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*A la memoria del Dr. Bernardo Jablonski*

## Latin American Women in Australia: *Immigration and its impact on gender relationships and family life*<sup>1</sup>

### Latinas en Australia

#### *La inmigración y su impacto en las relaciones de género y familia*

#### ABSTRACT

International migration has become an essential part of the economic and social life of many countries. Although immigration has been widely analysed, research regarding female immigration is scarce. Moreover, studies focusing on the adjustment process of Latin American women in Australia and elsewhere likewise remain under-researched. The current paper addresses the impact that immigration to Australia had on family relationships and gender values in a group of Latin American women in Melbourne. To that end, 13 Latin American women were interviewed using an open-ended format. Main findings suggest that immigration did not necessarily represent a way to promote a change in unequal family and gender values. Although participants acknowledged broader male participation in family duties, traditional gender values attached to the female role still had a strong impact on the division of domestic and child-rearing duties.

*Key words:* immigration, Latin American women, Australia, gender, family.

#### RESUMEN

La migración internacional representa una parte esencial de la vida económica y social de muchos países. A pesar de que este fenómeno ha sido ampliamente analizado, las investigaciones relacionadas con la inmigración femenina aún son limitadas. Sumado a eso, el estudio del proceso de adaptación de mujeres latinoamericanas en Australia está poco investigado. Este trabajo analiza el impacto de la inmigración en las relaciones de familia y valores de género en un grupo de mujeres latinoamericanas en Melbourne, Australia. Para eso, se realizaron entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas con 13 mujeres latinas. Fue posible observar que la inmigración no promovió necesariamente un cambio en las relaciones desiguales de familia y en los valores de género. A pesar de haber una mayor participación masculina en los deberes familiares, los valores de género tradicionales vinculados al rol femenino aun permean la división de tareas domésticas y la crianza de los hijos.

*Palabras clave:* inmigración, mujeres latinoamericanas, Australia, género, familia.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the International Organization for Migration, in 2009 there were more than 200 million migrants, representing 3.1% of the global population (IOM, 2009). Taking this into consideration, migration has become an essential and unavoidable component of the social and economic life of many countries. Recent data provided by the United Nations in 2010 indicated that, over the years, international migration has become more balanced by sex as education, mobility and employment opportunities have been increasingly more accessible to women. It is estimated that 105 million women make up 49 per cent of the total international migrants around the world, even outnumbering male migrants in some regions (in Eastern Europe, female migrants represent 57% of the total migrant population, 55% in Central & Eastern Asia and 53% in Northern Europe) (UNDESA, 2010).

- 4 The close attention paid to women within the immigration process – or, as Marinucci (2007) described, the “feminization of migration” – represents a recent academic focus, initiated approximately three decades ago. Before this, immigrant women were frequently stereotyped as dependant wives, unproductive and isolated members of the community not included in most analysis of the reasons, ways and effects of immigration. Interest on female migration resulted, mostly, from the growing feminist perspective on women’s role in society since the 1970’s and the acknowledgment of women as economically productive members (Morokvasic, 1983; Sinke, 2006). As a result, immigration studies incorporated gender as a significant geographically and culturally related construct. This concept can be understood as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, 1991: 14) or, as Wade and Tavris (1999) had also explained, as a sum of duties, rights and behaviours that a specific culture attributes and expect from femininity and masculinity. Consequently, gender roles and expectations are a direct result of cultural socialization, and they vary depending on historical, economic, political and cultural contexts. A good understanding of the characteristics and influence of gender values in society seems to be extremely important in social analysis as it shows possible socially constructed mechanisms for female oppression and subordination (Pedraza, 1991; UNESCO, 2003).

The relevance of incorporating the concept of gender within migration studies is based on the assumption that, as many authors indicated (e.g., Dion

& Dion, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Raijman & Semyonov, 1997; Sullivan, 1984), immigrant women are more likely to experience greater hardships in comparison to immigrant men. These challenges are a result of a combination of factors, most influenced and determined by gender values and socio-cultural expectations. For example, immigrant women with limited family or social support networks in the new environment and limited skills in the host country's language often experience restricted access to information and knowledge resources of the labour market in the new country, mainly as a result of the accumulation of domestic and motherhood responsibilities. In general, immigrant women frequently experience an overloaded reality, trying to combine the pressures of paid work with family and domestic duties. In most cases, female migrants struggle to find a balance among so many responsibilities, especially without social or family support to help them -in particular with children care (Alcorso, 1991, 1995; DIEA, 1985).

This situation frequently leads to a serious shortage of time to pursue education, learn new social skills and the language of the host country. In many cases, these circumstances become a trap for female immigrants who do not have many opportunities to work on a positive integration strategy. As a result of the combination of traditional female responsibilities, restricted family or social support networks and the relative isolation from the mainstream society, immigrant women often experience high levels of psychological stress, and, even, depression (Noh, Wu, Speechley & Kaspar, 1992; Vega *et al.*, 1987).

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Immigration from more traditional countries to more egalitarian ones does not necessarily represent a way to improve women's status in the society. Morokvasic (1983, 1984) has stressed this point, stating that unless immigration is followed by substantial changes in women's reproductive role within the family with a subsequent renegotiation of female's productive position in labour and educational contexts, relocation *per se* does not represent a major source of social change for women. If these factors remain unaffected, the expected benefits from immigration might be delayed or might not even be perceived by women.

Although there has been extensive research focusing on the migration and acculturation experiences of Latin Americans in North America (mostly connected to the geographical proximity and the greater number of individuals and families relocating north) focus on the adjustment process of Latin American immigrant women around the world, and particularly in Australia, re-

mains scarce. The current paper presents a qualitative analysis of the impact that migration to Australia had on family relationships and gender values according to the experiences of a group of Latin American women, living in Melbourne for an average of 32 years. For that, 13 women of Spanish-speaking background were interviewed in 2006 and 2007 using an open-ended schedule. The data from the interviews seeks to portrait the interviewees' reflections about their past experiences of migration and the effects perceived within family relationships.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### *Immigration, work and family values*

Immigration is experienced, very often, as a difficult process of readjusting traditional family structures and relations between men and women in a completely new social, labour and political environment. As a result of combining traditional gender and family roles, restricted support networks and women's relative isolation from the mainstream society, female immigrants often experience high levels of psychological stress and even sometimes, depression (Noh, Wu, Speechley & Kaspar, 1992; Vega, Kolody & Valle, 1987).

6 Dion and Dion (2001) suggested that the negotiation of expectations and responsibilities related to family functions is a conflictive challenge that women have to face while acculturating to a new country. The constraints and values attached to traditional female gender roles not only impact women's family and personal life, but also affect their labour outcomes in the new country, that is why the author highlights the relevance of "studying the contribution of gender to immigrants experiences in the receiving society offers insights about the challenges confronting immigrant families" (Dion & Dion, 2001: 511). Once in the new country, immigrants need to renegotiate family roles, gender relations, expectations and responsibilities. Several authors analysed the direct relationship between new power relations and the empowerment of women outside the household on immigrants' increasing levels of family conflict (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Lim, 1997; DeBiaggi, 1999; Hirsch, 1999; Zhou, 2000).

Seeking to understand the consequences of immigration on gender relations and power resources within immigrant families in Sweden, Darvishpour (2002) observed that minority immigrant groups are frequently affected

by higher rates of family conflict and separation if compared to the wider society. These findings go hand in hand with Swedish statistics showing that family instability and separations are not only more frequent among immigrants than Swedes, but also that non-European immigrants divorce more than European immigrants. Among these groups, South American (Chilean) and Iranian families with children were the two groups at greatest divorce risk than any other immigrant group in the period 1991-1992. According to Darvishpour, most challenges were experienced by families where housewife immigrants had the opportunity to progressively decrease dependency levels on their husbands (by continuing with education and entering the paid workforce in Sweden). It seems that new sociopolitical measures and opportunities for immigrant women have enabled them to increase their power resources within the family, making it “easier for women to solve the social and economic problems that can arise in connection with a divorce” (Darvishpour, 2002: 280). Along with changes in the power resources between the spouses also comes a potential risk of family conflict. As women’s lives progressively change due to new social and economic circumstances, they start playing a more significant role in the decision-making process of the family structure, creating a potentially conflictive force. The high incidence of divorce among some immigrant families suggest that it is the changed women’s role in society and the fight for liberation rather than a change in men’s role, that leads to conflictive breakdowns.

However, relocation to countries where women have more opportunities does not necessarily reflect on a change of traditional family values and practices. Observing the impact of immigration on the economic and political aspects of gender and in the negotiation of roles within the household, Fernández Kelly (2005) investigated two groups of Hispanic women working in factories in USA. Immigrants within this study maintained an unambiguous acceptance of patriarchal values that define male and female roles and behaviours. Although most women did not have previous working experience, the entrance into the paid labour force in the new country resulted from the need to maintain the family integrity and to conquer better class-related standards. In this way, the author affirmed that “the meaning of women’s participation in the labour force remains plagued by paradox (...) Paid employment responds to and increases women’s desires for greater personal autonomy and financial independence” (Fernández Kelly, 2005: 354). However, in this case, immigrant women’s search for paid work reflected a

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weakening position and a severe financial need, rather than the pursuit of more egalitarian values and practices. As Fernández Kelly concluded, “exile did not eliminate these [patriarchal] values; rather, it extended them in telling ways” (Fernández Kelly, 2005: 354).

Women’s participation in the new society can often be limited by traditional family responsibilities unaffected after immigration. Jones-Correa (1998) observed this phenomenon with Latin American women in New York City, and highlighted that their inclusion into the workforce did not relieve them of traditional social expectations. Immigration, quite often, greatly restricted women’s work experience as, more likely than men, they tried to adapt to flexible jobs in smaller business, with lower pay but closer to their homes so they can balance paid work, domestic duties and, in particular, childcare. In this context, immigrant women’s employment did not have a direct impact on their levels of empowerment. On the contrary, among families with limited financial resources, immigrant wives’ employment often represents a way to help with the survival of the family and not a means for independence and equality, as researchers have indicated with other groups (Glenn, 1987; Kibria, 1990).

8 Boyd (1984) observed, in her analysis of immigrant women in Canada, that foreign born individuals apart from not finding the same economic and labour opportunities as native born, they also experience some levels of discrimination in the new society, closely related to immigrant’s lower level of education, occupational skills, language knowledge and country of origin. Immigrant women not only face more stratification within the workplace and the society in general, but also are more likely to suffer from a “double disadvantage”, where gender values intersect the already conflictive process of immigrating and adjusting to a new culture.

*Traditional family roles affecting immigrant women’s wellbeing*

Evidence drawn from various studies reinforced the idea that the immigration process has different effects on men and women, that traditional gender values still play an important role in everyday life of these individuals and that the overload of responsibilities has a direct impact on women’s health, social and psychological adjustment, especially if they do not have strong sources of social support in the new society (Lin & Ensel, 1989; Lin, Ye & Ensel, 1999; Miranda & Umhoefer, 1998; Noh *et al.*, 1992; Thoits, 1982).

Findings presented by Noh *et al.* (1992) with Korean women living in Canada highlighted this phenomenon, indicating that immigrant women often present a higher incidence of depression than immigrant men. The authors looked at two alternatives, the “double burden hypothesis” and the “power hypothesis”. The “double burden hypothesis” emphasizes that negative psychological outcomes like stress and depression are mainly due to role overload (domestic and family duties combined with external paid work). On the other side, the “power hypothesis” proposes that psychological stress partially results from the ways power is allocated within the family. Within this perspective, factors such as external paid work are considered potential enhancers of women’s power capacity within the family and the community in general, promoting lower levels of psychological stress. Nevertheless, research findings showed that being employed was as a particular strong risk factor for these women as they were eight times as likely to experience depression than their male counterparts. Gender differences in depression were more evident in the most “advantaged” immigrant group (with greater income and higher educational level) where men presented a much lower tendency for depression than their partners.

It seems likely that the approval of more traditional gender values within the family is one of the causes for different gender levels of depression and stress. Within this context, employment is observed as a stressful factor if combined with the fulfilment of domestic and family roles, as the “double burden” or “role overload hypothesis” propose (Noh *et al.*, 1992). As Dion and Dion (2001: 514) also suggested, “it is also possible that the greater reported depression among employed women might be partly attributable to the process of renegotiating family, specifically, spousal roles, as a result of changed circumstances associated with immigration”. Without a doubt, immigration entails a great impact not only on women’s labour and social life, but also on the way gender roles, values and responsibilities are negotiated within the private sphere.

#### *Australia’s migrant population*

Until the II World War, most of Australia’s migrant population came from Great Britain. Since then, many other countries were the source of geographical relocation to Australia, most of them European. However, since the 1970’s – with more flexible and less discriminatory migration policies – Asians be-

came the most significant group of new immigrants. In 2001, immigrants represented almost 30% of the Australian population (de Vaus, 2005). The major Latin American immigration wave occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. After that period, the number of Latin immigrants stabilized, a change related to the end of dictatorships in most affected countries and more favourable economic conditions. Nevertheless, the Latin immigration in Australia can be divided in three major periods of time, one occurring during the late 1960s, the second during the 1970s and the third one during the 1980s. However, most immigrants from the region related two main causes to leave their countries: economic hardships and political persecution. The 1996 Australian Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999) registered 61 471 Latin American born people living in Australia, highlighting that Chileans represented the largest group of Latinos in Australia, followed by Argentineans and Uruguayans.

#### *Participants and procedure*

10 This study includes 13 South American immigrant women who moved to Australia in the late 1960's, 1970's and early 1980's, when most political and economic changes occurred in South America. On average, these women have been living in Australia for an average of 31.5 years and resented an average age of 58 years old at the time of the research (interviews were taken in 2006 and 2007). All participants are natives of Spanish-speaking countries in South America (Argentina, Peru, Uruguay and Chile). The women in this study came from major urban centres in their countries.

The reasons for immigration were directly related to economic conditions and life threatening factors associated to military dictatorships and political instability. Nevertheless, most of these women were economic immigrants. Of the participants, six had completed higher education, four had finished Secondary School, and the remainder three had only a primary school level education. At the time of the research, six of these women were working full time in professional environments related to their academic training, four women worked in cleaning or factory positions, two women were self-employed and one was a housekeeper. Regardless their educational levels, most participants had a temporary experience of factory or cleaning work at the beginning of their lives in Australia. At the time of the research, six of the participants were married, four were divorced, and three were widows. Most of the divorced women and widows had remarried in Australia by the time of

the research. All participants had been married to Latin Americans or had a Spanish-speaking partner. All participants had children, ranging from 2 to 5. Most women migrated with their husbands and had their first child once in Australia. On average, participants were 32 years old at the time of relocation.

Qualitative data was collected through in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, built within a phenomenological perspective. Particular attention was given to main common themes emerging from the stories and responses to questions, where personal biographies intersected historical, political, economic and social factors (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997; Smith & Osborn, 2004; Willig, 2001). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) represents an idiographic approach that seeks to provide meaning to subjective experiences through the analysis of the main categories and themes derived from participants' narratives. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

The limitations of the research are connected to participants' recruitment process – often using snowball methods and/or presenting the research project at community centres. Although most women shared some significant factors (age, length of stay in Australia, Latin American background, language), the group investigated is not representative. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, results cannot be generalized to all Latin American immigrant women in Australia. Experiences and their narratives are related and restricted to immigrants' personal and contextual background and the specific circumstances and resources found in the receiving country. Apart from that, participants' husbands and/or other members of the family were not interviewed. Therefore, it is not possible to address and compare the consequences of migration between participants and their husbands. The research may have been strengthened with the inclusion of more participants, reflecting a wider range of backgrounds and experiences. However, analyses of the thematic data showed that saturation was being achieved. All interviews were conducted in Spanish to facilitate participants' sharing of their narratives.

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## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### *Intersections between work, education and gender*

Of the main challenges experienced as immigrant women in Australia, the language barrier was one of the most discussed among participants; together

with the limited opportunities they encountered to learn English in Australia. Low communicational skills in the host country's language deeply impacted on immigrants' educational and work experiences, as Laura described [A Chilean mother. She pursued nursing studies in Chile. Due to limited English skills and the need to work upon arrival, she became a factory worker]:

When I came here I did it thinking on using my skills. In Chile, I did a short course in nursing and also worked for some years at a telephone company. I came wanting to validate my qualifications but I didn't have English proficiency, which was very important. I could have tried working as a nurse, but I didn't feel confident with English, I didn't have the courage. So I started working in factories. Later on, in 1986, I had a horrible accident at work, so I stopped working. That was 20 years ago... After some time, I tried to get back to work and do other type of jobs, but I was still struggling with English... so I never joint the paid work force again (Laura).

12 Most women without an extensive educational and professional training had to immediately work due to economic constraints. Without efficient language knowledge, these women only found work within manufacturing or cleaning services, where English was not a requirement. As a result of long hours of unskilled work, chances to improve levels of communicative English were very low or almost nil., as Rita explained [Rita, completed Secondary studies in Argentina and worked in factories around Melbourne]: “whatever English I learnt I did it listening to people at the factories, a very bad spoken English, a language spoken by immigrants... talking like Tarzan! [she laughs] so I started talking like Tarzan! You get used to talk to people who don't speak English properly”.

This phenomenon was also described by immigrants interviewed by Santos (2006), explaining the reasons why their language level remained as a “factory English”. Within these work environments, immigrants with no formal language education learnt very basic and limited communication skills while interacting with other colleagues – most of them, also immigrants –. Women working within factory or cleaning services also felt overwhelmed by not being able to share with close relatives their stressful working experiences. This increased feelings of helplessness and solitude:

I was a hairdresser in Argentina, but here all the hairdressers were Italians and they wouldn't hire a professional older than 18-19 years old. So... what would I do? I went to do what my mother always feared us to do... cleaning. I used to tell

her that I was working in a factory, which was true, but I was in charge of cleaning! (Dora) [Argentinean, Secondary studies].

My first job was as a cleaner, there I cried the biggest tears of my life. Later I started working at the factories and that was another storm to pass through. I would sit to work at the factory, and I wouldn't be able to even look at my side! You work like an animal until you reach home completely exhausted! On top of that, I had my own family, I would reach home and kept on working... The worse thing is that if I ever told my parents, they would not be able to believe it, because over there I always had everything, and then I came to Australia to suffer what I never suffered before! So I couldn't tell anyone... (Mara) [Chilean, Secondary studies, worked as a cleaner and factory worker in Australia].

Although most participants' acknowledged the existence of English programs organized by the Australian government (510 hours of English tuition offered within the immigrants' first two years in Australia, free of cost), assistance in improving immigrants' communicational skills was very limited. Quite often, English classes were out of reach of recently arrived individuals who had other priorities to consider, such as finding new accommodation and a first job, or taking care of their children. In many cases, immigrant mothers also referred to the lack of free of cost or a low-fee childcare service, and the subsequent inability to attend English classes. Restricted initial opportunities to learn English were directly connected to a daily cycle of responsibilities attached to the traditional female gender role. This phenomenon is exemplified by Rita's experience:

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I couldn't take any English classes because I started working and I had to go back home and take care of the kids, my husband used to work many more hours than me and I couldn't leave them alone all day. I started taking some classes close to home and I used to take the kids along with me. The problem is that they were already tired after 7 hours of school, feeling hungry, and ...it didn't work.

According to Alcorso (1991), the restricted professional mobility of non-English-speaking women, their over concentration in manufacturing industries and their restricted knowledge of the host country's language is directly related to their urgent need to find paid work as soon as they arrive in Australia. The absence of relatives to help women with childcare duties, the maintenance of traditional family roles within the household and the restricted gov-

ernmental childcare programs, combined with the shortage of intensive English classes, greatly interfered with women's chances to move out of the factories. This reality perpetuated the education and skills gap of many immigrant women: "I felt particularly frustrated because the years passed and I couldn't finish my education. Here I had the barrier of the kids! Because I didn't have anyone who could take care of them! Now, I am 53 years old and I'm trying to take some courses, but you find that the language barrier is still there" (Mara).

The limited family support and available social resources to share childcare responsibilities greatly affected female immigrants in their personal and labour outcomes in Australia. Researching overseas born women in Sydney, Cox, Jobson and Martin (1976) reached the conclusion that childcare was the major problem working immigrant women faced in Australia. Immigrants' work, educational and language experiences were always related to their domestic reality and the available resources to assist them with their children. According to the authors, Australian government policies ignored the needs of working women by not fully considering the difficulties and traumas of immigrating to a new country with no family or social support resources, doing paid work while being in charge of domestic responsibilities.

#### *Family life*

- 14 According to many authors, one of the major sources of psychological and emotional support for Latin Americans resides within their own families (Amézquita *et al.*, 1995; Cortes, 1995; Hovey, 2000; Miranda & Matheny, 2000). For most immigrants, the decision to move entails leaving behind this important reference of social and emotional support. In Australia, most participants referred to the immigration and acculturation experience as a process that strengthened the partnership with their husbands. Especially for those women who immigrated already married, the experience of being overseas without any other close relatives promoted a closer bond between husband and wife, as exemplified by Elsa: "with us, I think that the result was positive, we got to know each other more, and as we had to deal with all this immigration process, we became better partners" and Betina [an Argentinean social worker]: "my husband helped me so much to adapt to Australia, so much. . . We are good partners in everything, we also share hobbies, we are both crazy about our community work at the radio. He gives me his shoulder and support me in anything I do, we have always been excellent partners, married for 32 years."

Australian life had also facilitated a closer relationship with her partner and helped disentangle some traditional functions based in “Latin machismo”, as Clara [Chilean, secondary teacher & sports coach] described:

Here we’ve been much closer, with our kids and everything. I think that the immigration was a good thing for the family life. My husband has participated much more in our family than a traditional Chilean man. Look, in Latin America, men are leaders, they feel they can go back home whenever they feel like. So many of them have a second hidden woman. Here it’s not like that, here is from work to home. It’s like they don’t have anywhere to go! There is nothing to do here! [she laughs] Well, they can play sports...

We have always played sports and do other things, so we have always stayed together.

We have been a close family, so I find that immigration was good in that sense.

Of particular interest, participants’ bond with their children was one of the most significant aspects stressed in their narrative (also responding to what is traditionally expected of the female gender, to be a “good wife and a good mother above all”). Not only immigrants’ children provided a new source of satisfaction, but also represented one of the major reasons to stay in Australia and continue facing adjustment difficulties. The acknowledgement of broader educational and financial opportunities for immigrants’ children in Australia was a major reason to face all challenges and remain in Australia, as it was Julia’s experience [Julia, completed Secondary studies in Argentina, hairdresser]:

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I overcame many difficulties because of my children. I am convinced that we had more opportunities in Australia than what we would have had in Argentina. My kids wouldn’t be doing as good there as they do here. At their age, they already have their own houses, that you can’t do in Argentina! That’s why I decided to stay, I told myself “if this is the country that is feeding my kids and giving them so many chances, it will be my country too. Argentina is over.

According to Pettman (1992), although female immigrants often feel loss and nostalgia for what and who was left behind, experiencing exhaustion and even sometimes exploitation at work, the hope for a better future for their children remains as the ultimate worthwhile reason to continue with their immigration journey. However, the lack of family support in Australia greatly

impacted on women's lives, leading to contradictory feelings due to the overwhelming sum of responsibilities:

Immigration had a huge impact on us. Now I see that before I couldn't do things, I wouldn't be satisfied or fulfilled. I was a mother, but I had to keep so many things to myself, so many things to put up to. Regardless if I felt bad at work, I couldn't reach home in a bad mood! Because I had to go on! For my children! So I had to keep to myself all those feelings of anger and helplessness! In my case, too many things collided and made my husband and I get divorced...too many things accumulated! (Mara). Working full time and taking care of my kids, without any relative in Australia, was very difficult. I had to do everything by myself. I had to send the kids to different activities to compensate the absence of their parents. When the kids were sick, I wasn't always able to take care of them. So I had to leave them alone at home and call them from work to check how they were doing. Not even a neighbour to help me checking on them once in a while. It was very hard. As a working mother you lose many things, you constantly feel overwhelmed, guilty... with no one to share anything (Rita).

The lack of other family members in Australia also interfered in females' chances to learn the host country's language, pursue further levels of education and improve their work opportunities. Mara [Chilean, mother of four children, housewife] exemplifies this:

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I feel particularly frustrated because the years passed and I couldn't finish with my education. Look, I'm the only one among my brothers who doesn't have a profession. In Chile, I would have been able to work or study even having the kids. Here I had to face the barrier of the kids! Because I didn't have anyone who could take care of them! Now I am 53 years old and I'm trying to take some courses, but you find that the language barrier is still there, that you are still missing something in English...

What Mara experienced was a common limitation faced by many other women. Studies and surveys developed in Australia (Alcorso, 1989, 1995; Cox *et al.*, 1976) indicated that childcare was the major single problem working immigrant women had to face in the new country, having a negative impact on their own adjustment process and in their capacity to fully develop educational and labour skills. Although Iris migrated with her parents and had an extensive family support in Australia, she frequently felt overcharged of responsibilities trying to balance traditional family duties and external paid work

[Iris, Uruguayan, pursued university studies in Melbourne and worked as a professor]:

My rhythm of life was really killing for many years trying to combine my work at the university with my two baby boys, that's why I moved closer to the university. But I had to fight like crazy anyway as, after moving, my parents were living far and I had to manage by myself with everything... as I could. Everything has been done running all the time, from here to there. When my second son started school, I said «no more, I can't go on like this!» I was tired. I worked full time for 10 years, and decided to go part time or casual since 1994.

Some authors (Dion & Dion, 2001; Noh *et al.*, 1992; Raijman & Semyonov, 1997) outlined this phenomenon, affirming that most immigrant women who join the paid labour force often present some levels of stress and depression, mainly due to the accumulation of duties, the unequal gender responsibilities at home and the limited family or social resources to assist with childcare.

In spite of the pragmatic and ideological changes entailed with the immigration process, the traditional ideal of being a present mother remained unquestionable to most participants. The pressure to fulfil this “superwoman ideal” (Dion & Dion, 2001), someone who is in charge of domestic tasks, children upbringing, and quite often paid work, while adjusting to a new country, certainly added some levels of psychological and physical stress.

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*Being a woman in Australia: The impact of gender values*

Immigration to a geographically and culturally distant country such as Australia represented a complex personal and social challenge to all women interviewed for this study. Although most participants migrated approximately 30 years ago, they described relocation to Australia as a continuous adjustment process, sometimes difficult and psychologically demanding. In spite of that, most women agreed that Australian life provided them with more opportunities to become independent women. More favourable structural and financial conditions offered a new sense of stability and increased feelings of satisfaction, freedom and self-confidence, as Elsa [Argentinean, a social worker] indicated:

It must be hard to have feminist values in Argentina because women are subject to other things, like the lack of work and not being able to achieve their financial

independence. The Government doesn't support you financially if you separate from your husband, all those things are more difficult in Argentina. Here the horizons expand a little bit, you feel like working, travelling, you feel like doing many more things than what you can't actually do in a country with scarce resources.

Isabel [a Chilean factory worker with Primary studies] also observed and experienced herself higher levels of female independence and equality in Australia: *"here, there is no problem with lack of work. Women can get separated or divorced, they can leave the man and go on by themselves. That's what I did. But not over there! [in Argentina] Women are still very dependent on men"*. Financial stability not only helped women to conquer their independence but also to achieve personal goals and to experience higher levels of wellbeing and self-motivation. In spite of domestic conflicts that might result from this process, financially independent women were more willing to challenge conflictive and unequal partnerships, as it was Rita's example:

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I think that women now are more rebellious. There are still, of course, some who follow machismo and don't know how to protect themselves, they are in the same situation as I was with that "machist" belief that says "if you are not with me, you won't do or be anything in life". Now I feel satisfied because I've done things that my ex-husband thought I would never be able to do. I achieved it and I discovered myself. We got separated and I bought his half of the house, I paid it with my own work. I am proud of myself, I know what I want and what I can do. And everything is related to economic circumstances.

Many participants agreed on the fact that Australia provided a stronger ground for feminist values, facilitating, as they mentioned, a "more liberated woman" and the achievement of a more equal position in society:

At least here in Australia they admit that domestic violence exists, and women in general have some kind of participation, there are statistics about them and their problems. I don't know how much it's done in practice, but at least they admit those issues. Australia it's a bit more advanced related to open discussions, studies and research on gender issues. I think that Latin America remains at a more academic level, not really at a labour level. Back there, the word feminist is still associated with being lesbian. There is some kind of fight but not yet at the family and religious levels, also because men are very comfortable in that situation (Elsa).

I see that women have always had more rights here than in Argentina. And they progress every time more. I think that they [politicians] are trying to make a more egalitarian Australia, they are fighting for that (Alma) [An Argentinean housewife].

As women participate in the labour force and have their own salary, they tend to challenge unequal gender roles within their families. However, this is sometimes a complex and conflictive process. According to several authors (e.g., Darvishpour, 1999, 2002; Dion & Dion, 2001; Jones-Correa, 1998; Raijman & Semyonov, 1997), women's ideological changes and labour achievements do not necessarily result in a similar ideological change from their partners' side. Frequently, psychological stress, separation and divorce are common phenomena among immigrant families from more traditional countries where women entered the paid labour force after immigration.

Indeed, gender differences were still present in many aspects of participants' lives, overcharging them with duties (although many of them saw women's reality in Australia as more "independent" and "liberal"). Most women described their routines as exhausting and sometimes emotional distressing, mainly due to the accumulation of outside work and domestic responsibilities:

As a woman in Uruguay you are in charge of all the domestic duties, and if you decide to work outside home... then, patience! You still have to do everything the same way! That is your role, that is your function! But women here in Australia still work a lot. I think that women here are overcharged of duties, I see it in my family. My father never took care of the domestic things, only does it when my mother gets sick. But well... it has been a whole life with another set of mind, other values... (Iris).

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Although I call myself a feminist, I still do 3 or 5 times more things at home than my husband to maintain all the things that I want, my independence, and at the end I maintain everything! Women are still overcharged of duties. Absolutely overcharged. In Argentina, women must experience this and even more, because imagine not having your financial independence... At least here, women have a bigger participation (Elsa).

Elsa continued describing how the Australian rhythm of life affected the household division of duties and how Latin men, from her perspective, maintained and incorporated values that seemed most convenient for them:

The division of domestic duties is pretty well shared, but almost every duty has to be directed... and you can't change that in them! It's a bit a combination of what

he [husband] brought from there and what he saw here that suited him perfectly! And that thing that women work and they contribute to the economy like them...also suited them so well! But, anyway...he doesn't have any problems in "helping", but it's just "helping". It's a constant fight!

As observed with participants, most traditional gender values related to the division of household duties were maintained after migration. Although many individuals changed their opinions and discourse about how domestic and family responsibilities should be divided when both parents work outside home, the practice was significantly incongruent. Unfortunately, a new role for women in society, with broader education levels and stronger participation in the paid labour force, has not greatly affected men's roles and behaviours (Darvishpour, 2002).

20 According to participants, most male participation was limited to traditionally male-oriented activities, such as organizing barbecues, cutting the grass, or fixing things at home. Activities related to cleaning, daily cooking, raising the children, driving them to school or even taking care of them when sick were, in most cases, female tasks. It was possible to observe how traditional male and female roles persisted within the private life: whenever men participated in any domestic task, they did it in order to "help" women in their responsibilities, as exemplified by Laura: "men always have a tendency of being 'machista', at least in my case! There is a bit of change nowadays, in the sense that he realizes that I need help. But 'machismo' is always there, with the idea that men are superior. I don't know, maybe life has to be like that! We've been raised that way, where women have to be subjected to men".

The negotiation of a more equal division of responsibilities was far from being achieved. As some women explained, traditional roles at home were very difficult to change:

My husband never did anything, for example, he never gave the feeding bottle to any of our 5 kids! He was always dedicated to his studies, to reading...and after moving, here in Australia, he did the same. All the domestic duties were mine. My son was the same, he never did too many things at home. What he would do was cutting the grass, and things like that (Lucia).

My husband started changing during his last 5 years of life. He used to say: "you work so much, I never realized all this, did I? Let me at least wash the dishes". Then I would say "you don't have to do it now, now we are only two at home!".

He would say that I never told him what to do or push him to do things at home. But well...I had to do it, ...I was at home, and you know...we can. But traditional roles are very difficult to change. Men don't make efforts to do things at home, it's all up to us (Julia).

In spite of women's participation in the work force, immigrant families within this study did not experience a substantial modification of gender roles. Consequently, it is no surprise women found it difficult to balance their overwhelming reality as immigrants, workers, mothers and housewives, struggling to adjust and integrate to the new country.

## CONCLUSIONS

As the current research indicated, immigration from more traditional countries to more egalitarian ones (or to countries where women have broader opportunities to join the paid force and become financially independent) does not necessarily represent a way to improve immigrant women's status in the society. Unless immigration is followed by substantial changes in women's reproductive role within the family with a subsequent renegotiation of female's productive position in labour and educational contexts, relocation *per se* does not represent a major source of social change for women, as Morokvasic (1983, 1984) had stressed. If these factors remain unaffected, the expected benefits from immigration might be delayed or might not even be perceived by women.

21

Although participants often acknowledged a broader male participation in family responsibilities, traditional gender values still had a strong impact on the division of domestic and childcare duties. As a result, most participants described their daily routines as overloaded and stressful. Motherhood represented a significant part of women's lives and without the support of any close relatives to share childcare or provide emotional support, research participants struggled to combine paid work with childcare and domestic duties. Also attached to traditional gender values attached to motherhood, one of the major reasons to continue juggling so many responsibilities as immigrant women in Australia was the prospect to provide a better structural and financial future for their children.

However, the vulnerable financial reality immigrant women have and the restricted social policies protecting and supporting them in the receiving countries have been observed as part of the reasons why many female immigrants

remain in unequal and disadvantaged positions within their families and societies. In the particular case of immigrant women with children, their situation is constrained by the limited social services and low cost childcare programs aiming to facilitate their availability to paid employment (Dion & Dion, 2001; Riaño, 2003; Toro-Morn, 1995).

Apart from that, women who immigrate with low levels of the host country's language are often employed within unskilled or low paid jobs, working long hours under tough conditions. Due to the lack of low or free of cost childcare services, they struggle to have free time to upgrade language, educational and professional skills and then, remain trapped in a vicious cycle that impacts negatively on their adjustment outcomes (Alcorso, 1989, 1991, 1995; DIEA, 1985; Stone, Morales & Cortes, 1996). That is why, in spite of the female exposure to the paid workforce and the ideological gender revolution, immigrant women still face an overload of responsibilities within their families. As observed, participants' renegotiation of more balanced gender and family values were compromised and traditional division of duties and responsibilities remained unchanged after immigration. Women's realities were highly overcharged, affecting negatively on their educational opportunities, chances to upgrade work skills and improve language knowledge. Women quite often felt isolated and emotionally challenged due to the overwhelming sum of responsibilities, factors that remained mostly unresolved after more than three decades in Australia.

**22** The current research highlighted the fact that if immigrants do not have the adequate support from social services to upgrade their language, educational and labour skills in the host country, many of the acculturation challenges encountered could potentially harm their adjustment and integration processes. Immigrant women's acculturation processes are often more complex phenomena, compounded by traditional gender values still attached to women's role within private spheres and to the presence of gender discrimination within labour and social environments.

To help prevent conflicts or resolve some of the adjustment challenges encountered after migration, public policies and social services need to be reassessed in order to match immigrants' needs at a more adequate time and place. For this, childcare services need to be organized at low fees or free cost during the first years of immigrants' lives in the new country. This would greatly assist immigrant mothers without any type of family or social support networks to help taking care of their children while they pursue language or

professional training. As well as that, language classes free cost should not be restricted to immigrants' initial years in the new country, as this period is primarily dedicated to solve other priorities as finding permanent housing, job offers, schools for the children and getting adjusted to a completely new rhythm of life.

In order to effectively assist individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, social services should be provided in the immigrants' native language and psychological services should be incorporated to help immigrants deal with the emotional challenges resulted from the acculturation process. Moreover, workshops and group discussions should be organized in order to assess what are the actual needs of immigrant women and how these needs can be met in the most efficient way. Immigrants' labour integration should be considered a social and political priority. Within a multicultural and integrationist ideology, immigrant women's backgrounds and experiences need to be adequately assessed and valued in order to assist them in becoming a contributing part of the host society.

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