration opened up possibilities for personal development and self-affirmation. The findings demonstrated the relevance of the intersectional approach in understanding the complexity and social conditionings of women's experiences of aging.

KEYWORDS

Experiences of aging;
intersectional approach;
older immigrant women;
qualitative research

Introduction

For many years we have investigated the situations of aging women in the private and public domains. While acknowledging that women's experience of aging is characterized by multiple forms of exclusion, we have shown that older women engage in various practices of resistance through social and political involvement. In this article, we continue this work by focusing on a population that is underrepresented in feminist, gerontological, and intercultural research: Older immigrant women. For anyone interested in the phenomenon of aging in Western countries, it is a noteworthy population. In Québec, 16% of the population is aged 65 or over, and over the next 30 years this rate is expected to double (Government of Québec, 2015). The population of Québec is aging, and its profile will be increasingly female and culturally diverse. In fact, most seniors are women (57% compared to 43%), a proportion that will accentuate with age, rising to 70% among women aged 85 and over (Government of Québec, 2015, p. 3). Further, according to 2001 data, 28% of older women in Canada were immigrants (Milan & Vézina, 2011). Older women's voices should be heard, and this is why we embarked upon a study with 83 immigrant women aged 60 and over, from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, who had immigrated at different periods in their lives. What does it mean to older women to grow old in a land of immigration? What are the effects of immigration on their living conditions, especially when they have immigrated after 50?

This article seeks to answer these questions based on the accounts of 83 immigrant women we met during group interviews. Two principal dimensions are evoked in their remarks: Immigration means (a) living conditions marked by both professional deskilling and a certain degree of economic independence, and also (b) freedom, i.e., possibilities for women to further their personal development.

Theoretical aspects of the study

Overview of the literature

A review of the scientific literature based on various combinations of the keywords “older women,” “women,” “immigrant women,” and “aging,” with an emphasis on social gerontology and feminist studies, generated three main conclusions. First, we found quite a few studies of adult immigrant women (18–34 and 35–49 cohorts) and immigrant families¹ but very few studies of older immigrant women. As several authors noted, very few studies concern older immigrant women, rendering them socially invisible (Attias-Donfut & Delcroix, 2004). Although more research is being done on immigrant seniors in general, few of these studies take gender into account. Last, with respect to the topics under study, the experience and perceptions of aging receive scarce notice when it comes to immigrant seniors (Torres, 2008). Most studies on seniors, whether in North America or Europe, focus on the impacts of immigration, analyzing experiences of discrimination, or the effects of migratory paths on individuals’ living conditions (wage gaps, deskilling, poverty, vulnerability, isolation) (Wu & Penning, 2015; Rousseau, Drapeau, & Corin, 1997; Treas & Shampa, 2002). Other studies focus rather on seniors’ state of health, described mostly in terms of losses and deficits (Chappell, Lai, Gee, Chan, & Behie, 1997; Chen, Ng, & Wilkins, 1996; Dunn & Dyck, 1998; Statistic Canada, 2006), factors influencing their quality of life (Bajekal, Blane, Grewal, Karlsen, & Nazroo, 2004) or on the utilization of health services (Anderson, Blue, Holbrook, & Ng, 1993; Chappell et al., 1997; Globerman, 1998), sometimes in comparison with the majority population. Many studies have also examined the beliefs, values, behaviors, and needs of cultural minorities, but they concern the population as a whole and do not focus on seniors or specific subpopulations with respect to ethnic or geographic background (Dasgupta, 1998; Health Canada, 1999; Wray, 2003). More recent studies have examined the transnational networks of immigrant families, particularly the role of women (but rarely that of older women) in perpetuating generational links (Le Gall, 2005; Vatz Laaroussi, 2009). In the current context of increased international mobility, some studies have explored intentions to return to the home country upon retirement (Lundholm, 2015, 2012; Yahirun, 2009). Research conducted with older immigrant women is rarer and almost always focuses on the grandmother’s role (the importance of exchanges of services, relationships with grandchildren, impact of geographic distance) (Aldous, 1995; Bourgeois & Légaré, 2008; Attias-Donfut, Tessier, & Wolff, 2008; Treas & Shampa, 2004).

Decision to employ the intersectional approach

Despite the transformation of male/female relations, these women experienced substantial gender-related inequalities. Added to this are other factors of inequality including ethnicity, age, social class/socioeconomic status, and schooling. To take into account the multiple forms of discrimination encountered by older immigrant women, we opted for the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1994; Dorlin, 2012; Krekula, 2007; Maillé, 2014; Poiret, 2005) because of its acknowledgement that “gender intersects with other aspects of social identity,” “generating specific experiences of oppression” and, as we will see, adaptation and resistance strategies and capacities for resistance [*Translation*] (Corbeil & Marchand, 2006, p. 46). This approach emerged from “standpoint theory,” which developed in the 1970s as a feminist critique of the relationship between knowledge production and practices of power (Harstock, 1998; hooks, 1981; Poiret, 2005) and demonstrated that the point of view of women belonging to ethnic and racial minority groups was ignored not only by White men but also by White women. Out of this came an insistence on the primacy of a perspective rooted in the life experience specific to women belonging to ethnic minority groups. According to this approach, all knowledge flows from the respective social positions and individual trajectories of the observer and observed and therefore must be made explicit and subject to a reflexive analysis (Poiret, 2005). The epistemological and methodological dimensions of this approach involve researching and analyzing the interactions of different forms of oppression and their impact on the minority experience. Power

¹For more about Canadian research in this area, see the studies of the Centre d’excellence Métropolis (<http://www.im.metropolis.net/>).

relations and inequality are at once cause and effect. In this regard, the statements of women from ethnic minority groups reveal that they do not experience sexism more than racism; rather, the sexism they experience is racialized, and the forms of racism to which they are subjected are gendered: “The different forms of domination are thus not separate or additional, but, on the contrary, they are interactive in both their processes and their effects” [*Translation*] (Poiret, 2005). The experience of Cooper in the late 19th century United States is an eloquent example of this: “When further along . . . our train stops at a dilapidated station. I see two dingy little rooms with ‘FOR LADIES’ swinging over one and ‘FOR COLORED PEOPLE’ over the other. I wonder under which head I come” (Cooper, 1892, p. 96, cited by Harper, 2012). The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994), when applied to our microsociological context, enabled us to identify the effects on individuals of interrelated structures of inequality and describe the processes of racism, sexism, ageism, and/or age-based exclusion from a microsociological viewpoint, based on the diverse daily life experiences of immigrant women.

Methodical aspects of the study

Conducted in Montréal from 2012 to 2014, our research project was the fruit of a partnership with organizations that work with this population or are composed of groups that represent them. Each has developed a specific expertise—for instance, ethnocultural identity, gender, and age.² We considered this partnership an essential condition for our study’s success because it enabled us to reach older women about whom less is known and who are often more difficult to contact (mainly due to the language barrier) and also because we wanted to publish the study’s findings, and in so doing, make their voices heard. In terms of our overall perspective, we adopted a feminist intercultural approach (Vatz Laaroussi, 2007) to overcome the structural obstacles of the researcher-respondent relationship (language, researcher status, etc.) and grasp the constructed reality and its meaning by getting close to the actors concerned (small groups, principle of shared ethnic background of interviewers-respondents, etc.).

Focus group as data-collection method

Given our objectives and theoretical choices (intersectionality), we believed using focus groups as a data-collection method would best enable older immigrant women to talk about their experience. The purpose of focus groups is to allow people to think together about important aspects of their experience and, rather than focus on the singularity of each person, identify what is common to the group (Deslauriers, 1991; Duchesne & Haegel, 2005). They are the only way of reaching enough women to achieve data saturation (roughly 10 for a homogenous group) (Bertaux, 1996).

The interview guide was grouped into five main themes: Migratory path, multiple identities and representations of aging, experience of aging in terms of the relationship to oneself and one’s body, experiences of aging in terms of relationships to others and to the family, and, last, end of life and final legacy. The focus groups began with an informal discussion in which the women introduced themselves to each other (referring to an object or quality that represented them). They then discussed the five themes in response to open-ended questions. The women were free to answer these open-ended questions or not; our goal was to encourage each woman to speak.

Challenges of the sampling process: Diversity and respect

With regard to sampling, our challenge was threefold: Prioritize diversity in experience and migratory paths, interview the older women in their own language, and resolve several problems of an

²Our partners: The Fédération des femmes du Québec, Relais-femmes, les Mamies immigrantes, and the Centre de recherche et d’expertise en gérontologie sociale (CREGES) du CSSS Cavendish-University Affiliated Centre.

ethical nature (informed consent, ability to refer to professionals in the event we became aware of problematic situations or received requests for help, etc.). We addressed this challenge by recruiting interview assistants who were of the same ethnic group and shared the same language and culture as the women being interviewed in the focus group (principle of homoethnicity of researchers and respondents). Our partners also helped in this respect and in the recruitment. We conducted 18 group interviews. Each of the groups was composed of three to six women with a common ethnocultural background and language but diverse characteristics in terms of marital status, level of schooling, income, and migratory path.

The older immigrant women we met: A wealth of life stories and experiences

Overall picture

Our final sample comprised 83 older women immigrants, who took part in 18 group interviews. The women were between 58 and 88 years of age:³ 27 were aged 65 to 69; 15 were aged 70 to 74; 15 were aged 75 to 79; 11 were aged 80 to 84; and six were aged 85 to 89. They were from four continents and 17 different countries: Former Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia (10), Romania (6), Mexico (2), Guatemala (1), El Salvador (3), Colombia (5), Algeria (3), Egypt (6), Lebanon (4), China (9), Japan (9), Congo (5), Haiti (10), Jamaica (3), and Portugal (7). **Table 1** provides a glimpse of the socio-demographic and immigration characteristics of these 83 women. We will go into more detail about this in the Findings section.

Circumstances of and reasons for migration

The 83 older women in our sample emigrated at widely varying ages. Almost 40 of them emigrated when they were well into their adult years, near retirement: 15 of them when they were aged 46 to 55; 17 when they were between 56 and 65; and six others when they were 66 or older. This was the case of all the older women from Former Yugoslavia (10) and most of the Romanians, Colombians, and Congolese women. Nearly 30 women immigrated when they were adults: 16 were between 26 and 35 (most of the Arab and Portuguese women), and 13 women were between 36 and 45. Over half of the Haitians emigrated before they were 40, and most of the Japanese women—7 out of 9—emigrated before they were 45, many when they were in their 30s. Fewer of our respondents emigrated when they were young: Only 10 of them emigrated before 25; the older women from China represented half of this group. The Canadian government has nine programs for landed immigrants.⁴ Our respondents used four of these programs during their immigration process: 31 arrived as skilled workers (some as a coapplicant, with their husband as the principal applicant), 22 arrived through sponsorship⁵ or as live-in caregivers,⁶ nine immigrated under the family reunification program, and 22 obtained refugee status.⁷

The women gave multiple reasons for emigrating. For many, it was not a choice. This was the case of those escaping a repressive political situation or even war (Congo, Colombia, Former Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone): “We were union activists and persecuted because of that. For us in El Salvador, going on strike was seen as a terrible thing and we were persecuted or killed” (El Salvador 3, 72 years old). Many Arab women told of leaving their country at a time of great political unrest: Algeria in

³Despite our explanations about eligibility criteria for the study, seven of the 83 focus group participants were under 65, and two did not reveal their age but were obviously very old.

⁴For more details about these programs, consult this Canadian government website: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/apply.asp>.

⁵A Canadian citizen or permanent resident can sponsor his or her spouse, dependent children, or other family member, and thus enable them to become permanent residents.

⁶This program allows a citizen or permanent resident to sponsor someone who is not a relative. Individuals who immigrate under this program are required to provide unsupervised in-home care to children, old people, and people with disabilities. They must live in the private home where they work.

⁷People eligible for this program are those who are afraid they will be persecuted if they return to their home country.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents.

Characteristics	Older immigrant women (<i>n</i> = 83)	
Age	64 or younger	7
	65–69	27
	70–74	15
	75–79	15
	80–84	11
	85–89	6
Income	Low	59
	Average	12
	High	4
Schooling	University	32
	College	11
	Secondary	11
	Elementary	16
Marital status	Married	37
	Widow	19
	Single	7
	Separated/ divorced	17
Living arrangement	Alone	35
	Cohabitation	34
	With children	9
Immigration age	25 or younger	10
	26–35	16
	36–45	13
	46–55	15
	56–65	17
	66 or older	6
Immigration status	Family reunification	9
	Sponsorship	22
	Skilled worker	31
	Refugee	19
No. of years in Canada	9 or less	8
	10–24	27
	25 or more	45

the 1980s and 1990s, during the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and Lebanon in the 1980s, marked by ethnic conflict and the war with Israel. Other women were forced to emigrate by their families, who wanted them to be safe. Some women from poor countries, with little hope of decent living conditions, immigrated to improve their situation and that of their families. Many of these older women emphasized that they emigrated out of a sense of duty, to reunite with their husbands. These women tended to view immigration as an experience of being uprooted and consequently had difficulty integrating into the new society. Some women were left on their own shortly after arriving: “My husband brought us here and then went away. I was left with our five children” (Algeria 1, aged 65). For some of the older women, immigration was a deliberate choice, seen as a chance to start a new life and even to realize a dream. Last, the women who emigrated late in life often did so to reunite with their children; many of them found themselves alone in their birth country after their husband’s death.

Findings

This article is about the effects of immigration on the older women we met with. We based it on data collected under the five themes of our interview guide—in particular, what we term the effects of freedom, a dimension that emerged not only in the women’s accounts of their migratory paths (theme 1) but also, and much more profoundly, when they spoke about themselves (theme 2) and their relationships with their families and lives in Québec society (themes 3 and 4). First, we will see how immigration results in deskilling and, consequently, impoverishment for all of the women, regardless of their social background and level of schooling. In this respect, and in line with the

intersectional approach, the dimension of immigration is much more significant than social class as such. We then discuss the fact that most of the women we met with would qualify their experience with one word: Freedom. Regardless of their birth country or religion, and despite the enormous hardships some women encountered when they arrived in Canada, they said that, as women, their status improved in terms of self-realization and personal development. In other words, it is the gendered dimension of their experience—the fact of being a woman—that is the most significant aspect of the women's migratory path.

The material conditions of existence

The experience of deskilling

Among the women we met with, one became a language teacher in Québec, a job she would not have had access to in her birth country. A few other women also experienced upward career mobility. Five Haitian women, who emigrated when they were very young, hold university degrees and have a high socio-occupational status as a doctor, professor, nurse, and audiologist. However, these paths are not representative of the respondent group as a whole. In contrast to these positive experiences, it seems that many older immigrant women were unable to find a job that matched their educational level and ended up confined to unskilled jobs. While nearly one-third of the respondents (32) had university-level education, and 11 had college educations,⁸ most of them worked in manufacturing jobs—for instance, as seamstresses or in private homes as cleaning women and babysitters. Deskilling was common among respondents with college and university educations, who suffered many kinds of losses—identity, status, economic—in comparison with their career situation in the home country. Many of these older women recounted their unending struggle, often alone, to ensure their survival and that of their children. With only a few exceptions, and despite their level of schooling, these older women immigrants lived in poverty or on the verge of poverty.

Aging alone and poor

A little under half of the older women we met are married (37), 15 are divorced, two are separated, 19 are widows, and seven are single. Over half of them have only one or two children (47), some 12 of them have three children, and nine of the older women have four children. A minority of our respondents (11) have large families—families with five or more children. As for the number of grandchildren, while 13 have none, the majority of our respondents (39) said they have one to four grandchildren. Only a few (8) reported having a larger number of grandchildren, ranging from 10 to 30. With regard to living arrangements, in contrast to what we had expected and the preconceived notion that immigrant families have multiple generations, particularly the older members, living together under one roof, most of the respondents live alone (35) or with their husbands (32). Few of them live in an intergenerational arrangement. Eight women live with their children, two live with their husband and children or grandchildren, and one woman lives with her grandchildren. Our sample reflects the fact that the trend in our individualistic society to live alone is increasingly true of seniors (MFA, 2011) and is marked by gender: The percentage of older women living alone is significantly higher (31.5%) than that of men (16%) (Statistique Canada, 2012, p. 3), in part because of their longer life expectancy.

Living and aging alone has an impact on living conditions. Many more single older women are poor and must overcome greater challenges in day-to-day life (cost of groceries and rent, heating, upkeep, etc.), especially in the event of illness and loss of autonomy (Gélineau, Fecteau, & Caron, 2008; Robichaud, 2009). Among the older immigrant women in our sample, five receive social assistance. Most receive Old Age Pension benefits (67), often partial benefits, because they have

⁸The rest were distributed as follows: 11 had high school, and 16 had elementary school educations.

accumulated at least 10 years of Canadian residency, which is the minimum to be eligible. The amount of the benefit is calculated on a pro rata basis depending on the number of years lived in Canada, up to a maximum of 40 years, and it is below the low-income cutoff.⁹ In addition to the old-age pension, only six older immigrant women also receive a retirement pension benefit, five earn a salary, and one has rental income. This reflects the difficulty of integrating the labor market and the discrimination they have faced, even for those with a high level of schooling and qualifications and who had been in Canada for many years.

For many respondents, migration and the fact of living alone also go hand in hand with social isolation. This is particularly true for those who speak neither official language. Some women reported a deep sense of solitude, due to the absence of an extended family. As we will see later, although it is a source of pressure and obligations, the women also associate the extended family with cooperation and mutual aid. The vast majority of respondents said that emigrating to Québec meant feeling isolated:

Here, when we get old, we have no one. It's hard because there isn't anybody we can count on to bring us something. . . . Back home we have lots of family members who can help us. (Haiti 2, aged 74)

We're alone here. . . . But apart from that, living in Québec is very good. (Former Yugoslavia 2, aged 68)

The new lifestyle in the host country represents a break with what these women were accustomed to and a crumbling of their social network:

We grew up in Africa, so we always lived with our families. People were always in the house, cousins, aunts and uncles, we were always in a group. . . . We never lived alone in Africa, and here we must learn to take care of ourselves, live alone. . . . It's a solitude that weighs on us. For an African woman, getting old here means solitude. (Congo 1, aged 63)

Being more economically independent

Women reported a certain degree of economic security even though, as we have mentioned, most of them receive a very small pension income. Several women indicated that the discounts offered by different businesses and service providers to persons aged 65 and older allowed them to raise their quality of life and enjoy the occasional treat. Some women reported that the fact they receive a check in their own name that no one can take away from them or cash for them meant a lot in terms of their economic independence: "Still, I have a better life here than back home. I have my pension; I don't live the life of someone who is disadvantaged" (Haiti 2, aged 79). This economic security procures heightened social independence, particularly in relation to their children. The women we met wanted to express their appreciation for this income, paid to them personally by the federal government: "It's much better here. At least here, we receive money. We have a 'grandfather'" [laughter, referring to the government] (China 1, aged 80). Many women from countries lacking infrastructure and services for the elderly view the old age pension as a sign of respect for seniors, in addition to being a form of security: "I can see personally that getting old here is good . . . because the government takes care of the old. The government does everything for the old" (Congo, aged 71).

Opportunities for personal development or migration's freedom effect

Although immigration creates a break between past and present—especially for the women who arrived in Québec after the age of 40—and even though they suffer from solitude, most of the women use the words "personal development" and "self-affirmation" to describe their experience. The migratory path of most of the women, whether it occurred in youth or middle age, had a

⁹The low-income cutoff for single people has been established as \$18,112 (Fréchet, Lechaume, Legris, & Savard, 2012, pp. 7–8).

liberating effect in terms of the values and standards of the birth country or the political context there. One woman summarizes this liberating effect as follows: “I had a real sense of freedom and happiness . . . of being able to achieve things I couldn’t have achieved in a whole lifetime in Romania [crying] (Romania 2, aged 81).

Liberation from the social standards associated with older women

First of all, for many women freedom meant the freedom to think, study, and wear what they wanted; to have control over their time and their body; to go out, to love, and to express their sexuality. In short, they spoke of the freedom to make their own choices throughout life, including old age:

It’s good to grow old here, and at this time. It’s less traumatic, not so scary . . . In Haiti, it is terrible because as soon as you reach a certain age, people think you can no longer grow and develop. It’s as if your life were over, you’re no longer entitled to love dancing, or the rest of it. (Haiti 1, aged 68)

The immigrant women who arrived with no higher-learning credentials remarked that Québec provides women with better opportunities for personal development and self-affirmation: “I don’t know, if I had stayed, whether I would have continued my education after marriage. I don’t know whether I would have developed the same way, if I could have worked” (Egypt 1, aged 69). Many of the Arab immigrants said that the fact they were in a country where women are not forced to conform to traditional roles meant they could be affirmative and independent. It would appear that Québec has given them the opportunity to be themselves, to make decisions for personal reasons rather than follow social dictates: “Over there, you can’t just be yourself, you have to follow the flock. So, what I liked to do that I didn’t do back there, I can do it here” (Algeria, aged 65). The dimension of freedom was also mentioned by the women from Former Yugoslavia and was especially present and strong in the remarks of the respondents from Romania. The arrival in Québec was reported as a time of happiness and personal liberation, when they could take up long-abandoned interests. The participants from Former Yugoslavia also mentioned particularly appreciating the freedom they experienced with regard to their appearance. They felt that social pressures were much milder here: “That’s what I like about Québec. . . . Everyone wears what they want, and what is comfortable for them. In our country, we’re forced to put on makeup even when we take out the garbage!” (Former Yugoslavia 1, aged 66).

The sense of freedom they expressed also referred to freedom of thought and freedom to pursue different kinds of activities. The Haitian women we met spoke of the heavy social controls in their birth country: Activities seen as perfectly ordinary in Québec, such as dancing or going to the movies, are considered out of the question for older women. Some women also mentioned the possibility of having an active love life: “At a certain age, you don’t even have a sex life, you can’t even talk about it. You can’t fall in love. . . . It’s as if for you, life is over now” (Haiti 1, aged 68). In Haiti, older women seem to be subjected to strict social controls, and several respondents spoke of the privilege of being in Montréal because there they can do lots of things without being treated as a “bad woman” (Haiti 1, aged 68).

The possibility of having an active life and taking on projects in old age were mentioned as examples of things that allowed for personal development, a Québec value that is appreciated by numerous respondents. A Jamaican respondent of 65 expressed her admiration for seniors who decide to go back to school and earn a degree, not for financial reasons, but for their own development. She aspires to do the same. Paradoxically, many also condemn the individualism.

Liberation from social and family norms associated with women’s role in the family

The possibility for personal development is accentuated by the relaxing of women’s family responsibilities and their new living arrangements. In contrast to preconceived notions, the vast majority of

respondents live alone or with their husband. Only nine out of 83 live with children or grandchildren. Many respondents have distanced themselves from the traditional “vertical” and “female” care system, centered on the family, and are critical of how it has curtailed women’s—mothers’ and grandmothers’—individual freedom and independence. The arrival in Québec changed their position and role, even in the family: “My role changed. I was the giver, now I’m more a receiver, and more or less on my own, an individualist” (Haiti 1, aged 68).

In this regard, living alone or in a couple brought a feeling of freedom, a reappropriation of their time and daily lives, especially since their family obligations were reduced in the host country. For instance, they babysit their grandchildren, but they do so when they are available: “When the parents want to go out dancing in the evening, I stay with the children. I have danced a lot in my life, and now it’s time for them to have fun” (Colombia 1, aged 61).

Emancipation from the husband: The principle of sexual equality

These older immigrant women clearly viewed the principle of sexual equality in Québec society positively. Many talked about the changes in their marriage and family dynamics after settling in Québec, especially in relation to family roles, and the more equal distribution of household chores and parental responsibilities. The Congolese and Colombian participants stressed their emancipation from the family controls exercised in their homeland, especially within marriage: “Today, when you decide to divorce your husband, you’re free, you do it. In my country, it was not possible, you had to listen to the family” (Congo 1, 65).

In some cultures, such as Congo, pressure and even punishment inflicted on wives continued even after the husband’s death, in the form of widowhood rituals. In Québec, the women said, they were “freed from this ordeal” that they had lacked the strength to oppose. Furthermore, the criminalization of domestic violence in Québec gives women the possibility of escaping such situations: “Back home women tolerate things they should not have to tolerate: abuse, blows. And when they come here, they learn that here, it’s zero tolerance for abuse. Here, they say, ‘No, no more!’” (Colombia 1, aged 61).

Several respondents from Former Yugoslavia also mentioned that their husbands had changed their behavior toward them. They seemed to have understood that certain practices are unacceptable in Québec and that they can no longer claim superiority over their wives:

My husband said he wasn’t afraid of the police, but at the same time, he doesn’t shout anymore. He speaks normally . . . (Former Yugoslavia 1, aged 66)

For me, it’s different. My husband can no longer say, “I’m the boss here.” . . . I feel like a butterfly. (Former Yugoslavia 1, aged 75)

Conclusion

This sketch of the paths of older immigrant women illustrates the diversity of migration experiences and challenges the stereotyped image of the large multigenerational immigrant family that shelters a poor and dependent grandmother. These women have encountered numerous obstacles to their social and occupational integration in the host country, and many have encountered hardships that expatriation rendered all the more difficult.

For them, aging is accompanied by major challenges associated with their life paths: solitude, assistance and care of loved ones, economic insecurity, and vulnerability to violence—elements that affect older women much more than the men of their generation. These disadvantages, including socioeconomic insecurity, combined with multiple forms of discrimination—ageism, sexism, and racism—are particularly significant in older women’s lives (Charpentier & Billette, 2010; Rose, 2009) and the lives of immigrant women, especially when they migrated late in life (Olazabal et al., 2010; Treas & Shampa, 2002). The illustrations throughout this article demonstrate the appropriateness of the intersectional approach for grasping the complexity of women’s life paths.

With respect to identity, the interviews with these women reveal their strong capacity for adaptation. For them, aging is not only experienced as loss—far from it: They speak rather of gains in terms of their identity. Migration has meant they can grow old and enjoy more security and also more freedom as women to dress as they like, go out on their own, etc. Migration opened up possibilities for personal development and self-affirmation. Our analysis reveals women's desire to distance themselves from the omnipresent stereotypes generated by the interacting effects of ageism, sexism, and racism that assail them, here and elsewhere. They also indicated that their relationship to themselves and aging was shaped by a combination of their cultural identity, generation, and migratory path (in youth or later in life). Most of the women we interviewed were seeking to create and appropriate an image of themselves as aging women and perceive this period of aging in accordance with a world vision that continues to give their lives meaning.

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