

'Milk and Honey:' Not for Older Migrant Women

By Reihana Mohideen

“I grow old...I grow old... I shall wear
the bottoms of my trousers rolled.”

T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock is not alone in his predicament. The fate of older migrants living in the West, especially women, and especially those of colour, is increasingly bleak.

The great Australian myth—the “lucky country,” the multicultural land of milk and honey which beckoned to migrants from all over the world—is now wearing very thin.

The Pecking Order

Most older migrants, who have worked tirelessly for decades, generally in the lowest-paid jobs, are still at the bottom layer of the pile. Yes, they have probably done better than they might have back home, but if they came in as a part of the working class, they continue to remain trapped in the same class background—unless you happen to be white and especially if you happen to be British. The Irish, after several years of discrimination at the hands of an English ethnic ruling elite, are now also upwardly mobile.

As to which part of the pecking order you fall into, that depends on several factors—class, race and gender being definitive, along with the particular wave of migration that you were a part of. The southern Europeans, who migrated in the post-World War II intake and were assigned the title ‘wogs’

and along with it the lowest paid jobs, used to be the most exploited sections of the workforce. Today they would consider themselves superior to the Turkish and Lebanese migrants who came in the 1960s and 1970s, who themselves now feel superior to the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian migrants who arrived in the 1980s. The latter in turn feel more privileged and superior to the migrants and refugees fleeing Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa today. The migrants from South Asia tend to be highly educated and fluent in English. They are overwhelmingly professionals and tend to feel more special and superior to everyone else.

Working Women and the Family

Generally, the migration experience is less positive for the older men in the family. They tend to have greater privileges to let go, especially if they came from the well-educated and relatively privileged classes back home. For the women, while the adjustment is great, there is a certain equalising factor that the migration experience can bring in to play.

For most women of colour from the poorer classes, the biggest opportunity afforded is the right to a job, and along with it precious economic independence. In some cases it is easier for the woman to find work before her husband. The reason is that lowly-paid and super exploited jobs as cleaners in the service sector, domestic helpers, piece-workers in the home are easier to come by than unskilled factory jobs in industries such as manufacturing that traditionally employed migrant men.

For migrant women of colour this invariably leads to extreme tensions in the home. The ability to resolve these tensions invariably depends on the capacity of the male partner to adapt and accommodate to the new conditions and the woman's changed economic status. These tensions, if unresolved, lead to the abuse of the woman or the break-up of the family unit. This is a common problem faced by older and younger migrants. For older migrants the adaptation can be much harder.

Older migrant women are also responsible for disciplining their children—a younger generation who migrate at a very young age or are born in Australia. This discipline usually means maintaining traditional cultural values that, in many cases, come into sharp conflict with the norms of society “out there.” In society “out there” there is a dominant Anglo-Saxon culture that imposes the status quo, and a myriad of other very different cultural backgrounds that do not mingle too easily with one another.

This adds to the frictions in the family unit. The mother has to deal with her children's rebellion and frustrations that unfortunately flow from, or leads to, an embarrass-

ment with who and what they are, and sometimes, even hatred. This too has led to the breaking down of relations within the family.

For families coming from Asian ethnic backgrounds, this disharmony in the family is a major humiliation—a slur on the family name. It should not be spoken of and should at all costs be hidden from outside knowledge—after all “what will other people

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think?” This leads to a process of self-denial and a refusal to come to terms with these pressures, which of course exacerbates the problems.

Retirement

In Australia today a number of Asian migrant women, who arrived from the 1970s onwards, have to face the fact of being older—the fact of “retirement.” This can be a frightening prospect for anyone and more so for migrant women and their families.

For Anglo-Australians the cultural norm is, at some stage, to move in to that waiting room to oblivion or what some people hope may be a haven of some sort—the “home for the aged.” But for Asian families this is still generally unacceptable. There is still a very

strong expectation that the children will look after the elders, which was, after all, a part of the unstated family contract. But in most cases the children's lives are consumed by the frantic pace of an increasingly productivity-driven, individualised present and the prospect of an uncertain future. They are trying to "make it" at one or two notches higher than their parents on the socio-economic ladder. Thus the prospect of looking after mum and/or dad is not a very welcome one. While some families continue to look after their old, more and more Asian migrants are also living the last few years of their lives in "homes for the aged."

Today in Australia there are "homes for the aged" for older people from various ethnic backgrounds, including Asian backgrounds. However, even these are scarce. Many older Asian women will have to move into a "standard" home which invariably means no provision for their social and cultural needs. The most common complaint from those who have to rely on these services is the quality of the food—an insipid English diet of boiled beef and vegetables.

Reproduction Continued

Perhaps one of the more problematic aspects of growing old is the need to feel productive and useful, to society, to your loved ones and to yourself. On a more abstract level this generally means wanting to be a part of



Sid Balatan/Asiapix

Continuing reproductive role. Due to decreasing government allocation for social services, older women such as the one in this photo have to again assume the role of unpaid caregivers.

some social division of labour. The slashing back of the welfare state under two decades of neoliberal economic policies has resulted in older women being once again slotted into their traditional roles of unpaid caregivers.

Some of them undergo enormous hardship looking after very old and even incapacitated husbands and increasingly also taking care of their grandchildren. For most grandmothers, taking care of the youngest ones is a joy rather than a chore. However, due to cutbacks in easily affordable childcare, many working families today are unable to pay the large childcare fees required and are relying exclusively on grandparents to not merely assist but to even take the main load of caring for the very young and other related household tasks. I am reminded here of a story told by my mother of an Asian grandmother in her late sixties who complains of exhaus-

tion because she has to do most of the housework to make life easier for her working adult children. In this case the woman also felt obliged to do it because she was being “looked after” by her son, i.e., allowed to live with his family.

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This load of domestic work, which is increasingly oppressive for older women due to their age and physical fitness, is now being more publicly acknowledged as a form of exploitation—the multiple burdens that continue to drain older women. However, it is an exploitation that is primarily the result of a government policy which cuts back on social welfare and calculatedly places the selective burden on the most vulnerable sections of society, older women among others.

This is also being increasingly felt in the economic sphere with the cutbacks in government pensions. While there are figures that show the massive holdings of superannuation funds and pension funds, these don't necessarily translate into better quality of economic life for the aged. In fact the increase in these funds directly results from the privatisation of government pensions which used to be given at the level of a living wage to retired people. The cutbacks and privatisation of pensions simply shift the burden back to the workers to save for their retirement and takes the responsibility away from government to ensure that retired people live a decent life. Therefore the economic situation of most retired working-class people, and especially the women, is getting worse.

Older Women's Rebellion

One of the most cruel losses felt by older Asian migrant women living in White society is the lack of respect. In their traditional culture, respect was accrued with age and experience. People not merely listened to you, but they sought you out for advice and your active intervention in important matters. This is denied in the most horribly discriminating way in White society. You are dismissed for being old and “unproductive.” If you are a woman and a migrant you simply have no place, you are invisible. However, some older women are fighting back.

In Australia a “grey power” movement has emerged, highlighting the hardships facing older people and heralding their willingness to fight government policies. Traditional politicians now have to take note of this as an “electoral” factor in a population that is getting older.

Older women's campaign networks and support networks have arisen in the last few years—one of the more popular ones being the “Older Women's Network” which performs around the country at women's demonstrations and puts their message into song.

In areas heavily populated by working-class migrants, such as Bankstown in Sydney, migrant women are active in a range of community issues. The International Women's Day marches here are perhaps among the most colourful in the world as women march proud in their cultural glory.

Older women are also resisting the pressures by refusing to fit the gender stereotype. Increasing numbers of retired women are returning to high schools and university to finish their education. Literary efforts have flour-



photos by Tesa de Vela



Ayesha migrated to Australia in 1976. As most older migrant women in that country, she has to be ready to face the difficult realities of retirement.

ished as more and more women writers are “discovered” and acclaimed.

Older women are also more boldly starting to explore their sexuality and starting up new relationships later in life.

Some migrant women are opting to return to their former home countries where they can find an improved quality of life. Others are trying to make the best of both cultures. My mother, a splendid Sri Lankan woman in her eighties, has her own flat but also shares her time with me, my sister and her relatives in Sri Lanka. She has now decided to take an overseas trip to “see the world” visiting the Philippines and Wales in the United Kingdom.

Of course, not all women have these options available to them. Their choices are limited by factors such as class. A majority of older migrant women face a bleaker future, along with other disadvantaged sectors of Australian society, migrant and non-immigrant, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The important thing is for these sectors of society, including older migrant women, to realise that their lives can be genuinely fulfilling only through the struggle for their own collective and personal empowerment.

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