Gender, Substantive Citizenship and Multiculturalism in Canada

Perspectives, Debates and Silences

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This paper explores the interconnections between gender, substantive citizenship and multiculturalism in the current Canadian context\(^1\). To be more precise, it develops the following points:

- Cities are important spaces for the realization of substantive citizenship and women have played and continue to play a significant role in these processes.
- Cities in Canada have been the predominant spaces in the recent past for the integration of newcomers to Canada. Gender relations are an important element in understanding the impact of migration and therefore on understanding issues of multiculturalism in the current Canadian context.
- One of the emerging debates in Canada around the relationships of multiculturalism, substantive citizenship and gender is around issues of religion and religious practice. At the moment, it is an emerging debate, not always very well articulated and substantial efforts need to be made to have a useful debate on this issue in Canadian society.
- There are also significant ‘silences’ in the relationships of gender, multiculturalism and substantive citizenship in Canada, and this paper will explore one of these silences, that around ‘family’ and the role of women as ‘mother’. This issue is very clear to immigrant women but rarely introduced into public debate and the paper will attempt to outline the complexity of the issue and the way it plays into issues of the equitable inclusion of newcomers into Canadian society.

1. Cities, Gender and Substantive Citizenship in Canada

The whole process of urbanization in Canada is very closely related to evolving gender relations. As Suzanne MacKenzie demonstrates in an important article (MacKenzie 1988) the moments when ‘the women question’ was central in Canadian society correspond to the critical periods of urbanization and the two issues are interconnected. The late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) Century moment of urbanization in Canada was also a period of great migration and immigration with young women coming into cities to find industrial employment. The larger society, and particularly the urban elites, worried about ‘these’ women, the Canadian born and even more so the foreign born, and worried whether they would be led into ‘evil ways’ in the cities and, on a more long term basis, whether they would be able to develop the skills to properly raise the next generation as well integrated productive workers. I have argued elsewhere (Andrew, 1984) that it is important to understand both the gender and class relations that played themselves out in this period; the elite women who built the urban services, developed education programs and created hospitals for children were concerned about the living conditions of the urban poor, particularly the women and children, and they were also concerned to protect their class interests and maintain class privilege. Both are necessary to understand and most of the academic literature in Canada has taken one or other of these positions. Understanding both involves a genuine analysis of intersectionality.

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So the first moment of building cities was also a period of urban reform and the creating of many urban services and middle class women played important roles in the development of parks and playgrounds, public health, decent housing, domestic science in schools, the prohibition of alcohol (not all that successful in the Canadian context) and votes for women.

The next important period is the immediate post-world war two period with the development of suburban Canada corresponding to a period of economic prosperity dominated by the model of the male bread-winner. Women were relegated (after their economic participation during the war) to the home and the relationship between the development of the suburbs, the development of industries related to providing domestic goods to fill the suburban homes and the discourse around the association between the women as homemakers and builders of supportive environments for the return of their tired husbands at the end of busy days has been well documented (MacKenzie: 1988).

The third, and most recent period, concerns the relationship between the dramatic increase, in Canada, of women entering the paid labour force and their increasing interest in being situated more centrally in the city. For some of the middle-class women who were located in the suburbs, the move to the centre has been possible although for others the impact of gentrification has priced out that option. At the same time women’s groups have been active in creating the urban services necessary to make possible the combining of paid employment, primary responsibility for children and for the management of households and, for some, engagement in voluntary and political activities. Child care was in many places expanded, created and ramped up by local women-led organizations. So too, beginning in cities, transition houses were created for women leaving situations of domestic violence.

It should be noted that throughout these periods, women tended to create programs and then push for state responsibility, either financial or operational, for these programs. This was true for parks and playgrounds, children’s hospitals and child care to name only a few examples. This was done for reasons of principle (these were public responsibilities) but also because women, acting through voluntary organizations, did not have access to sufficient private wealth to think of maintaining these services as the responsibilities of civil society. Of course, in the Canadian case, the state has not taken up full responsibility for child care and the solutions have then had to be found within civil society and/or the market sector. There certainly have been services that women have not wanted to have taken over by the state or even have funded by the state but in the majority women have argued that state funding is more progressive than private funding and that good urban services for women, children and everyone are fully part of a collective responsibility.

There have been recent arguments made about the importance, when thinking of substantive citizenship, for articulating the concept of urban citizenship. James Holston (2001) argued that we can speak of urban citizenship under three conditions; ‘when the city is the primary political community, when urban residence is the criteria of membership and the basis of political membership and when rights-claims addressing urban experience and related civic performances are the substance of citizenship’ (Holston, 2001, p.326). There is an argument to be made that these conditions are at least emerging in Canada. As we will see from the description of the City for All Women Initiative, the activities of the group relate to Holston’s three conditions. We can also consider the recent campaign in Toronto arguing for the right to
vote in municipal elections for all residents and not limited to Canadian citizens as an illustration to the arguments for urban citizenship.

2. Gender, Migration and the evolution of multiculturalism

As has been well documented (Our Diverse Cities I), recent immigration to Canada has been marked by two characteristics; it has been metropolitan and it is non-white. Although this is beginning to change, recent immigration to Canada has been primarily immigration to Toronto, to Vancouver and to a somewhat lesser degree, to Montreal. To repeat well known facts, Toronto is not about 50% foreign-born and more immigrants arrive each year in Toronto that the entire population of Prince Edward Island, the smallest Canadian province (although perhaps the best known in Japan, thanks to Anne of Green Gables).

The other important originality of recent immigration to Canada is that it is very substantially non-white. Therefore the urban centres of Canada, particularly the big 3 (Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal) but increasingly other urban centres such as Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary and Edmonton, and the cities of Southern Ontario such as Windsor, Hamilton and London are being transformed, at least demographically, and to some extent socially and politically. Canada has a long history of immigration (it is important to recognize that Canada has also had a long history of ‘forgetting’ or hiding the history of Aboriginal Canada and the shameful history of the relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals) and so it is not so much the recent numbers of immigrants that are the dramatic change as the shift in countries of origin.

There are a number of points that could be made about this, including the question of a growing divide between the multicultural urban Canada and the increasingly elderly and very white rural Canada. But this is not the argument I want to pursue here but rather the importance of gender in the migration experience and the impact of this on the role of immigrant women and the organizations they create and animate.

Again, the impact of migration on gender relations is a topic that has been studied, particularly in the recent period where the economic experience of recent immigrants has been much less positive that in an earlier period. Men are seen to have a particularly difficult time; they have difficulty finding any work, much less work that brings with it anything like the respect many of them had with their employment in their country of origin. Men have found this loss of status particularly hard to deal with and, in addition, the argument follows, they are then in a society, the Canadian society, which gives far less status to the male head of household, again compared to their countries of origin. Canadian feminism would certainly question the truth of the claim to the gender equality on the part of the government discourse. We will come back to this question of the gap between the discourse and the reality but for many male immigrants, the ambiguity of Canadian society about the status of the male head of household must certainly create a sense of diminished status.

But what of immigrant women? Their position is complex and contradictory in the sense that migration to Canada has both created constraints and opportunities. The constraints are certainly economic; immigrant women earn less than immigrant men and less than Canadian-born women. Their education in their countries of origin is often unrecognized; the Canadian record in foreign credential recognition has been very bad and although there has been some
recent action in a positive direction (the Ontario legislation for example) the overall record has been very poor. Their employment is often part-time, poorly paid and in precarious working conditions. However, in some ways, it has been easier for immigrant women to get employment that immigrant men and this has clearly had implications for gender relations within the family. In addition and at a somewhat more speculative level, the sense of loss of status felt by male immigrants is of course also felt by female immigrants but is mitigated by women generally having less sense of the importance of their personal status and being more progressive and/or more resilient.

So the opportunities arise from the constraints. They do find employment and often become the principal bread-winner. And Canadian society does have messages about gender equality that resonate with some of the women immigrants, some of whom had already been engaged in activities around women’s rights or needs in their countries of origin. Finding themselves in a new environment can be a positive encouragement to continuing this work. I have written elsewhere about the community work done by immigrant women who moved from solving the problems of their own family interfacing with the institutions of the host society (schools, health care system, government bureaucracies, etc.) to helping to solve these problems for their friends and their fellow immigrants. This led, for some of them, to working in the formal associations of immigrant communities and in some cases they exercised formal power but often simply did the work while the males kept the formal positions of power. But this experience of organizing and of succeeding in mobilizing communities did represent an opportunity to exercise management and leadership skills, to learn how to interface with the host society and to have reaffirmed a sense of their own capacity.

Immigrant women build institutions and organizations that provided services to immigrant women. Not all the organizations serving immigrant women were created by immigrant women but many of them were. They also played an important political role, and one that we want to describe in slightly greater detail, in challenging the Canadian women’s movement in terms of class privilege and white privilege.

The story of this challenge has been partly described through the example of NAC, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Mary-Jo Nadeau, in Bashevkin 2008). But the argument I want to make is somewhat different than most of the existing literature on this question which either supports the position that the Canadian Women’s movement did not give up its class and colonized privilege or the position that the movement was marginalized from political influence because of the infighting within organizations. The argument I want to make is that, despite the conflicts, struggles and casualties in terms of organizations that fell apart and people who burned out, the women’s movement in Canada has been the sector that has most integrated the intersections of race and gender and has been better than other sectors of Canadian society in terms of the integration of newcomers. This is certainly a debatable point and one that needs to be discussed and challenged but I would maintain that this has had an impact of multiculturalism in Canada, in that the women’s movement has more successfully incorporated diversity into its practices and its institutions that most other sectors of Canadian society. This has happened primarily in the large urban centres of Canada and, as I have argued, this connection is neither incidental nor accidental. Changing women’s roles in the domestic, market and state sectors have been fundamental in shaping and reshaping urban space and women have been crucial actors in creating and managing the services and activities that have made these urban spaces workable for themselves and for other women, their children and
therefore for the society. Immigrant women have been an integral part of these institution-building activities and the services for immigrant women, still totally inadequate, do represent a continuation of the city-building activities described by Susanne MacKenzie.

3. A Case Study: The City for All Women Initiative / Initiative: une ville pour toutes les femmes

In order to illustrate these links between women, diversity and multiculturalism, cities, immigration and substantive citizenship, I will briefly describe one particular example; the City for All Women Initiative: Initiative: une ville pour toutes les femmes (CAWI-IVTF) (Klodawsky, Siltanen, Andrew, 2009). I use this example because I know it well (I am a member of the Steering Committee) and this is, of course, both a problem and an advantage. I do not have distance but I do have information. There are, of course, many other examples that could have been used; both ones I am aware of, such as The Toronto Women’s Call to Action and the numerous others that I do not know.

I want to develop this example to illustrate the links between women, diversity, multiculturalism and the demands for good urban services as being the basis of substantive citizenship. It is about women’s daily lives, women in all their diversity, and how good urban services can make women’s lives easier, more enjoyable, more egalitarian and therefore their citizenship more inclusive and more real.

CAWI-IVTF started in 2004 although it is a continuation of an earlier project that focussed on evaluating women’s access to services in Ottawa. CAWI-IVTF is a partnership between community-based women’s groups, the City of Ottawa and representatives of the women’s studies programs of the two largest universities in Ottawa (Carleton University and the University of Ottawa). It’s basic objective is to engender the decision-making process of the City of Ottawa and it has two basic types of activities; one focused more on the community link and one focussed more on the City of Ottawa but both trying to develop ways in which the voices of the full diversity of women can be better heard and better taken into account by the City of Ottawa. The fist set of activities relates to training programs whereby women from community-based women’s groups get training in how city hall works and how to make their demands heard. As the City of Ottawa has had a series of budget crises since the beginning of CAWI-IVTF, there has been ample opportunity for practical applications of the training. CAWI-IVTF members have made over 20 public representations to City committees and City Council on a huge variety of subjects, all of which relate to the importance of good urban services and to ensuring that the voices of those least often heard are heard.

The other fact of CAWI-IVTF’s work is working directly with the City of Ottawa to produce tools to help City staff and City officials to better understand and better engage with the growing diversity of Ottawa. The intention of these tools is to produce better and more inclusive public policy in Ottawa. The first tool was a gender equality guide which looked at differences between men and women and, equally, differences within the full diversity of women. The City found the guide sufficiently useful that it contracted with CAWI-IVTF to develop an equity and inclusion lens, that covers 11 of the marginalized sectors of the population (the 5 equity groups of the Ottawa Equity and Diversity policy – the Aboriginal population, women, visible minorities, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered population and the disability community, plus six
additional groups also seen to be marginalized – seniors, youth, recent immigrants, francophones, those living in poverty and those living in the rural areas of the City of Ottawa). This lens is currently being developed and is interesting for the City as part of its mission for service excellence and is interesting for CAWI-IVTF as a way of really introducing an intersectional analysis to the City of Ottawa.

CAWI-IVTF is not an immigrant women’s organization but recent immigrants are the most active element from the community-based women’s groups. Part of the pleasure the women have in participating in CAWI-IVTF is that it is a mixed group; Canadian born women, recent immigrant women from francophone Africa, from Latin America and so on. Most of those women are also active in groups representing their own country of origin and CAWI-IVTF therefore represents another form of collective action, one that is aimed at improving the political and social community of Ottawa for women and children and everyone and one that operates in ways that are inclusive, holistic and pleasurable. CAWI-IVTF has operated publicly in line with its principles; it has started representations o City Council by singing a song, it has given roses to City representatives after important recommendations to a City Committee were accepted, it has developed plays to reinforce its messages and it has also made hard-hitting representations about the importance of making recreation services more accessible both financially and culturally. It therefore tries to be understood by City officials and, at the same time, conveying to them the possibility of alternative visions of politics and of society.

CAWI-IVTF is about redistribution (it’s recommendations about recreation services, public transportation costs, more public housing, more child care, etc.) and it is also about representation. It was recently awarded an award by the United Way of Ottawa and CAWI-IVTF managed to bring three tables of women to the fancy banquet organized by the United Way which brought together, for the most part, the elites of Ottawa. The women were absolutely delighted to be there, to be recognized and to feel that they were being seen as part of Ottawa. Most of the groups being honoured were represented on the stage by two people; a male chair of the Board and a male director of the organization. When CAWI-IVTF was recognized, thirty women went proudly to the state and two representatives made short but pointed remarks in elegant English and French and then, all thirty tossed their peach-coloured scarves in the air saying, ‘Our voices count’. It was an alternative vision of a democratic organization and a representation of multicultural engendered urban politics. It represented a desire for recognition, based on an articulated position calling for greater redistribution.

The case study of CAWI-IVTF does not, of course, demonstrate that the connections I make between immigrant women as in important part of the diversity of women in Canada, cities and substantive citizenship are substantiated; it merely gives one example where these links are central to the activity of the group. I also do not want to suggest that CAWI-IVF has been able to engender decision-making in Ottawa nor to substantially improve the life conditions of the women immigrants active in CAWI-IVTF. It has, I believe, made slightly more visible multicultural women to parts of the Ottawa City government and to parts of the Ottawa public.
4. Emerging Debates

Canadian society remained favourable to continued immigration, different from many of the other immigrant-receiving countries at the present time. However, this is not to say that the dramatic demographic changes in Canadian society have not been unquestioned.

There are debates that are emerging in Canada stemming from the demographic changes form recent immigration. I use the word ‘debate’ but it is an inaccurate word as there is not a debate in the sense of a broad-ranging public discussion of the issue in a way that provides information, allows for all perspectives to present their points of view and encourage public debate. But lacking a better word, we will talk of debates. There have been elements of genuine debate, but only elements.

The one that has been most talked about is the issue of religion and religious practice. It is about the role of the State in relation to religion. It has come up in relation to religious schools (a hotly discussed issue in the last Ontario election), in relation to family law (a very controversial subject in recent Ontario politics) and, more generally, about ‘reasonable accommodation’ in recent Quebec politics.

The question of dress has been a part of some of the discussions but I would argue that it has not been as contentious an issue as in many other countries. In my opinion, the majority of Canadians do not see this as a question that public society should address.

The issues around religious pluralism have been very well presented in the recent publication by the Policy Research Initiative, a federal government ‘think tank’ charged to do wider ranging research and dissemination about important policy issues that play out across sectors and departments. Their publication, “Religious Diversity in Canada” (Horizons, 2009) analyzes different levels of policy-making – macro, meso, micro – that relate to issues of religious practice.

The issue is made more confusing by those people who argue that Canada is, and must remain, a secular society. Canada is not a secular society and by this I am not at all arguing that it should not become a secular society. Simply it is inaccurate to state that Canada is secular and indeed the Policy Research Initiative makes the point nicely.

At the same time, it is important to take into account the people, numerous in my generation, who have worked hard to try to make Canadian society more secular. Many of these were people brought up in strongly religious communities and/or families and who felt constrained by what could be considered the public role and influence of religion. Many of these were women who felt that religious institutions were a major factor in the inferior position allocated to women in Canadian society and who believed that women’s equality would be enhanced by the secularization of Canadian society. For these people, Canada should be secular and therefore, for some, it is. They forget, in saying this, the clear visibility of Christianity in Canadian society, from things like the public calendar and the public holidays to things like the Constitutional recognition of Catholic schools in certain jurisdictions.

There are of course other Canadians who would defend the public support for Christianity as being the historical tradition in Canada and as something that should be continued, despite the
growing number of Canadian citizens (and residents) that do not share this religious tradition. These would be people who may favour immigration but who feel that immigrants should adapt to Canada, including existing public policy favourable to Christianity. The official Canadian position is that we are a two-way street with mutual adaptation of immigrants and of Canadian society but this view is not shared by all Canadians.

These discussions have heated up in the period post 9-11, and clearly there are people with opinions that are clearly anti-Islam and for whom religion and terrorism become connected. I am not going to get into the substance of these debates as this is not my area of expertise and also not the object of this presentation. I want simply to indicate that this issue is in the public realm and calls out for more treatment such as that of the Policy Research Initiative which attempts to clarify the structure of the debates.

5. Silences

There are also silences in the current discussions between newcomers and those born in Canada. These are subjects that are of importance to the full inclusion of newcomers and therefore subjects that should be discussed and talked about if integration is going to lead to substantive citizenship. One of these that relates very centrally to immigrant women, multiculturalism and the living together in diversity is a silence around the role of women as mothers in Canada and, as part of that question, the role of parents in families. This is a subject that is complex and broad-ranging and to which I will have difficulty to do justice, all the more so that it is not something that is a matter of clear public debate.

Many newcomers to Canada, and this applies to women and to men, see Canadian society as being adamant about the rights of children to the point of undermining the role of families. There is a feeling, shared widely among newcomers and perhaps true and perhaps an urban legend that immigrant children on arrival in Canada are immediately told about children’s rights and told that they can phone 911 to complain about mistreatment by their parents. This view is linked to the feeling that Canadian born families give total license to their children and that Canadian children live without any parental or social rules.

This question is particularly, although not exclusively, linked to women as they tend to play the role of intermediates between their children, growing up in Canadian society, and their husbands who, as we already argued, have often suffered a feeling of loss of status in coming to Canada. This can make them even more anxious to play the traditional, and perhaps more so, role of the head of household wanting to exert strong disciplinary rules on their children. Without wanting to deal at length with the question of the place of children in Canadian society, one could say that it is indeed true that there are major differences between the lives of children in the countries of origin of many recent immigrants to Canada and the lives of children in current day Canada. However, it is not true to say that most children in Canada grow up with no rules or no sense of accepted social norms. But his is an issue for a different presentation.

The difficult role of the immigrant woman as intermediary is one dimension of a complex question; another is the more positive view that immigrant women see their role as mothers as extremely important, often more so that their role as women. Furthermore, they see this role as a public role not simply as a role for the private realm. Many of them perceive that this is not
how the role of mother is seen in Canada and for this reason remain silent. Their silence of course means that they cannot feel fully integrated into Canadian society.

I have simplified the complexity of these issues and I do see them as linked; mother as a public role and their feeling that children are given too much license in Canada and that this puts pressure on the bridging act they must play within the family setting, in Canada, between their children and their husband. Mothering is a stressful private role and one that they feel has an unclear public status.

This is a complicated question for women in Canada. There is, for instance, a long history of maternal feminism in Canada and I have alluded to this earlier as being part of the explanation for the role played by women in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century reform period. The second wave of the women’s movement in Canada, from the 1960’s on, was very adamant that it was as individual women, and not as mothers, that equality should be judged. This was in part to make clear that the aim of a woman’s life was neither to get married nor to have children, as had often been argued in the past, but rather to be able to make the choices she wanted to make and to have the agency to create herself as she wished. This was all the more strongly felt as it was a discursive opposition to the discourse of the homemaker in the suburbs making life comfortable for the toiling spouse.

This was not, of course, accepted by all women in Canada, certainly not by Aboriginal women and not in general by immigrant women. But it has been, I would argue, the public position about women in Canada, in public life women are seen as autonomous individuals and if they are mothers, this is an identity in the private realm and not an identity in the public realm.

This is to me the central question and a very complex question. There are a number of critical dimensions which I can only outline very briefly. One element is whether the link between a woman and her child is a purely private link or whether it can be a first step to a relationship with the public realm and to the universal. Certainly one of the paths to political careers for women in Canada has been involvement in school committees, elected school boards and on from there to federal or provincial politics. Clearly in these cases the maternal role led to the public realm and first a concern for educational policy and then more broadly to policy and politics in general.

However, I do not want to argue simply that the status of mother should be recognized in the public realm because the argument of second wave feminism is an important one. Formally inscribing the status of mother in the public realm has often lead to discrimination against those women who chose not to have children and certainly this discrimination has a long history. Recent newspaper reporting of the New Zealand Prime Minister called her ‘barren’ and the Australian Prime Minister was constantly referred to as ‘childless’. The right of women not to have children, not to marry and to be seen as equal and fully capable of the full range of human behaviour is a critical human right and a critical part of women’s equality.

It is therefore not an easy question to figure out how to give equal space in the public realm to women and to men and, at the same time, recognize the diversity of women’s roles in a way that accords recognition to their different roles. Equality and the recognition of difference is not an easy combination and it certainly cannot be achieved without discussion and without recognition of the validity of all the different points of view. I do not think that this is happening now in Canada and this is why I have called this a silence. I think it is extraordinarily important that it
take place because it is a crucial step for the full integration of immigrant women to Canadian society. Without a conversation in which they can freely express their views about motherhood in Canada and the relationship of motherhood to politics and to the public realm and in which Canadian-born women can join this conversation with the same spirit of dialogue and exchange, we will not achieve substantive citizenship for all women in Canada. I have argued earlier in this presentation that the women’s movement has been better that other sectors of Canadian society in recognizing and integrating diversity, particularly racial and ethnic diversity (and perhaps sexual orientation). We need to continue these conversations that indeed open up difficult subjects in Canadian society, to Canadian feminists and to newcomers alike, the role of religion and the role of mothers in the public realm. These may challenge our imagination and how to combine equality and difference but one can hope that our collective imagination is up to the challenge.

References


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