

# The Lone Woman

## The Migration of Portuguese Single Women to Montreal and London

By *Wenona Giles and  
Ilda Januario*

In recent years, with the evolution of feminism and the women's movement, there have been significant developments in the literature on the migration of women. However, to date little attention has been paid to the reasons behind the migration of the single woman<sup>1</sup> and to her specific socio-economic status. In our research in Montreal and London, England, we found either an overall surplus of female as opposed to male migrants, or a surplus of female migrants in certain age categories.

Some writers have begun to analyze this phenomenon. Saskia Sassen-Koob describes a correspondence between the type of job sectors that are expanding (i.e. the service sectors<sup>2</sup> of highly industrialized countries) and the composition of immigration — "largely from low-wage countries and with a majority of women."<sup>3</sup> Mirjana Morokvasic also highlights the importance of turning our attention to this migration of the lone woman. She emphasizes the importance of looking at the origins of these women, in regions where their unequal access to resources is pronounced because of their single status.<sup>4</sup> Annie Phizacklea indicates that patriarchal oppression in the sending society is a motivating force in the decision of women to emigrate.<sup>5</sup> Our research in London and Montreal confirms the latter for single women, but also indicates that patriarchal oppression continues under a different form in the country of emigration.

According to statistical evidence, migrant women far outnumber men in the category of widowed, separated and divorced persons in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in London there are more Portuguese migrant women than men and this has been the case since 1951.<sup>7</sup> The migration of single women has always been more

substantial in Europe than in Canada; this includes the migration of Portuguese women. (In more recent years, however, the migration to Canada of women from Asia, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe has brought an influx of significant numbers of single women). Portuguese immigration to Canada became significant during the 1950s and kept increasing until the mid-70s. In the 60s, women began to immigrate to Canada in substantial numbers. Married women make up about 66 percent of female Portuguese immigrants who arrived between 1968 and 1980. While Portuguese men outnumber women in Montreal by a small margin (106M/100F), there is a preponderance of women born in Portugal for the age groups between 15 years and 24 years and between 55 years and 59 years.<sup>8</sup> Research indicates that among Portuguese immigrants, the marriage age is generally higher for those who emigrate, than for men and women in Portugal and for second-generation Portuguese Canadian men and women in Montreal.<sup>9</sup>

In our research in Montreal and London we found ample evidence for the need to explore in greater depth both the macro-economic conditions leading to the migration of single women. The present article is an introduction, with case study material derived from the lives of these women.

### IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

Over time legislation in the U.K. and in Canada has changed to respond to the demand for a constant supply of cheap domestic labour. In spite of high unemployment in both countries, employers have been unable to attract indigenous workers because of the poor working conditions and pay and the low status

associated with the jobs.

In Britain, the different types of immigration (the one colonial, the other not) have been governed by different legislation and certain legislation has had specific effects upon women. The 1980 and 1983 Immigration Rules in Britain are an example of specifically sexist legislation. As a result of these rulings, immigrant non-British women (i.e. Portuguese) are not allowed to bring their husbands, fiancés and children to join them as dependants in the U.K., unlike men (citizens and non-British). Portuguese women therefore enter either as dependants of men, as "visitors" who later become illegal workers, or as independent workers who apply for work permits before leaving Portugal.

Portuguese men and women are located primarily in the service sector of the British economy. The importation of labour to work in the service sector in the U.K. is so important that, even in 1970 when legislation was being introduced to restrict the entry of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers, three special quotas were set up (lasting until 1979) to include resident domestics, nursing auxiliaries, and hotel and catering workers. With the end of the special quotas, the need for domestic workers did not diminish, but came increasingly from illegal workers, students and, more recently, EEC workers.

In Canada most Portuguese women immigrants have entered as dependants of men, as spouses or as daughters. Sponsored married women have less access to language and job training opportunities. A considerable number of Portuguese immigrants entered as visitors, then became illegal workers, and later acquired landed status within Canada. This became impossible after 1972 when the economic recession led to greater restrictions in

immigration. After 1973 all visitors were required to obtain work permits; following this, the 1978 immigration law imposed further restrictions on the "assisted relative" category. Immigrants to Canada (as in the U.K.) had to have an official job offer approved by an Employment and Immigration Centre.<sup>10</sup> All these measures greatly curtailed the numbers of unskilled workers in Canada — among which most Portuguese single women are numbered.

However, the Canadian immigration law has always made special provisions for the entry of domestic workers. The Domestic Scheme (1955) brought in large numbers of women from Third World countries who were allowed to enter with landed immigrant status on arrival, provided they worked for one year as a domestic before changing job sectors.<sup>11</sup> This was followed by the Temporary Employment Visa program (1973) for domestic work and other low-paid occupations, such as seasonal farmwork and some factory work. Like the guest worker system in Europe, this program initially made workers ineligible for landed status in an effort to keep them from changing job sectors. 1981 legislation allowed live-in domestic workers to apply for landed immigrant status after only two years, provided the applicants could prove they had upgraded their language and job skills. Although most of these applicants had come from the Caribbean and the Philippines, over the years a considerable number of Portuguese single women have come to Canada on these temporary visas. For example, in 1985 there were 581 applicants from all countries, 10 percent of whom were Portuguese.<sup>12</sup>

Like the special quota system in the U.K., both the Domestic Scheme and the Temporary Employment visas in Canada have ensured a flow of female labour to mainly low-paying jobs in the service sector, in spite of restrictive immigration legislation. In the early years of the latter scheme, the number of Portuguese women applying for such permits in Canada (including both first time applicants and renewals) increased from 27 percent to 56 percent between 1973 and 1978 (Desrosiers). As in the U.K., domestic work has become the only avenue for legal immigration for unskilled single women, other than sponsorship by a fiancé.

The following two case studies are representative examples of the lives of two Portuguese single migrant women; one worked in Montreal and the other in London. The type of work they do, the networks they develop and their aspira-

tions are linked closely to the legislative and socio-economic conditions under which they entered the country of immigration.

#### CASE STUDY: MONTREAL

Arminda Sa (pseudonym) is a thirty-nine year old single woman who was born in a farming community in central Portugal near the sea coast. The youngest of three children, Arminda did the housework upon completing four years of primary education, while her parents and brother worked the family's land holdings. Later Arminda taught herself to weave and produced handcrafted articles for sale in a local store.

When she was in her early twenties her mother died of cancer. Around this time Arminda began working in a local restaurant, "following the example of other young women." She met a man with whom she started a common-law relationship, thereby bringing a "loss of honor" upon herself (her words). The relationship did not last because the man, although a poor provider himself, would not allow Arminda to work. She soon returned home to her father's household, where she took up her late mother's role. Having lost her status as a marriageable young woman and now shunned by local villagers, her only close social contact was her sister-in-law.

In 1974, with no prospects for a better life in Portugal, Arminda decided to emigrate to Montreal. She was twenty-six. Her sister in Montreal tried to sponsor her, but she was turned down for immigration as an "assisted relative" because she lacked the necessary number of points accorded for job skills. Arminda's sister went on to sponsor her father who, as a "sponsored relative" of the "family class," did not need to score under the point system. Arminda came to join her family with a three-month tourist visa and stayed illegally for two years, working as a domestic cleaner in private homes and attending French-language courses in the evening. When immigration authorities found her, she returned to Portugal with a job offer as a domestic in Montreal. Seven months later, she returned to Montreal to work for a wealthy and politically influential employer, whom she credits with her return as a landed immigrant (instead of as a live-in domestic on a temporary permit).

Arminda now works as a cleaning woman, six days a week, for several employers in the best residential areas of Montreal. Because she still shares living

costs and accommodation with her father, she has been able to save substantial sums of money.

Although Arminda still does all the housework, she leads an independent social life from her father. However, she has not been able to escape the social stigma and oppression that had such a powerful effect on her decision to emigrate. When she was involved in a promising relationship with a Portuguese man in Montreal, he received an anonymous letter from someone in the Portuguese community disclosing her past. He responded by breaking off the relationship.

Recently Arminda finished building a house in Portugal, complete with swimming pool. It was built on land in the village which she inherited on her mother's death. She continues to pay her contributions to the local "Casa do Povo," a rural institution for social security which will pay her an old age pension when she retires in Portugal, like her father.

#### CASE STUDY: LONDON

Mathilde Ribeiro is a forty-four year old single woman who was born in the north of Portugal to a farming family who worked on their own land. Of her six siblings, only one of her sisters has remained in the town of her birth; the others have migrated to Lisbon, Oporto, France and London.

Mathilde had more schooling than most Portuguese immigrant women who were interviewed. She attended primary school for four years and taught catechism to young children for two years. When she was fifteen she went to high school for a year and then to secretarial school. During this time she worked in a school for young children and began to work in an office. When Mathilde was twenty, she entered a convent in Portugal, believing that she might have a vocation to be a nun. After six months she decided against this and went back to working as a secretary; however, she still identifies herself through her religion and her devotion to the Virgin.

Mathilde says that she was not interested in getting married and has "never met anyone" whom she "really wanted to marry" — although her parents had tried to arrange a marriage for her once in Portugal. She said that her brothers had the responsibility of "looking after" the single women in the family.

She had been living in Lisbon for fifteen years when she decided that she was "tired of the job in Portugal" and wanted

more freedom and a better wage. In 1966, when she was twenty-eight, she migrated to London, where one of her sisters lived. There she found a job working in a hospital cafeteria. She moved into a hospital residence.

Mathilde Ribeiro became part of the first major wave of Portuguese and Spanish workers to supply labour for the British service sector. After a year she left her first job and the residence. She took a course to become an auxiliary nurse and acquired her own council flat. She has been able to save enough money to begin to build a house on land inherited from her parents. She plans to retire there.

In London, Mathilde is part of a well-established social network of Portuguese women, mostly single, with whom she socializes at least once a week. She also goes to a Portuguese Mass on Wednesday evenings with fifteen to twenty women who meet afterwards in the Church basement for coffee. The Mass provides a common ground for these women to meet informally.

The experiences of Portuguese migrant women as wage workers in Portugal are extremely varied, including work in factories, in agriculture, and as domestics. Before leaving Portugal, Portuguese women in London had also worked as secretaries and as hairdressers. Most Portuguese migrant women contributed their wages and labour power to their households before they left; and this contribution, while universal, was also critical to the negotiation of power in household gender relations.

In the case of single women in London, most of whom were in their late twenties and older, it was not marriage which they expressed as a major desire and concern, but the difficulty of remaining single in Portugal and still surviving from an economic point of view. Most Portuguese women in London, like Mathilde, had left Portugal alone and intended to remain single or, at least, to avoid family or community pressures to marry. In Montreal younger single women who emigrate alone tend to sponsor their fiancés, while older single women, like Arminda, who is considered past the "marrying age," may sometimes express a wish to marry, but may have to contend with community pressures that discourage them from marriage.

The lowest paid jobs in Portugal, London and Montreal are available to Portuguese women, married or single. In London and Montreal, however, the wages are sufficient for single women to achieve a better standard of living than they would

as single women in Portugal. Economic independence is the most important factor in the decision of a Portuguese woman to come to these cities. Single women, without responsibility for childcare, are able to work longer hours in order to increase their income or to devote more time to upgrading their skills or language capabilities.

These women regard migration as a means of achieving freedom from the control of others. In the case of single women, especially those who do not plan to return to Portugal, it is true that they can feel "freer" in London and Montreal from the constraints imposed by extensive kin and village networks. Arminda, however, by living in the Portuguese community, was not able to liberate herself from these constraints and was often the subject of malicious rumours linked to her past in Portugal. Other immigrants to Montreal prefer to settle outside the community, with the express intention of avoiding "the gossip."

Both Arminda and Mathilde had sisters who were already living in London and Montreal when they arrived, and who helped them find jobs and settle in their new environment. However, neither woman continued to nurture these kin ties after the first year or so of arriving in London and Montreal.

One of the most striking differences between Arminda and Mathilde is their networking patterns. Mathilde was part of a cohesive support group of single Portuguese women migrants in London, which acted to fill some of the gaps left by the absence of relationships with household members in London. This alternative to a patriarchal household form does not diminish the independence to which single migrant women aspire. Arminda, on the other hand, appears to have isolated herself from contact with any Portuguese women, which may be related to her loss of "honour" in the eyes of the Portuguese community.<sup>13</sup>

In London and Montreal, some, but not all single Portuguese women express a desire to return to Portugal. The research in both cities suggests that return orientation for single women is linked to the possession of land in Portugal and to the economic success of single women, some of whom, like Arminda and Mathilde, are able to invest money in a house in Portugal. These are women relatively close to retirement who would benefit socially by being close to kin in Portugal when they retire. In London, research further suggests that return orientation is related to the life cycle of Portuguese single migrant

women. However, it is also in the return plan that the economic and social independence that single migrant women seek through migration may be thwarted, insofar as they rejoin a patriarchal household dominated by male kin or a community which they found oppressive and which contributed to their initial decision to migrate.

The presence of large numbers of unattached immigrant women in countries of migration warrants attention. The choices which these women make in terms of migration, work and return are influenced by variables which are, in many cases, different than those of female married migrants and male migrants. Not only do these women confront gender relations in different ways than women and men in nuclear households, but immigration legislation may also affect them differently. Their situation clearly warrants further study.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'single women' refers to unmarried, divorced or separated women who live alone or with other women.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the 'service sector' refers to a sub-section of the tertiary sector, specifically to the public and private use of servants, which includes employment i) in private domestic work, ii) in the hotel and catering trade, and iii) in hospitals as domestic staff.

<sup>3</sup> Saskia Sassen-Koob, 1984. "From Household to Workplace: Theories and Survey Research on Migrant Women in the Labour Market," *International Migration Review*, Vol 18. No. 4 (1984), p. 1160.

<sup>4</sup> Mirjana Morokvasic, "Women in Migration: Beyond the Reductionist Outlook," in *One Way Ticket: Migration and Female Labour*, ed. Anne Phizacklea (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Annie Phizacklea, "Introduction," in *One Way Ticket*. Pina Cabral, "Female Power and the Inequality of Wealth and Motherhood in North-Western Portugal," in *Women and Property — Women as Property*, ed. R. Hirschon (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> "Labour Supply and Migration in Europe," *Economic Survey of Europe*, Part II (Geneva: ECE and the UN, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> J. Harris, "Portuguese Workers in the United Kingdom: A Study Commissioned by the Portuguese Institute of Emigration" (London: unpublished manuscript, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Denise Desrosiers, "*Caractéristiques socio-démographiques de l'immigration féminine portugaise au Québec.*" Groupe de recherche: étude comparée de la condition prolétarienne des femmes immigrées au Québec. (Montreal: UQAM, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Antonio J. Alpalhao and Victor M.P. Da Rosa, *Les Portugais du Québec: Éléments d'analyse socio-culturelle*, (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1978). Caroline Brettell,

"Male Migrants and Unwed Mothers: Illegitimacy in a Northwestern Portuguese Parish," in *Anthropology* 9, 1 & 2, (1985); and Jose Cutileiro, *A Portuguese Rural Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> The Law Union of Ontario, *The Immigrants Handbook: A Critical Guide* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Makeda Silvera, *Silenced* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Judith Ramirez, (Coordinator of INTERCEDE: A lobby and advocacy group for domestic workers' rights in Ontario), personal communication with I.

Januario (1987).

<sup>13</sup> However, recent studies on northern Portugal by Pina-Cabral, O'Neill, and Brettell and the well-known ethnography on the Alentejo region by Cutileiro indicate the need to re-examine interpretations of the codes of honour and shame in Portugal. See [refer to pp.15&16]. These studies indicate that, at least in the case of landless women, premarital sexual morality is not of primary importance to the kin group or the community.



Photo: Charisse de Freitas