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Asian Women’s Immigration Experiences in Vancouver**

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**Parental Sponsorship – Whose Problematic? A Consideration of South
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Abstract: This paper examines how parental sponsorship policy is fractured. Canada's immigration policy recognizes the importance of family reunification, yet in selecting economic immigrants based on human capital measures and restricting parental sponsorship, immigration policy has created a dual system. The paper examines the problematic of sponsorship that discursively constructs parents as a potential 'burden' and competing interpretations that consider the sponsorship mechanism itself as creating the burdens of dependency and marginalization. The paper explores some of the tensions in immigration discourse and practices regarding parental sponsorship by focusing on older South Asian women's immigration experiences. Elderly immigrants' stories call into account purely economic rationales for immigration and convey their centrality to family life, the limited value of idealized models of the 'autonomous' immigrant, the necessity to question simplistic portrayals of 'immigrant families', and the necessity of hearing their 'voices'.

Key Words: elderly immigrant women, gender analysis, immigration policy and discourses, family class immigration, sponsorship, dependency, narrative

Introduction

In parental sponsorship policy, immigration discourse and practice is fractured. Canada's immigration policy has had a longstanding recognition of the importance of family reunification. But the policy, which allows landed immigrants and citizens to sponsor family members, is historically marked by exclusions that are racially, gendered, and class-based (Côté et al. 2001; Agnew 1996). These exclusions continue, but in less obvious and more complex ways in immigration discourses and practices. The point system, which determines criteria for selecting 'independent' immigrants, has enabled a growing population of non-Europeans to immigrate to Canada. At the same time, it contributes to 'deficiency discourses' that are particularly harmful to racialized sponsored parents who immigrate to Canada in the family class category (McLaren and Black 2005; McLaren 2006). More particularly, the discourses and practices of the point system give legitimacy to the recent reduction in the admission of sponsored parents and justification for the continued use of the sponsorship program, despite the harm it may cause groups who are already made vulnerable. Immigration policy operates as a dual system that *selects* economic immigrants based on human capital measures and that *restricts* and manages the sponsorship of family members (Li 2004).

Yet immigration policy and practices provide a discursive space in which the meanings of sponsored parents vary and are subjected to contestation. This paper aims to contribute to Citizenship and Immigration Canada's commitment to gender-based analysis, which considers the different impacts of policies, programs, legislation and research on women and men (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2002). In particular, the paper focuses on elderly women¹ who make up the majority of parental sponsorships. This paper explores some of the tensions in immigration discourse and practices regarding parental sponsorship by focusing specifically on older South Asian women's immigration experiences in the Greater Vancouver area. To set the context, this paper, first, discusses immigration discourses, practices and research that problematize the 'immigrant family' – particularly sponsored parents (for an elaboration, see McLaren and Black 2005). Second, the paper considers research on the sponsorship program and its implications for women. Third, the paper examines changing trends in South Asian family class immigration to BC. Finally, utilizing in-depth interviews with twenty South Asian elderly women who came to Canada as sponsored immigrants, the paper shows how elderly immigrants' stories, that locate their experiences in meaningful social contexts, call into account purely economic rationales for immigration. Their narratives convey their

¹ It is important to understand gender as an organizing principle of migration that intersects with age and other social categories such as 'race', ethnicity, and social class.

centrality to family life, the limited value of idealized models of the 'autonomous' immigrant, the necessity to question simplistic portrayals of 'immigrant families', and the necessity of hearing their 'voices' to address violations and exclusions (see Anthias 2002).

The sponsorship problematic

In exploring parental sponsorship, it is necessary to consider how prevailing discourses define the value of immigrants, the eligibility of immigrants, and the circumstances of their immigration and how they interact with such material practices as the immigration point system. Various discourses have informed the highly charged debates in Canada's fraught history of immigration admission policies and practices. The debates, however, have generally been framed by prominent discourses that perpetuate "the separation of 'Canadians as members of the nation' from immigrants as the 'new' problem under consideration" (Thobani 2000: 38). By virtue of their embeddedness in routine practices, prominent immigration discourses provide common sense, which is powerful, often exclusionary, but not easy to identify (McLaren and Black 2005).

Discourses prevail that view family class immigrants, especially the elderly, as undesirable burdens on society, who are ill prepared for the Canadian labour market, do not integrate and are a drain on Canadian society (e.g. Collacott 2002). Powerful discourses that distinguish between 'desirable' and 'deficient' immigrants obscure how immigration policy already restricts elderly parents' and grandparents' immigration, how central they may be to immigrating families, how they may provide support to their families' settlement in Canada, and how the sponsorship program itself may contribute to immigrant inequalities and marginalization. During the past decade, elderly parents' and grandparents' opportunities to immigrate to Canada have diminished relative to economic or 'independent' immigrants. In 1994, Canada admitted 41,477 parents or grandparents out of 224,399 immigrants (18% of total admissions) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003). In 2004, it admitted only 12,732 out of 235,824 immigrants (5% of total admissions) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2005). Increasingly, the immigration system selects immigrants on the basis of their human capital 'skills' (Abu-Laban 1998; Li 2003; Li 2004; McLaren and Dyck 2004). The growing influence of human capital theory on the immigration point system, which establishes criteria for selecting skilled workers, has given legitimacy to immigration policy's downward trend of admitting sponsored parents to Canada. (McLaren and Black 2005).

Further, the shift in immigration policy during the past decade towards favouring economic principal applicants (usually selected through the immigration point system) gives legitimacy to

demeaning stereotypes of extended family networks associated with foreign cultures “contrary to Canadian family values” (Li 2004: 26). Dominant immigration discourse includes the connotation that the family reunification program needs to be based on the Canadian nuclear family, not the extended Asian or African family (Li 2004). In excluding parents and grandparents from the ‘immediate’ family, immigration policy has targeted them as not only less important, but also as threatening. As Abu-Laban (1998) argues, the policy choice that gives priority to economic over family immigrants and refugees reflects an increasing emphasis on economic self-sufficiency as a measure of an immigrant’s worth, reduced notions of citizenship and citizens’ rights, and a corresponding ‘problematization of immigrant families’. The presumption that the worth of elderly immigrants is measurable according to economic self-sufficiency criteria appears in research, not just official policies and practices.

A recent study found, for example, that sponsored elderly immigrants make considerable use of government pension and social assistance programs, which represents a serious burden to taxpayers, and that elderly immigrants may divert resources away from children and therefore may represent a burden to families as well (Baker and Benjamin 2002). The authors, however, do not take account of the meaningful social context of immigrants’ lives for understanding why some may draw on government benefits and programs. They also do not consider how central sponsored elderly immigrants may be to their families and the various ways that they may contribute to their families’ settlement in Canada. Another recent study (Dempsey 2004) shows that parents and grandparents who had landed when they were 60 years or older relied the most on non-contributory retirement income such as Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. In contrast, elders who had landed as ‘skilled principal applicants’ and had spent considerable time in Canada relied most heavily on private market income such as employment earnings and investment. An implication of this research brief is that skilled principal applicants are the ‘ideal immigrant’, and that, because sponsored parents may not be economically self-sufficient, they are likely to be a problem. The study does not investigate how ‘independent’ immigrants may be intricately involved in family relations and depend on family members, and it does not consider the obstacles elderly immigrants may face that make it difficult to be economically self-sufficient.

On the other hand, discourses that measure the worth of immigrants in economic terms co-exist with others that are more socially inclusive, which allow for broader notions of worth, citizenship and the family. These less dominant discourses, which run counter to officially-inscribed distinctions between desirable and undesirable immigrants, are informed by various theoretical perspectives – including classical liberal, feminist, anti-racist, gerontology, poststructural and/or

political economy. In various ways, they challenge the economic and market-based notion of immigrants' 'human capital' by acknowledging the significance and complexity of family and community life, underlying power relations, and patterns of inequality. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, for example, suggests that many compelling reasons exist for promoting family reunification, which include international legal obligations, Canada's traditional policy of family reunification, and the promotion of newcomer integration (OCASI) 2005). The Canadian Bar Association questions the decline of parental sponsorship target levels and states, "In view of the 75% reduction in quotas ("targets") over the past two years, it appears that the government is deliberately trying to kill the longstanding program for sponsorship of parents and grandparents" (2005:4). The Association calls for more public consultation:

The issue of parental sponsorships is a policy decision; a question of values. The government may decide that Canadian values dictate that parents are not integrally part of the family unit and that there is no sufficient policy justification for admitting sponsored parents to Canada. This appears to have been already decided. We believe this is a fundamental issue deserving of public debate. (Canadian Bar Association 2005: 4)

The former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, himself, suggested that parental sponsorship is a key component of immigration and needs re-consideration. On April 2005, he announced that the government would permit more landed immigrants and citizens to sponsor parents and grandparents than his Ministry had earlier forecasted. Joseph Volpe, stated: "Reuniting families is a key priority of Canada's immigration program, and an issue to which the Liberal government is firmly committed" (Volpe 2005). In allowing immigrants to sponsor parents and grandparents, Mr. Volpe noted, Canada needs to be culturally sensitive to different concepts of family: "For example, in many cultures, these parents and grandparents are essential child-care providers and supports, and their presence in the country will dramatically improve, for some immigrants, their situation in this country". This announcement was a major reversal of the government's previous year's forecast that about 6, 2000 parents and grandparents would immigrate to Canada in 2005. The Minister was now expecting to land an additional 12,000 in 2005 and another 12,000 in 2006 (altogether 18,000 in each year) (Volpe 2005).

Despite various statements about the value of family reunification and the significance of varied family formations, debates about parental sponsorship remain unresolved and admission targets have declined and/or fluctuated. Very little research has addressed these debates and investigated the centrality of sponsored parents and grandparents to immigrant families and their importance in helping immigrants to settle. In addition, whatever research exists has little to say about

gender, and about elderly women and their views about their experiences (e.g. Khoo 2003; Angel et al. 1999).

The shifting discourses and unresolved debates suggest it would be timely to conduct more extensive research and to engage in public debates about sponsored parents and grandparents. The point system and human capital discourse may not only play a role in justifying the sponsorship program; they may enable the immigration system and wider society to turn a blind eye to its possible harms. Several studies, which have examined the implications of the sponsorship program for women (usually as spouses or partners), suggest that it creates dependency and vulnerability. The following considers this research and its relevance for understanding elderly women's experiences.

Sponsorship and women's dependency

The charge that family class members, ill prepared for the Canadian labour market, do not integrate and are a drain on Canadian society overlooks how the sponsorship relationship itself may produce dependency and vulnerability for sponsored members. The family class sponsorship program allows people to immigrate to join their families, under very specific conditions (Côté et al. 2001). The program admits family members on the basis of a sponsorship agreement with the Canadian government. The sponsor agrees to provide accommodation, care and maintenance for the family member (Côté et al. 2001; Arat-Koc 1999). In signing a contract, called an Undertaking, with the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, the sponsor promises to financially support the sponsored immigrant for a period of up to 10 years. The support period extends to 3 years for spouses, common-law partners or dependent children aged 22 or older, and 10 years for dependent children under age 22 (or until they reach age 25) and all other sponsored immigrants (Baker and Benjamin 2002). During the support period, the sponsored dependants cannot, except under exceptional circumstances, collect social assistance and are ineligible for most subsidized housing. As well as the Undertaking, sponsors must provide evidence that they are able to financially support sponsored immigrants (and their dependants). Sponsors must have an income that exceeds the Low Income Cut-off for a household that includes their current dependants and the sponsored immigrants (the income test is normally relinquished for spouses and dependent children) (Baker and Benjamin 2002).

It is worth considering how these measures reflect and contribute to a neoliberal value of economic 'self-sufficiency' tied to the labour market, the primacy of the nuclear family, and the responsibility of the individual and family instead of the state for sustaining immigrants. Demanding this sacrifice of sponsors suggests that only they and not Canadian taxpayers benefit from family class immigration, which emphasizes the outsider status of immigrants (Arat-Koc 1999). Moreover,

sponsorship is only available to individuals who can afford to pay for the cost of the sponsorship process, the bond, and the essential needs of the sponsored individual, and possible dependants. As a result, families who are struggling economically, socially and emotionally, who might most benefit from more family support, are the least likely to have access to it.

Another consequence of the program is that it enforces dependency of the sponsored individual on the person who has posted the bond. Such dependency may be entirely benign and serve all those involved. But it does not take account of changing circumstances, the strains it can cause within families, and how it may result in exploitation of the sponsored individual's labour (by family members or others who take advantage of their vulnerable position), isolation, abuse, indebtedness, poverty, marginality, and exclusion. This enforced dependency relationship in sponsorship is exacerbated further by the fact that it is highly feminized. Women, who comprise a majority of the family class immigrants who come to Canada, are already made vulnerable by inequalities in education, the labour market, the family, and so on. Such gendered inequalities may be compounded further when they intersect with being older, racialized, and poor (McLaren and Black 2005). Since little research exists on sponsored elderly women, we consider a few studies that examined the impact of sponsorship on women who are spouses, partners or fiancées.

In their in-depth analysis of 'conjugal sponsorship', Côté et al. (2001) provide one of the few studies on the consequences of sponsorship for women in Canada. The authors interviewed 16 sponsored, Francophone immigrant women in Ontario and highlighted the women's dependence, isolation, feelings of indebtedness, culture shock, difficulty with social integration, underemployment and its effects, language barriers, discrimination, sexism, and racism. Female dependence, the authors suggest, was above all financial. Male partners appeared to exercise financial control, and in some cases, social control over their female partners. Sponsorship debt as a form of psychological control was "the most salient aspect mentioned by the women interviewed" (2001: 55). "In exchange for the 'right to come to Canada,' the husband demands 'eternal recognition' from his wife" (2001: 55). The women described being blackmailed by their partners' threats of withdrawing sponsorship and of violence if the women resisted their authority. Côté et. al. (2001: 62) criticize the state for assigning the role of guarantor to the husband, because it offers him on a "silver platter" the opportunity to impose his authority. The authors fault the sponsorship rules as contributing to the inequalities between men and women and impeding the autonomy of sponsored women.

In a qualitative study of 32 women in Vancouver who were sponsored (or expected to be sponsored) by their husbands/fiancés who were living in Canada, the authors found similarly that the sponsorship agreements rendered the women vulnerable (Jamieson 2002). The authors question the

apparent assumptions underlying sponsorship agreements that: “(1) sponsored persons are unlikely to have sufficient skills and knowledge to ensure that they can contribute to the Canadian economy; and (2) that they are likely to make excessive demands on our health and medical systems” (p. 4). Further, the authors suggest that since a sponsored woman becomes unusually dependent upon her spouse, the possibility of domestic violence is exacerbated.

Giroux (2002), who focuses on the impact of sponsorship dependency on women’s vulnerability to violence, points out ways in which the sponsorship program is discriminatory and infringes on immigrants’ equality and human rights. For example, when a husband sponsors his wife, only he signs the sponsorship contract; she is also excluded from the sponsorship application process. “These practices deprive sponsored women from their juridical personality and have considerable impact on the couple’s relations, since they reinforce the husband’s quasi-parental authority over his wife, as well as her subordination and dependency” (p. 16). In their in-depth analysis of women who speak neither English nor French and have been abused by their husbands, MacLeod and Shin (1993) examined the meaning of abuse in their lives, their experiences linking the abuse, including immigration to their new country and their linguistic isolation. The authors included in their study sponsored women (about a third of their sample) but not elderly women. Such studies suggest that the sponsorship program exacerbates existing social inequalities, creates women’s dependency, and makes them potentially vulnerable to harm. Though little research focuses on sponsored older women, several studies provide insights into the conditions of their sponsorship.

Elderly women’s sponsorship

In her research on family class immigration in relation to income security policy in Canada, Boyd (1989) focused, in particular, on the experiences of elderly immigrant women. While immigration policy in the 1980s facilitated the arrival of elderly immigrants, she notes, regulations governing eligibility to income security programs denied or prorated their benefits. Canada’s income security programs (Old Age Security (OAS) and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS)) have been generally off limits to elderly, sponsored immigrants for 10 years and in any case provide quite minimal assistance. Boyd indicates that the low personal incomes of the immigrant elderly point to an unresolved tension over what constitutes their social rights to income security programs. Who should be the beneficiaries of these programs that serve to spread the financial burden of caring for the elderly among the younger generation? Boyd suggests that among immigrants “the first generation may not fully benefit from income security programs, both because, as young families, their social

obligations toward their elderly may also be economic ones, and because, in old age, first generation individuals may not receive income benefits to the same extent as the elderly Canadian born” (p. 21).

Though Boyd does not focus on the implications of sponsorship, her research indicates that elderly immigrant women are placed in an especially precarious position. The fact that they are more likely than their male counterparts and Canadian born elderly to be living with their children may represent a deliberate strategy to minimize the effects of their low incomes. Boyd indicates that “if gender, immigration policy and income security policy underlie the low incomes of elderly immigrant women, the personal consequences remain unexplored” (p. 18). She notes that little is known about whether elderly immigrant women benefit from living with kin. Do family members, for example, pool their resources and transfer them across generations or are the elderly left in relative positions of powerlessness and dependency? More than a decade after Boyd’s analysis, the fundamental questions that she raises about elderly immigrant women’s low income and dependency continue to have urgency.

Few studies focus on parental sponsorship and its dependency effects, but research indicates that elderly immigrants may feel obligated to provide care and housework for their family, which can lead to isolation and loneliness (e.g. Treas and Mazumdar 2002; Sherkin 2004) and reports suggest that extreme forms of vulnerability and abuse may result. For example, in its report on the elderly, the Quebec Commission of Human Rights and Youth Rights refers to the vulnerability of older sponsored women who are secluded within the family, especially those who are socially disadvantaged (Giroux 2002). Anecdotally, columnist Margaret Wentz (2004) notes that Sistering, a Toronto shelter for homeless or near-homeless women, increasingly offers sanctuary to older immigrant women. Wentz writes: “These women live with their families. But they are frightened and even terrified by them. Many of the elderly Chinese women were brought here to care for their grandchildren. They don’t speak English, and they are easily exploited and abused” (p. A25). Beaulieu, Gordon and Spencer (2003) note that immigration policies and sponsorship rules can have a profound influence on older immigrants, creating isolation and dependency on the family. If families are stressed, for example, by poverty and underemployment older immigrants may be particularly vulnerable to abuse or neglect.²

On the other hand, sponsored elderly women may benefit from living and working with their families. If their families are unable to sponsor them – because they cannot afford the obligations of sponsorship – all may be disadvantaged. In addition, reduced immigration admission of sponsored parents and grandparents may place more immigrant families in tenuous positions as they struggle to settle in Canada. Little is known, nevertheless, about the extent to which sponsored elderly women

² My thanks to Charmaine Spencer for providing me with information from her report and other related sources.

come to Canada to care for their grandchildren, about their responsibilities in providing childcare and other domestic duties, nor about the consequences of such an arrangement for them, their children or their grandchildren.

If few studies focus on the sponsorship of older immigrant women, research does indicate that elderly immigrant parents may contribute substantially to their families (Lowenstein 2002). In their research on the perspectives of both female caregivers and receivers in three generational Chinese-Canadian households, Leung and McDonald (2001) show that the elderly women – who were usually sponsored by their families – helped their adult children in the home. Especially in dual career families, they took care of children. They made meals, did household chores, and comforted the adult children. The caregiving between adult children and aging parents was likely to be reciprocal unless the latter were frail and ill. While the authors do not consider other cultural traditions and household arrangements and do not raise questions about how sponsorship might contribute to conditions of dependency, nevertheless, they usefully analyze elderly women's complex social relationships and how they benefit family settlement in Canada.

In considering sponsored elderly women's experiences, it is particularly important to locate them within the context of their everyday lives. Feminist researchers who focus on immigration experience and draw from post-colonialist and anti-racist perspectives stress the importance of placing individual experience within the social, economic and political contexts “to implicate the societal context as a source for change” (Ward-Griffin and Ploeg 1997: 284). These theorists often use narrative – that is, the stories that people tell about themselves, that express lived and bodily experience through language and that portray individuals' experiences in relation to their views of larger societal forces (Becker 2003). Narratives may provide a place from which marginalized groups begin to counter the overriding discourses that shape their world. Storytelling enables marginal groups to direct issues “to the sites where people live, work, learn and socially interact” (Dossa 2002: 355). In the absence of forums to engage in activities and relationships that acknowledge their presence, narratives, anchored in the larger social-political context, can capture the world of people who have suffered and therefore suggest paths to a just world (Dossa 2002). This paper provides a preliminary analysis of sponsored South Asian elderly women's stories as a place from which to begin countering misleading and harmful discourses. Before turning to the narratives of the women in this study, the next section locates their experiences within larger trends in Canada and BC.

Family class immigration from India

The largest source of family class immigrants to Canada comes from India. In 2001, for example, 12,627 family class immigrants came from India to Canada compared with only 6,472 from China, the second-largest source country of family class immigrants (Walton-Roberts 2003). Spouses are the largest category of family class immigration from India, with parents the second largest category. Over the five-year period of 1995 to 1999, the annual intake of spouses from India continued to grow: from 4,009 to 4,851. The annual intake of parents generally declined: from 2,965 (1995) to 2,592 (1999). In recent years, the skilled worker class from India has risen steadily, and since 2000 has become particularly large relative to family class immigration, which overall has declined. In 1994, 2,126 skilled workers emigrated from India to Canada in contrast to 14,640 family class immigrants. In 2001, 13,640 skilled workers emigrated from India compared with 12,627 family class immigrants (Walton-Roberts 2003). The overall decline of parental sponsorship and dramatic increase of skilled workers from India during this period of time reflects the general trend of Canada increasingly admitting skilled workers. As parental sponsorship has declined, families from India may particularly feel the impact.

In her research on immigration from India, Walton-Roberts (2003), emphasizes the importance of family class immigration and its intricate link with economic immigration. We cannot, she argues, “easily define immigration into distinct categories and classes with a desire to control numbers over time without recognising the social and emotional disruption this causes to families whose migration strategies evolve over years, if not decades” (p. 246). For example, a purely economic rationale for immigration misleadingly casts older family members who provide childcare as a possible drain on the Canadian economy, when such a contribution to families may be as “economically significant as it is culturally mediated and is a major influence in determining strategies of family migration” (p. 247). A purely economic rationale mistakenly assumes that the category of skilled workers is more economically desirable than that of family class and that workers are autonomous in their mobility. To counter that rationale, Walton-Roberts cites a study (Winchic and Carment 1989) that indicates the most cited reason for coming to Canada was the presence of family members or friends, which suggests that “the mobility of economically defined subjects is actually shaped by pre-existing social factors” (Walton-Roberts 2003: 144, emphasis in the original).

In Vancouver – which is home to the second largest (after Toronto) South Asian-origin population in Canada – the sponsorship process has been vital in community formation in the 1970s

and 1980s and is still evident in reconstituting the extended family (Walton-Roberts)³. From 1980 to 1994, 90 percent of Indian immigrants to British Columbia were admitted to Canada under family class status (BC Stats 2001), and from 2000 to 2003, that proportion declined to just under 80 percent while economic immigrants were almost 20 percent (BC Stats 2004). From 1999 to 2004, family class immigration from India to BC averaged around 3,762 yearly compared with 937 economic immigrants. The highest number of family class landings occurred in 2002 at 4,196 and has decreased in the years since (3,392 in 2004). While these admission data indicate that immigration from India to BC has been composed largely of sponsored, family class immigration, they do not provide a breakdown of family class categories to show the proportion of parents or grandparents. An indication that fewer elderly are migrating from India to BC is the declining proportion of those over 50 years of age. Between 1980 and 1984, on average 33% were aged 50 or older; from 1996-2000, 27% were 50 or older (BC Stats 2001), and from 2000-2003, 24% were in that age group (BC Stats 2004).

Approximately one third of Indian immigrants destined for BC between 1996 and 2000 chose to settle in Surrey, an outer suburb of Vancouver. Almost one-quarter chose Vancouver (BC Stats 2001). According to statistical categories, the population of South Asians by visible minority group in the City of Vancouver in 1996 totaled 26,040. By 2001 it had grown by 18% to 30,655. In the City of Surrey the South Asian population totaled 49,805 in 1996, growing by 52 % to 75,680 in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001). In Vancouver, the South Asian population is concentrated in the South East section of the city (roughly 33rd Ave to the Fraser River and Ontario St. to Boundary). Provincial Electoral Districts Fraserview and Langara housed a combined population of 14,240 in 2001. In Surrey, this population is concentrated in the West and central parts (72nd Ave. to the Serpentine River and 120th St. to 156th St.). Provincial Electoral Districts, Green Timbers, Newton and Panorama Ridge had a combined South Asian population of 58,610 (BC Stats 2001 Census Profiles).

While South Asian immigration to the Vancouver area is concentrated, Hiebert and Ley's (2003) survey of 2000 recent immigrants to Vancouver shows strong South Asian transnational connections. The 109 Punjabi speaking respondents indicated a high level of connectedness to their home country. 89% answered positively that they had family in their home country and 99% reported that they kept in touch. Roughly 64% had traveled to their home country and almost 58% still held property there. In their study of a Vancouver Sikh family, Walton-Roberts and Pratt (2005) discuss the ways that several members of the well-to-do family negotiated transnational geographies, and their gender, class and sexual identities. The authors show, for example, how the 'entrepreneurial

³ In 2003 BC's share of immigrants from India was 19% of Indian immigrants to Canada, down from 37% in 1980 (BC Stats 2004).

mother' was able to maintain her businesses in the Punjab through her extended family network and focus on building her commercial interests in Canada.

Besides geographical clustering, immigrants from India are concentrated in specific occupations. Census data indicate that a comparatively higher portion of South Asian BC immigrants than those from other source countries worked in farming, manufacturing or processing-related occupations. Recent figures indicate that Indian immigrants were relatively more likely to report an intended occupation of farm labourer (BC Stats 2001). The educational level of immigrants from India to BC has, however, increased over time, suggesting a wider educational and occupational distribution than previously, and an increase in economic class landings. Between 1996 and 2000, 30% had obtained post-secondary education (BC Stats 2001). By 2000-2003, the percentage of immigrants from India to BC with post-secondary education had increased to 35% (BC Stats 2004). The lower education levels of immigrants than that of other immigrants in the province may in part be attributable to a relatively high portion of family class immigration in which the educational qualification is not part of the selection criteria (BC Stats 2001). Of the immigrants landing from India in BC between 2000 and 2003, 33% reported having English language skills compared with 16% of those who arrived between 1980-1984 (BC Stats 2004).

These studies provide a context for locating sponsored South Asian elderly women in Vancouver. The research shows the importance of Indian immigration to BC and Vancouver, and in particular, the significance of family class immigration that has continued (though lessened) over time, despite the emphasis in immigration policy and discourse to select economic immigrants. These studies also suggest some of the complexities and intricacies of immigration from India to Canada. The following discussion turns to an analysis of the study of sponsored South Asian elderly women to explore what their immigration has meant to them and to their families.

The study

This study draws on twenty semi-structured interviews that took place from January to May 2005 with sponsored elderly South Asian women. The range of years in which the women had arrived in Canada was from 1987 to 2002. Their current ages varied from just over 60 to 80 years of age. Over half of the interviews took place in Surrey; the others took place in South Vancouver. Most interviews were conducted in people's homes, a few occurred in offices in a Sikh temple. In one case, two women asked to be interviewed together, and a son was sometimes present. An immigrant community organization in Surrey and a Neighbourhood House in Vancouver helped to recruit the interview participants. A trained researcher conducted the interviews with the assistance of an interpreter who

also translated the consent form into Punjabi. Most of the participants spoke Punjabi in the interviews. Two settlement workers, immigrants themselves with many years of experiences of working with Punjabi-speaking immigrants, assisted with interpretation, providing the words in English of the elderly women who spoke Punjabi. As a highly mediated, social and political site (Dyck and McLaren 2004), the interviews opened up spaces for the women to tell their stories, but not 'like it is'. In addition, the interpretations of the words in the transcripts offered here comprise another layer of meaning. In reflecting 'their voices', the following sections give a preliminary sketch of the women's immigration experiences: why they came to Canada and who sponsored them; their living arrangements and types of housing; their family networks; household work and childcare; adult children's work and activities; farm work; community activities and mobility; health-related concerns, and implications of sponsorship.

Sponsorship to Canada

The women in this study came to Canada for a variety of reasons, which mostly had to do with family. In talking about who sponsored them and why, many of the women said they were sponsored by their eldest son, a typical pattern in Indian sponsorship (Walton-Roberts 2003) or another son (and often their daughter-in-law). Some said that their daughter (and usually her partner or husband) sponsored them. In one case, a nephew had sponsored the woman.

One came because she was a widow. Others came because they wanted to join a son or daughter, and often because of grandchildren. Some women came on their own; others were accompanied by their husbands (about half) or other members of their family. Most had left family in India, which often included children. They had settled in Canada, but maintaining relations in India was important. Some travelled back and forth between the two countries. Here are a few examples:

So she said, I got only one son, and he came over here....when she got a grandson. So when he got a grandson, you know, he was one month old, so that time they come over here to look after, you know, to support his son....She said she got two daughters, one daughter is here, one is in India. So specially because she got only one son when she got a grandson, so that time when she decided to come over here.

My son and daughter-in-law, they sponsored us and that's why (we) are here. I've got 3 sons and 1 daughter in India.

My son, he sponsored us so we want to come, and help our son, so it's both ways, we want to help our son but at the same time our kids, they want us here.

I came just for the sake of my children, to help them. Because they have to work, too. --- for these children, how to manage it. I came only for these children.

These examples illustrate that the women came to Canada through various kinds of family sponsorships, but usually to help their adult children (and their spouses or partners). It would be misleading, however, to assume that sponsorship was unidirectional and simply the case of an adult child being able to sponsor and financially support a parent. As a woman noted: “We help them sometimes financially, we help them. They are at initial stages, so we bought a house, we helped, we gave some money, because they are not able as yet. Because they are only two years in this country”.

Another:

She said we have helped our kids a lot. She said we helped, trying to bring them money and other assets to settle here, financially and otherwise as well. So yes we're very clear if we help them financially by bringing some money from India to here so they will settle quickly so that's why they provide all the help financially and emotionally. So not only emotionally.

Family and housing

In coming to Canada, the women lived in a wide range of family arrangements and different types of housing. They usually lived with their sponsor. After being in Canada for a while, some changed their housing arrangements. Most lived in an extended family household.

Some lived in an extended family household of three generations that included a son or a daughter (and spouse) and grandchildren. For example, a woman lived with her husband, son and his wife, and 2 grandchildren in one-half of a house. Some lived in more complex, extended family households. A participant lived with her husband, two sons, their partners and 2 children in a large house. Another lived in a basement suite with her husband and adult daughter; the participant's son, his partner and 2 children lived upstairs. One woman lived with her son and his partner and 3 children in a house. She shared a bedroom with 2 grandchildren.

Many referred to fluid housing arrangements, sometimes living for a while with an adult child who sponsored them and then moving to live with another adult child. A participant initially lived with her older daughter for the first 2 years, now lives in a house with her younger daughter, son-in-law, and 2 grandchildren. Another initially lived with her husband, the daughter who sponsored her, son-in-law, 2 grandchildren and younger daughter in the house; the daughter's in-laws lived in the basement. Later the participant and her husband moved to their own basement suite with their younger daughter. Another (with her husband) lived previously with the eldest son for 8 years, his wife and children; currently she is living with her youngest son, his partner and children in a house. Another lived initially with her daughter, her partner, her in-laws and child; now the participant lives with her daughter, her partner and 2 children in a basement suite; her other daughter and her family

are in another basement suite on other side of the same house. A participant lived with a sister-in-law and 3 nephews for the first few years; now she lives in a 1 bedroom apartment in senior's housing. Another lived with her daughter and her partner for the first year; now she and her husband are in their own house.

Becker (2003) calls attention to the little studied topic of the living environments of older immigrants. The women in this study were on the move in coming to Canada and some had changed their housing situations after living for a while in Canada. Nearly all had lived in a household with grandchildren, suggesting that the presence of grandchildren was a strong link in why the women (and often their husbands) came to Canada, why they were sponsored, and the nature of their experiences in Canada.

Complex web of family and social networks in Canada and elsewhere

The women's complex housing arrangements manifest the extensive web of their family and social networks in Canada and elsewhere. The following example illustrates the density and fluidity of the networks and what they meant to one of the participants, who lived with her husband, 2 sons, 2 daughter-in-laws, and 2 grandsons. Her eldest son had sponsored her. One of the daughters-in-law, however, was not staying with them continuously because she was studying in India:

They are trying to accommodate her so she can finish her studies in India and then she can come back....She said, you have to make adjustments all the levels, for example, there are kids, they are too young, so you have to work according to them, so there are the sons and daughters, they are at a different age level and then you have the third view, yourself but just for the harmony and the whole family, you make adjustment for all 3 different levels. Because she loves her family so much, she wants her family together.....So to some extent she knows what this country's about because she was in England and over here, during her 2 month visit she knew what Canada was about....She said I miss my brothers and sisters back in India, my mother.....When they visit the relatives outside of Vancouver, so that's another way of having an outing and then another 2 months ago they went to Calgary.... visiting relatives and meeting friends....She said I enjoy sitting with the family but sometimes when the other family members or other guests come, then they start talking English. It's natural that she doesn't enjoy. It's natural because she understands Punjabi and then she enjoys it. At the get together as long as they're speaking Punjabi, that's fine.....When she's here she always feels like going back to India because she misses the family...Because she said they tried it out, they went back to India, she and her husband but over there they feel a lot of loneliness because the kids are here so that, the level, that you miss that, that always stays in mind....They came in '97, she was talking about the level of support so she, they both came in 1997, since then 5 times they've been to India and 6 to 7 times her husband has gone to India. Whenever they feel like it, their kids, say okay, go ahead. So what else are they expecting, this is the level of support.

The woman's family networks and transnational movements are vast. She has children and grandchildren in Canada and siblings, a grandchild, and a mother in India. Her daughter-in-law is based in both Canada and India. The participant had visited England and Canada before landing in Canada and continues to visit relatives in BC's interior as well as in Calgary, Alberta. She misses India and her relatives who are there and has visited India several times since residing in Canada.

Other women talked about their struggles arising from the loss of having relatives both in Canada and India. For example:

She said her family's divided. One family's here. The other sons and daughters are back in India. When she's here, she misses that family over there, when she's there so that's why she said I wish whole family is at one place but it's not possible.....She's got two sisters here and two sisters back in India, one brother in India. Her mom is here.

She said, you know, all the time feeling divided. So when they are over here, they miss their daughter back in India. When they are in India, they just feel that they have to be here. So to some extent, just feeling stuck, you know, so, divided.....In November, they went back to India and then they came in March again, and after that, after every two years. They are going back to India because they miss their daughter a lot. Because she's in India.....But there was another reason why she was going back to India again and feeling, because her grandson that is the son of another daughter who is in India, he used to stay with them. He used to stay with them, you know, so then that son, that grandson, you know, he was staying with so they missed him a lot, because they had to give that back to the mom. And they said they are so attached to that kid. But she said after the visit, the first visit, when they went back, see the daughter, see the grandson, so they feel, after spending time, they feel much better. And then they came back.

Other research has shown the intricate and strong connection of families across national boundaries. Some of the connections, often associated with families pursuing entrepreneurial interests (Ong 1999; Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005), provide evidence of an easy, flexible citizenship of family members living in and traversing across various locations throughout the world. In negotiating family relations that are spatially dispersed, the women in this study seemed to be trying to sort out the meaning the dislocations had for them, of being both together and apart.

Complex household work and childcare

It is not unusual for commentators to note that sponsored parents often help out with childcare, and that their help is important. But little is known about the texture of such activity and how central it is to family activities and strategies. The women in this study were often caring for several grandchildren, sometimes the offspring of more than one adult child, and were busy with household work. A participant talked about her daily routine with the grandchildren: "The grandsons get up in

the morning, so after that she said that she is busy with the household work, cooking, taking care of the kids, so she has 2 kids and one kid is going to pre-school, she takes care of him, dropping him off". Another said: "My daughter has two daughters. And my son has one daughter. So I have to take care for three daughters.....At 6:30 I get up....So then she prepares lunch for kids, kids' meals, for daughter-in-law and son, because go for work". Another participant discussed in more detail how she cares for a grandson under two years of age and a granddaughter who is almost three:

She gets up at 5:00. Then she cooks their lunch for the kids and then she does the prayers so we have the holy book to recite and she does that...in the meantime, the other family member they go out for work, her daughter-in-law, her son is working, husband is working, the second son is also working, all family members are working.....She said I prepare lunch for everybody, so after that she goes to bed again. She said she's cleaning the home and doing the laundry and taking care of the kids so in the meantime she said in the evening time they come back from work and then she gets busy. She said by 7:00pm she does the whole thing. So she's very busy. She cooks food for the dinner and by 7:00pm she hands the whole thing over to the kids.....She said whatever the kids want, she's preparing them, for example, milk, baby food and washings and other things. She is taking care of them, bathing them. She said now I give bath to the kids, otherwise her daughter-in-law she used to give. She said I do the diaper change and other things.

Most of the women were caring for grandchildren, usually more than one, and often they were young. As well, many rose early in the morning to help everyone in the household by preparing meals; they continued to do household tasks throughout the day and often into the evening. They were generally helping the everyday running of a household that was fundamental to sustaining family members who were in the labour force.

Children's work/activities

The women's care of grandchildren and domestic responsibilities were shaped by the work activities of their children (and their partners). The women generally saw themselves as helping and coordinating with the mothers of the children, most of whom were in the labour force, typically in jobs that had non-standard hours. Many worked at night or had shift work, jobs that are often filled by immigrant women. Here are a few examples:

Her daughter-in-law, she's working night time from 11:00 to 7:00 in the morning.

Her daughter-in-law is working from 5:00 (in the morning) to...1:30pm.....She said from 6 'till 2 o'clock I'm doing all the work and taking care of the kids and other family things.....She's all the time busy...and after 2 o'clock when she's back then she takes care of the kids and it's a great help to her because morning time, breakfast and other things....She don't have to do too much work when she's back home from the office.

Feed, everything I have to spend my time. --- Everything I do...(My daughter-in-law) goes at 4:30 in the morning. Starts at 5. Five to 1:50.

She said my daughter-in-law, she is working, she goes to work for three until twelve o'clock, night shift. So that's why most of the stuff she's doing.

Many of the women expressed the idea that their childcare and domestic work was essential to their children's financial livelihoods, and particularly helpful to mothers. A participant said: "They're carefree now, so they can go out to work and they don't have to worry about household things.....She said yes, it's useful because when she's taking care of the house and kids so she spares them so they can go out for work so that's it, contributions to them if you won't they wouldn't be able to go for work". Another said:

Yes, it's useful because when she's taking care of the house and kids so she spares them so they can go out for work so that's it, contributions to them if you won't, they wouldn't be able to go for work.....She said in her family there's an understanding that everybody's working hard. She said that when everybody's working hard I feel like working hard too. She said my daughter-in-law, she's going out for work, she's working eight, nine hours outside so I feel that I must do my best, do the cleaning things and the cooking things so that when she comes home she feels better. Because when she comes, all the kids they go around her so she cannot wait, she cannot cook, she cannot expect. So she's understanding, everybody's working hard, she wants to work hard as well. She's trying to accommodate.

Occasionally the participants referred to their sons or sons-in-law taking care of children, cooking meals and so forth. But usually the participants reinforced the notion that their childcare and domestic responsibilities were assisting the mothers (daughters or daughters-in-law) more than the fathers. With several adults in the household working in the labour force, many of the older women felt compelled to help out in the home. As well, some wanted to repay their children for their sponsorship and support: "Look, my kids, they are taking care of so much—of us—so that's why, she's fully dedicated, she wants to give".

Several stressed that they were doing the domestic work for themselves and for a feeling of family unity and affection. For example:

We are not doing it as a job not as a responsibility, out of love, out of affection we are doing that automatically we are doing that – so the same thing that we are doing here so we should not take it as doing it for them, it's nothing for them, it's for ourselves, for our family, it's a matter of attachment, taking care of things, taking care of kids, she's taking care of family.

Because my family is here with me, so I am looking up these kids. Happiness because they are my grandchildren, so I'm happy with them. I spend time, so it is

also good past-time for me also, so I'm happy otherwise. Things to do, no doubt.....My personal expectations were not high....so spend time at home, cooking and with these children I'm happy. So my expectations were my children...should set down the life, because they come for something special to live and achieve in life, their comfort, their purpose only....So she said ...I never thought much about my own personal life. I knew that I'm going to help my kids.....It's good, I understand, whatever, I'm doing, I'm doing a very good thing. My kids are under my supervision, it's good. I am satisfaction.

Many talked about their satisfaction in helping their families by taking care of the grandchildren and the home. But some were not happy about how confined they were to the home. Here are examples:

She was very busy in India and over here she's very busy at home but the only difference is the type of busy-ness, for example, over here she's taking care of the kids more.....She said from all the relatives we heard about that, that it's not so easy over there (in Canada), that you have to work hard, and that at the same time, the seniors, the ladies, they stay at home, so left lonely.

You know actually because she said most of the time you stay at home....She said you know for other age groups it's fine. They go out, they work, they come back...and then again go out but for seniors...they have to stay home.....So she's trying to tell me so that in India so we go out, we have our farms so that means lots of activity outside.

Another stressed: "I'm giving advice, yes, come to Canada. It's a nice place but it's a prison".

Though many of the women spoke of dedication in helping their children and grandchildren and found satisfaction in doing so, they called attention to some difficulties of their situation, in particular, in being confined to and isolated in the home, which could be a "prison".

Farm work

Since landing in Canada, not all the women had been busy looking after grandchildren all the time. Most who lived in Surrey, in fact, had worked at some point on farms. Many found the work difficult and some had to stop the work because of health problems. On the other hand, some found the work enjoyable because it provided a sociable dimension to their lives. A participant who worked for two years on farms picking berries indicated:

Most of the time it was seven days a week....She said it's only season is from June to September. That's when she worked.....She worked at the farm for two years so it was quite hard. She said she had to go at 6 and by the time she was back it was 8 o'clock....She said she has to leave that job because she developed a tumor in her brain and she has to go through a medical operation...She can work only in the household. She can't work outside. She was quite happy working over there because lots of people are over there.....She said that time we don't have the kids so she said I was quite tired that time so her daughter-in-law, she would cook and she would just

eat and sleep. Next day again, back to work. It is hard work she said. It is hard work she admitted.....She said yes, my husband used to work with her, used to go in the same van so working at same time.

Another described her farm work experiences as follows:

And she said, over here in farms, she was enjoying as well, because she was meeting new people over there, she can talk. She said because of the English problems, she could not work anywhere else, you know. She works in the farm, and when she was working on the farm, she got some back problem, so then she got some blood pressures, so after that, you know, she left the job, so her husband is still working in the farms.....So they say we have two cars, especially for that, because her daughter-in-law and son, they are also doing the same job. So that's why so easy, they don't have a ride problem. So sometimes they go to the same farm, so they use one car, but if they have two different places, so she and her daughter-in-law go to a different farm and her husband goes to a different farm, so because of their case, they were doing the same job, then it was convenient for them.....She said, I like working on the farms, because, you know, you have the get-together and you are busy, she was, she was enjoying....(She worked on the farms) maybe four years.

The meaning of farm work to the women in this study was complex. It could be difficult and back-breaking work that contributed to health problems, with long hours during the busy season. Yet, it could be sociable, a place where they meet friends or are with family members, in the open air, not unlike the agricultural work that some were familiar with in India. It could also be a welcome change from being confined to the home looking after children. Some, however, indicated that they had few alternatives to farm work and others expressed relief that they did not have to do such work and that their children insisted that they do not:

She said that, for example, because they don't have to work outside, because the kids, they are taking extra care of them, so that's it for them, they don't find any difficulties...She said the kids are so nice to them, they won't let her go out and work.....She said that even my daughter-in-law mentioned, you are not at this age that you should go out and work, the daughter-in-law is so nice, the children, the boys they are already you know, nice but the best part is that their daughter-in-laws are saying that.

Community activities and mobility

Several of the women were active outside the home, involved in community activities. One, for example, was involved in a Seniors' centre. Some went to the temple regularly, as one said: "We go to the temple, yes, every Saturday, Sunday". Some of the women talked, however, about the difficulties of having a social life: "She said, you know, I wish I had that type of relation you know, as in India, but over here, she said, the people, I don't know why they don't, you know, go very often

to each other's house. She said when I feel too lonely, so then I go to my nieces' and nephews' house".

Some were able to get out of the house and get around because of their family's ready help with transportation. For example:

She said...she doesn't have a driver's license, her husband has, her daughter-in-law is very supportive of her, they always give ride, sometimes they say okay there is the festival. Women's festival outside, they force her, okay 'We already bought the ticket for you, you have to come'....She said that she has a lot of support from her friends and they always take her out.

But others had difficulty gaining access to transportation, which reinforced their dependence and their confinement in the home: "She said most of the time I stay home or go to relatives' place (and don't go out shopping). She said friends as far as friends are concerned they are very...close to her... within walking distance, but relatives, the kids, they always give a ride, sometimes they drop her over there and whenever she feel like, they'll bring her back". In contrast, in India, the woman had more independent mobility: "Back in India she was taking the bus and visiting the relatives. That way she was more independent. Over here she said, no, I don't use the bus". Another said: "She goes to the temple with the family but because of the kids they are quite busy now. So otherwise she's staying home....She said most of the time I go with my kids and they do the shopping".

Being mobile and getting out of the home was a struggle for some. "She said they don't say no to take me out if I want to go. But I understand when they get time, I have to take it also. My son is tired, so I can wait. To these things I adjust". She commented further: "My difficulties is that I don't know how to drive. I can't do it.....Over there in India, it is easier to go out. They have that rickshaw thing, you know, manual driving, so she can hire anybody".

Health and well-being

Some of the women discussed their concerns about their health, the reasons for its deterioration, and the obstacles in attending to it in Canada. Several indicated that emotional stress created health problems. For example:

She said yes, over time she feels that her health is not as good and the reason is because when she's here she always feels like going back to India because she misses the family....So she feels like going back to India but over there all her family members are over here so she's staying here....She said yes, it's natural when she's thinking about India, she misses it and it stresses, she said of course, it may affect these physical things but she's not very sure.

In negotiating the health system, the women often needed the help of family members, and if they were absent, the women felt vulnerable. One said: “The only thing she’s worried about is her health....So that’s what she’s worried about a lot, and because her husband, he’s back in India, so she said when he’s around, he’s getting her all the modern support and everything. So she’s worried about, concerned about her health”. Another emphasized the importance of having a translator available, if not her daughter-in-law, then a Punjabi speaking staff member:

She said I don’t like the doctor here. She said the doctor said ‘take Advil’So she said most of the time her daughter-in-law, she used to translate but the nurse is around so she said whatever the information was she was communicating through her daughter-in-law because she was with her and secondly she said the staff member over there and they called the Punjabi speaking staff member and they do the translation.

In contrast to India, most of the women could not communicate directly to doctors about their health needs. In addition, they were likely to be more isolated in Canada. If they became sick, the whole family would not be available – since most were absent at work during various hours of the day (or night). Several were particularly dependent on their daughters-in-law, who provided help with their care:

She said, you know, most of the time her son and daughter-in-law, they go with her, and she said of course she feels that she’s not communicating directly to the doctor. Second hand information. She said I start feeling, yes, why can’t I express myself, you know....She said yes, there is a difference, because in India, you know, so most of the family members stay at home during daytime. If you are sick, then they are around you. But over here, if you are sick, still the family member, they have to go to work. So if you are sick, either you are by yourself, or you are end up in hospital, so it is a major difference. Over there in India, when you are sick, you don’t feel like because the whole family’s together you. They are not all daughter-in-law, the whole family, they don’t go out for work.

Some women felt their families were able to provide the care that they needed: “My son, my daughter-in law, my daughter...they gave much time for me, this time this and that, take me to the doctor, so food-wise and health-wise. Health-wise, they take care....I have no problem otherwise....Yes, my kids are very concerned about me. (They are planning to hire) a nanny for my health condition”.

Implications of sponsorship

When asked whether or not their sponsorship relationship left them feeling dependent, some felt they could not answer the question: “Actually, she finds it hard to answer that question. For her definition is totally different. She finds it hard to answer this question....She said no, I don’t have any

experience, you know, that she feels she is being dependent on her son or she's sponsored by her son". Another:

She said I've never had that feeling.....My kids, I don't have to ask them, only then she would feel dependent when she has to ask or something. The kids, they feel whatever their needs and they are providing that, fulfilling those needs without asking, she said even sometimes, the relatives, say you are depending on the kids, why don't you work but she said she never felt badly that I am depending on my kids.

One participant said that she does not feel she is a burden on her children, in particular, because she and her husband have been able to repay their daughter financially for sponsoring them. But she was concerned about a neighbour who no longer had a husband, and who was feeling vulnerable:

We are not a burden. Financially we are not a burden on her. So we were spending our own money.....She says, because our daughter sponsored us, she has to pay some fees. And even they have returned the fees to her.....Landed fees, her daughter, she paid the landed fees, they gave the money back to her, for whatever she spend to bring them over. My husband, he gave the money back.....Not burdening, also because my husband is getting pension. We have our own property in India, so we have no problem otherwise. All these kids are very good. They are helping us. Whatever we want, we get.....But she was just giving the example, there is one lady that is living next door. She said, you know, my kids they brought me over here, sponsored me, but now, her daughter-in-law is not treating her very well. But she talked a few minutes. In the mean time her son came up to her, and take her away. But she said I can see that he was angry. That why she is talking to. There are some cases.

Because sponsored parents are "purely dependent" on their children in Canada, a woman indicated, the sponsorship relationship could be very difficult for seniors:

She said in India most of the people who are elderly, they want to come over here, almost everybody want to come here, their kids are here. She said my sincere advice to those seniors if your kids are good to you, only then, Canada's good but if you have to go out to work, then it's not worth it...so if you feel that your kids they are not going to stay with you and staying outside and by themselves is very very hard in Canada.....Yes, at the same time she said if they feel that the kids won't take care of them, stay over there, at least you have relatives, other family members can take care of you but over here because you are purely depending on the kids, if yours are good only then come, it's not easy—working hard, going out for work and staying by themselves, not with the family, this is very hard.

Some of the women were concerned about the obstacles that the sponsorship program poses for families:

She said that she heard that in some cases of sponsorship that the parents have to wait for 5 years to come to Canada. She said the time period is too long, for example,

sometimes, you know when somebody sponsors their parents and they have a lot of family members, you know, brothers and sisters, they are expecting to come over here but if the time period is too long—5 years or 4 years—the age of the kids, they cross the limit so then they are unable to come over here so ... Then they are divided. Some kids stay over there, some are here....She said it's good, if some wife or husband wants to sponsor marital status because it's quick. I would say it's less than 6 months now but for parents, she said for example if the waiting period's 4 or 5 years so that means they have to show, maintain the level of income so much so that all the family members come. Sometimes it's hard because of the job market over here. For example, somebody sponsors parents, mother, father, 3 kids so that means 5 persons, so that means they have to maintain level of income.

Delayed sponsorship divides families, reduces eligibility as children age, and undermines the ability of families to meet government regulations of income levels.

Several participants worried about the lack of pensions for immigrant seniors. One talked about how women without husbands may be vulnerable to their children who may not provide for them:

She said in my case it's fine, my husband is working so we can financially be okay and sometimes the kids also help us but she is worried about those families who the husband is not working and they are seniors. If they are not working so then financially it's tough. She ...said the government must help ----- Then she said all families are different but some families' kids they are taking care of them a lot but some kids' family they don't take care so that means the ten year condition—yes—they need some help.

Another also felt that immigrant seniors needed pensions so that they could be more independent financially and not be forced to work on farms, which can be very hard on the elderly:

She said I will say yes, if you are going to Canada, so you are going to have to work over there. Financial wise. Some people, they work in the farms, yes.....She said, until the age of sixty, they are fine, you know, but after sixty, so it is very hard to work. So that means to earn money is very hard for the seniors. So indirect means they have to depend on the kids, you know. And ten year condition is.....So that's, she said if we got a pension, so they can become more self-sufficient, they can do whatever they feel like....That could be changed, oh yes. Definitely.

A study of farm workers in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia suggests that their financial dependency may make them continue to work under exploitative conditions. Because “many are recent immigrants sponsored by their families, they feel indebted to pay their immigration fees and do not want to be a financial burden to their children or relatives” (Black 2003: 76).⁴

⁴ For studies of the exploitative conditions of BC's immigrant farm work, see also Fairey (2005) and Moore (2004)..

Concluding discussion

By focusing on sponsored South Asian elderly women's experiences, this paper addresses the question of whose problematic is parental sponsorship. Despite the fact that family members provide much of the sustenance and development of human, social and cultural capital of immigrants (McLaren and Dyck 2004; Ong 1999), immigration policy ironically has set up obstacles for family class entry to Canada. Specifically, by reducing the numbers of parents and grandparents, and contributing to the ongoing problematization of immigrant families (especially the family class) in official and popular discourse, the policy adversely, and perversely, targets women. They are the ones most likely to be responsible for the forging of family ties and undertaking unpaid labour of family life and its multiple dimensions of caregiving (McDaniel 2002). The neoliberal contention that the only proper citizen is one with a skilled job in the labour force – that *prima facie* ensures self-sufficiency – overlooks and demeans essential, but poorly paid or unpaid labour and care in the home and community (McLaren and Dyck 2004). It fails to recognize that the 'autonomous immigrant' is a fiction (Walton-Roberts 2003).

Family relations are central in decisions to immigrate and whether or not to settle permanently (Angel et al. 1999; Khoo 2003). While the immigrant selection system in Canada seeks to recruit 'independent' economic immigrants, who so happen to be predominantly male, their migration depends on the many contributions of non-selected family members, the majority of whom are women, in the paid workforce, the home, and the community (McLaren and Dyck 2002). For example, often immigrant families initially rely on the labour force participation of wives, categorized as dependants, and only later that of husbands as well (Ng 1992). Many who occupy low-wage jobs that fill important niches of the labour market are immigrant women (Spitzer et al. 2003; Dossa 2005), many of whom have come to Canada under the family class (Satzewich and Wong 2003). Arat-Koc (1999: 38) argues that elderly parents are most likely to be perceived as being non-contributors and yet "directly contribute their labour in the care of children in the home or in family businesses".

This study suggests that sponsored elderly immigrant women may help their families to fulfil the criteria of 'ideal immigrants' that are written into immigration policy and practice and that shape the migration process. By contributing to household income, helping out in the home, networking locally or globally, older women assist their families in multiple ways, that include being more productive and self-sufficient. More particularly, in relation to the dominant economic discourse in immigration policy, elderly immigrant women provide the critical labour and support that enables their daughters or daughters-in-law with children to join the labour force, usually in jobs typically

filled by immigrant women. It is worth considering, as well, how sponsored parents' assistance may help to stem a childcare crisis in Canada.

At the same time, the sponsorship program inflicts costs on the elderly women and their families. Sponsored elderly parents may feel obligated to provide income to their families or in-kind services that could lead to exploitation, indebtedness, isolation, abuse or marginality. If they are sponsored, elderly immigrant women are likely to have few support systems apart from their families. They may feel "purely dependent" on them, with no alternatives. They lack the usual entitlements of social assistance and social security. If they lack adequate health care, social services, settlement services and transit support – and the foundations of local, social connections – their ability to help their families and to provide for themselves may be undermined. Programs that favour 'skilled' workers are unlikely to address many of the barriers faced by sponsored elderly immigrant women, who in their daily activities may participate in non-standard employment, and contribute as caregivers to their household and community.

In focusing on South Asian older women who were sponsored by their families to immigrate to Canada, this paper explores questions raised in Citizenship and Immigration Canada's (2002) gender-based analysis: parents' vulnerability in relation to sponsorship; low-income families' difficulties in sustaining sponsorships; parents' presence that may increase women's access to the labour market; and the different impacts that human capital selection criteria may have on women and men. Such questions, this paper suggests, need multi-layered analyses of the intricate relations between discursive and material practices. In indicating that the sponsorship program creates dependency and vulnerability, studies provide compelling reasons for considering alternative discursive and theoretical understandings to prevailing neoliberal and human capital discourses. More research is needed that takes account of how prevailing discourses inform the point system and sponsorship programs, how they obscure the contributions of sponsored parents to family settlement and the possible harms of sponsorship.

To challenge dominating discourses and practices of parental sponsorship, elderly women's (and men's) narratives must be heard and understood within their specific social contexts. Research needs to start from the perspectives and experiences of family class immigrants themselves. Rather than being objects of evaluation, they need to be "subjects whose values, aspirations and wishes are to be taken into account" (Li 2004: 28). Such research also needs to understand the centrality of gender and generation and how they intersect with 'race', and social class. In her study of aging Muslim women in diaspora, Dossa (1999) argues that narrative can render marginalized lives socially visible. Older immigrant women, she insists, are "global subjects engaged in (re)imagining their lives" (p.

269). Yet, “aging women have not emerged as actors in the body of literature on gender within diasporic communities: they continue to remain on the backstage with their scripts unwritten” (p. 246). Dossa notes that while feminist ethnographers have attempted to redress Western stereotypes of immigrant women as oppressed and passive, and dependent in old age, they have markedly excluded age as part of women’s multiple identities. Research needs to challenge the way that dominant discourses and practices make invisible sponsored elderly women’s struggles, lived experiences, and their centrality to family life and broader society.

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