

Beyond Island and Sea: The Journeys of Portuguese Working Women in Canada

Maria João Dodman

*Professor, Dept. of Languages, Literature and Linguistic
York University*

Old Worlds, Barren Lives

*I*t has been said that women were, and still are, the greatest non-paid family help in Portugal (Januário and Marujo 101). In fact, throughout history the work performed by women, although crucial to the prosperity of their families and by extension of their societies, has been obliterated from all formal accounts. Traditionally, women's work has been limited to their domestic duties. Household chores and child bearing defined the feminine sphere. Notwithstanding, we know today that women were active both in the home, where they undertook the entire burden, as well as in the workforce, working next to or replacing their male counterparts.¹

Until 1974, under the regime of Salazar, women were denied an equal position and therefore remained for the most part the property of their husbands or fathers. At the same time, the harsh economic reality of Portugal, especially in the Atlantic islands of the Azores, gave way to a considerable migration. In the Canadian case, men left first but women soon joined them, and together they ventured into an unknown, unfamiliar environment. This essay aims at celebrating the accomplishments of these women pioneers, as

1 Darlene Sadlier mentions the importance of the 1960s, a time when male emigration and drafting for the colonial wars left women but the option to take any employment opportunities in both the rural and urban sectors (123). M. Estellie Smith suggests the same and points out the case of the Atlantic islands of the Azores; according to Smith, it is very likely that due to extreme poverty and intense lack of resources, women might have played a more significant role in economic activities (80). Sadlier also points out the crucial role of Portuguese workingwomen who, in the aftermath of the April 25th Revolution that toppled the Salazar dictatorship, took over the textile mills when the former owners fled Portugal (124).

well as second-generation women and beyond. By doing so, it also seeks to illustrate the current need for renewal, for revitalized approaches into the often-unknown career paths of many of our Portuguese-Canadian women.

New Worlds, Chaotic Lives

Most Portuguese women have entered Canada as dependents of either their husbands or fathers. A traditional division of labor that limits women to their duties of wives and mothers has prevailed within the typical Portuguese household. However, the realities and necessities of the new country have forced many of these women to work outside the home. Yet, the Canadian workforce did not offer them any protection as they continued to experience great hardships and discrimination. In many cases, the lives of our immigrant women remained as difficult, if not more, than in Portugal.²

According to the study of Wenona Giles Portuguese Women in Toronto, most first and second-generation Portuguese women work in two main industries: manufacturing and other services, which includes paid domestic work (65). However, and despite the fact that Portuguese women have remained for the most part in traditional occupations, or perhaps have not ventured too far from home, we must acknowledge their successes within those spheres. Giles mentions the struggles of the office cleaners and the factory workers with very little education and/or language skills.

When faced with discriminatory attitudes in the work place, Rosa, a first-generation woman, did voice her opinions to her employers and regrets the fact that the other women with whom she worked were not as motivated as she was (70-71). As a result, she found ways to speak of her concerns, such as engaging her customers in work-related discussions and even refusing to be treated differently due to her social or ethnic background (71). Let's not forget both the struggles and successes of Lurdes, who in the mid-1970s lead a group of over one-hundred women in protest against the practices of their cleaning company, which refused to provide them with clean garbage bags. Lurdes recounts this experience as a time of fear and threats.

2 The stories of these women have been widely documented. One woman describes the harsh conditions of her job as a sewing machine operator; surrounded by an unpleasant, often dirty environment, with few breaks and even controlled bathroom visits (Nunes 61). There is also the lack of job security and the exploitation of office cleaners, a group that until very recently struggled with great discrimination (Nunes 62).

However, despite her fear and lack of proper language skills, she defended her cause to the end. Idalina also speaks of the strike in the factory where she worked. As she proudly states, "I participated in the strike; I did everything." (Giles 78). As Giles rightly points out, these women's difficulties, especially the lack of English language skills, "did not prevent them from defending their own and their co-workers' rights against the 'bossas'" (80).

Ilda Januário and Manuela Marujo bring some of these women's stories to the forefront. Among the courageous accounts, we find Izilda, who came to Canada in 1953 to join her husband, but had to remain in Montreal while he worked in Goose Bay, Labrador. Remarkably, she was a driven entrepreneur and found ways to help her husband prosper by supplying his co-workers with many basic needs, and later learning both English and French, skills that were essential to the growth of their business (100). These were some of the leaders of our community. However, I must reiterate that even those women who stayed at home or on the sidelines deserve equal praise. In fact, we have neglected to value the contributions of the homemakers and their endless non-paid activities. They have had a great role in the economic prosperity of their families and beyond.

Perhaps one of the most neglected aspects of feminine contribution is the impact that they exert as decision makers. M. Estellie Smith has found that in the American case, for instance, women, although appearing passive and submissive, were the ones who instigated the move; their reasons were, for the most part, financial but also political as emigration provided an escape from the regime and the African wars (79-81). Another important factor mentioned by Smith is that most of the arrangements in the old and the new country were and are made by women, while men's main responsibility remains to get to and from work. Smith offers the following list of activities performed by women:

...the woman must walk the town block by block to learn her way around; she must learn to cope with the public transportation system; to get, not to one place repetitively as in the case of the male, but to a number of places. There are markets; the school (or schools); shops for furniture, clothing, appliances; various local and federal governments offices; repair services such as cleaners or shoe shops; doctors; dentists; optometrists; clinics; banks; utility companies, the post office; and the church. (86)

As this list could definitely be expanded, it is important to emphasize the colossal debt that we as a community owe to our workingwomen, who in many cases and with minimal support, built and maintained their entire households.³ At the same time, we must acknowledge the fact that these women managed it all even though they arrived with less education than their husbands, fathers, or brothers.⁴ The key of their success lies in their perseverance; Anderson and Davis praise Portuguese immigrant women for being thrifty, ingenious, industrious and honest, along with their added “ability to stretch a dollar [which] is legendary” (141).

Another important battle taken by these women is the right to advance their English language skills. As Old World patriarchal traditions have prevailed in Canada, women often find themselves limited to environments where the language used is Portuguese, either at home or at work. As Nunes aptly points out, there is also the lack of time or energy, and most of all, a lack of support from their husbands to attend ESL classes (63). Yet, despite the fact that the research concludes that this is a major obstacle for Portuguese women,⁵ there are successes worth noting. The before-mentioned story of Izilda from Montreal is only one of many. Statistics show that the women in English language instruction programs have pursued their study, driven by determination alone, as half of them have not received any support from their husbands, and a few have even attended classes without their husband’s knowledge (Nunes 63).

Beyond the Expected: Journeys in Academia

One would be inclined to believe that gender is a non-issue in an

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- 3 Both the women and the men in Smith’s study fail to acknowledge the importance of their work; while the women deemed their behaviour as commonplace and trivial, men often denied their achievements altogether, and even resorted to the following remark: “Oh well, women love to meddle and gossip so you might as well put it to some good use” (84).
 - 4 This is especially relevant of those that came from the Azores, as education was simply not available at that time; it was rare for Azoreans to have more than four years of formal education. Women in particular had even less education, or close to none, especially in the most remote areas where one or two years of education would have been viewed as a luxury for a girl (Anderson and Davis 140).
 - 5 Anderson and Davis suggest that women “would be less likely to speak English since many who worked in office-cleaning were most likely to associate with other Portuguese-speaking women” (139).

*academic environment. Although this is true to a certain extent, there are still many wars being fought on this front. We, women, take these matters very seriously and it is common for us to react with dismay that gender discrimination can happen in such an "open-minded" setting. However, as we have made considerable gains, we have also perhaps forgotten the difficult road that has brought us here. It is important to keep in mind that until recent times, education has not been a viable option for women. Based on the perceived physical, emotional and spiritual inferiority of women, academic institutions have shut women out and have remained male environments. In her inspiring guide *Lifting a Ton of Feathers*, Paula Caplan reminds us of some of the prejudices that have kept women out of learning; for instance, it was a common belief that studying would redirect the blood necessary for menstruation and pregnancy from the body to the woman's head, which in turn would interfere with procreation. Besides the fact that intellectual women have been deemed unattractive, Caplan remarks that until the 1950s, religion played a crucial part by promoting that co-education lead to sexual promiscuity (14-15). These and many other aspects of academic life highlighted by Caplan are a clear indication that we are still in a man's world.*

*In fact, although there are great numbers of women in undergraduate studies, there are very few in comparison to men in the higher hierarchies of academia. It is also a concern that certain fields traditionally occupied by men continue to resist the involvement of women.⁶ Caplan concludes that "the marginalizing and mistreatment of women, then, remain substantial, and these are increased geometrically for women who are not white, born in the country where they teach, heterosexual, able-bodied, or older than the average woman at their academic level" (19). However, as much as Caplan's assertions can and will keep us cautious of the many barriers against women, we must not fall into a victim's role, but need to refocus our attention on the many positive contributions of women in academia. Doreen Kimura, in her dissenting essay *Affirmative Action Policies are Demeaning to Women in Academia*, does point out some interesting facts that prove that although still a minority, women are becoming a noted and productive group.⁷*

6 Caplan mentions the predominance of men in science and engineering and gives as an example the International Congress of Mathematicians, which meets every four years. Traditionally, women have neither participated nor have they been invited guests at this prestigious congress, and only "ten women were invited in 1990 after the American delegation "reminded" the organizing committee to invite women" (17).

Final Personal Thoughts: Where Do We Go from Here?

My personal journey through the Canadian landscape has, in many aspects, been similar to those that came before me. I arrived in Canada from the Azores in 1989. However, my reasons weren't solely economic; I was and I still am a rebellious, adventurous spirit. I was open for anything. In my suitcase, I brought the island, the sea, and the enduring engravings of my favorite landscapes. Yet, also in my suitcase was the negative impact of a restricted existence, of growing up as a young girl in a traditional patriarchal environment. In my case, the Canadian setting came to represent the perfect means of expanding my horizons, of trying new experiences, free and confident.

Initially, as many of those that came before me, I found employment in the factories and in the cleaning agencies. These experiences made me realize that there were indeed certain expectations that came with being a Portuguese worker; some of the most telling were to be a tireless and devoted worker, to be quiet and not complain, and my favorite, to possess the Portuguese "innate ability" of a professional cleaner. To make a long story short, let's just say that I disappointed many, especially in the subject of that "innate ability" which I so clearly lacked. Since I was left with the strange feelings of belonging nowhere, of being neither Portuguese nor Canadian, I felt restless, looking again for a new adventure. University was this new adventure. So, in the fall of 1994, I packed my suitcase again, now falling apart at the seams, with the added weight of a young son, and started all over again in academia.

My personal experience in academia has been, for the most part, filled with positive energy. I can't say that I haven't encountered any barriers. In fact, today I still remember my undergraduate years and a particular professor who enjoyed commenting on the physical attributes of certain women, and how they used those to advance their agendas. The reason why that episode has stood in my mind is due to the fact that I didn't speak up because, like so many of my female colleagues, I feared the consequences that could arise from my defiant acts. Today, I have developed "thick skin", and I speak against any discrimination and encourage my students to do the same.

It is true that Portuguese women have only begun to penetrate the

7 According to Kimura, between 1960 and 1989 the percentage of women overall increased from 11% to 20% (239).

academic sphere and female professors of Portuguese origin are few, indeed. However, the power of a few can be incredible. I have been fortunate to establish connections and friendships with Portuguese women in academia who have been inspirational mentors, voices in our community and beyond. In fact, most of these Portuguese women scholars have made a considerable contribution to the existing research concerning the Portuguese and/or Portuguese women. Of particular importance are the excellent contributions of Maria Margarida Aguiar in both her Masters and PhD dissertations, where she addressed the many struggles, but also the powerful role, of Portuguese mothers in Canada. The time for change is upon us. Therefore, as much as we continue to research and value the contributions of our ancestors in Canada, a new approach that underlines new directions taken by professional Portuguese women is of utmost importance.

Sadly, we are often characterized as a group of underachievers, and many of us have simply accepted that label. It is up to us to change that perception. Ultimately, being a Portuguese woman in academia has allowed me to connect with the sons and daughters of those women who have paved the way for their children. Contrary to many, I see a positive future for my students. Our young women have learnt valuable lessons from their mothers and grandmothers. At the same time, they have been given more tools, allowing them to question, to make choices, and to have a firm hand on their destinies. Second-generation Portuguese women are not only opposed to the traditional gender roles of their households, but also, as Giles indicates in one of her studies, the majority of second-generation women interviewed finished high school and 70% of them have been involved in post-secondary education (389). It is true that the numbers are still small; however, as the research indicates, these will continue to grow and substantially increase by the third generation (Anderson 77). Not only do our young women have wider choices of careers, they are also enacting change by becoming politically involved (Giles 82). As for myself, I continue to seek new adventures; academia has proven to be a fertile ground for that.

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