

Four Latin American Women in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver: Health, Housing and Immigration

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1. Introduction: Focus and research questions

This report examines the interviews conducted with four Latin American women about their daily life in the Downtown East Side of Vancouver. While exploring the general research question about the relationship between health and housing in the lives of low-income women in the DTES, particular attention is placed on the interplay between migration status, language, health and housing in the lives of these women;

2. Research process and methods

During the process of finding research participants, we learnt that Latin American women are not active participants in the street and community activities in the DTES. During this time, we only became aware of one Latin American woman who is a sexual worker, however, any of the community workers or activists in the area had contact or knew her. Otherwise, and by contrast with the visible number of Latin American men in the streets of the DTES, Latin American women living in the area are generally single mothers or married women who live there for its economic and locational benefits. The four women we interviewed for this project live in a social housing complex in the Strathcona area and in an affordable housing building North of Hastings Street. In both housing units there are other two to three Latin American women living with their families.

Two of the participants in the project were located through the community workers of the Store Front Orientation Services SOS, Bridge Clinic, and Watari. Initially, we established contact with Rosa, a senior woman from Perú, who occasionally uses the services at SOS. Rosa was enthusiastic about participating in the research project. She also suggested a friend and neighbor, Maria from Honduras, and approached her to participate in the interviewing process. Rosa and Maria are close friends, live in the same social housing complex, and expressed they wanted to be interviewed together. We conducted a total of three interview sessions with them.

Later in the project, Julia a Guatemalan woman we had approached at the beginning of the project, agreed to participate in the project and suggested that her friend Miriam from Mexico, joined for the interview process. Julia and Miriam are also close friends and live in the same building. We conducted one interview session and one informal session with Miriam and Julia.

The interviews were conducted between May and September, 2001. The interviews focused on:

- Immigration and housing history,
- Arrival, social relations and daily life in the DTES.

After having conducted the interview sessions, we gave each woman a disposable camera. Although we left open the themes for the pictures, we suggested they included pictures about their daily lives and routes:

- Places they pass or circulate through in their daily life
- Places they like and feel comfortable with
- Places they fear or dislike
- Places they go to when they are with their children, relatives, partners
- Places they go to use the services

On September 17th, 2000 we gathered with the four women and the two CBRs for a workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to:

- share their experiences as Latin Americans, immigrants and residents in the DTES;
- reflect on the commonalties and uniqueness of these experiences;
- discuss the links between health and housing;
- evaluate their participation in the research process.

In the first part of the workshop, the two groups of women worked in separate groups, each one with a CBR. Each woman showed her photographs and also described a day in her life. After, each woman was asked to visualize her daily life and circulation routes in a mental map. For the mental map, we gave the following guidelines:

- Locate a point of reference: a place that constitutes for you a key reference in your daily life (e.g. your home, a monument, a park);
- Taking this point as a spatial/geographic reference, locate in the map the other places you use or visit in your daily interactions (include here spaces you like, feel comfortable in, places you fear of consider dangerous);
- Place in the map some of the pictures that may provide additional information to your map.

In the second part of the workshop we gathered and shared the maps. The four maps were placed on a wall and later each woman described her map, her daily life and her perception of the spaces she uses or goes by. Once they finished sharing their maps, we

discussed commonalities and differences in their daily life and experiences of health and housing. We moved then into a short reflection about their perceptions of health and the ways they see their housing situation affects their health.

At the end of the workshop, we asked participants to share their impressions and comments about participating in this research exercise. Participants expressed that this was the first time they have shared their immigration and housing experiences and particularly the challenges of living in the DTES. They also saw this as an opportunity to share the issues they face as women and the possibility of addressing them:

Julia: Well, the reason for talking about health and housing is to see whether by talking among women, we can make things better and this might reach another level. Not that everything would be solved right away, because it wouldn't happen right away, but at least that it could be in place for the future in this area.

Miriam: Nice [experience], to participate, to talk about your likes and dislikes.

Maria: The maps were a good idea! (laughs)

The organization of the information and analysis presented in this report reflect the brainstorming and analysis sessions conducted with Martha Colorado and Berta Alicia Perez, the two community based researchers. Martha Colorado also prepared a written document that outlined her thoughts and ideas after the interview sessions.

3. A General Profile of the four women

Rosa is a senior woman in her mid 60s originally from Perú. Rosa arrived in Canada in 1994 sponsored by her son who had arrived four years earlier:

..my son, because he was already here. He had arrived in Canada 3 or 4 years before. My son filled out an application for me too, because he wanted to have me close by, but in all truthfulness I did not want to come. I would ask myself "What kind of country am I going to live in? Am I going to suffer? What will it be like?". Well, I had confidence in my son, who insisted so much by telling me that I would be safe. "Get your papers ready, Mum, come...". A few years later I did get my papers and everything happened quickly. I arrived on a 24th of August and went to Surrey, where my son lived. When I arrived he already had a wife, he already had a little son.

Rosa came with her two younger teen-aged children. During her first months in Canada, Rosa felt very unhappy as she struggled with the change, her lack of English, the sadness and nostalgia for her country and family, and a difficult relationship with her daughter in law:

I didn't feel at all well. I was very sad ["tenia pena"]. My sons also because of the way I was suffering, not knowing how to speak English, not knowing anyone,

only my son and my daughter in law. But I was very depressed as I cried every day. I could not get used to it, I wanted to go back to my country.

Rosa felt abused by her daughter in law “*she treated me very badly, very badly, she treated me very badly*” and pressured her son to send her back to Peru. Her son expressed his inability to do it and asked her to be patient. Rosa’s change of mood and attitude came when she befriended a woman from El Salvador who advised her to look for a job. Rosa found a job babysitting that took her out of the house for most of the day. Later she became involved with a Christian church and found a job cleaning a factory in Downtown Vancouver. Though happy to be working, Rosa’s daily journey became very demanding as her shift was between 5:00 p.m. and 10:00 PM. Rosa found herself arriving in Surrey at midnight amidst silence, cold weather and loneliness:

..and at night, you know that out there [in Surrey] there are buses every hour, so many times I remained on the street. In the middle of Winter I had to walk blocks and blocks to my son’s house. At night. All alone. And that is silence, silence. You don’t see a soul walking out there. That’s when I frankly said, “I would really like to live in Vancouver.” To live here instead of having to travel over there. And God, our Heavenly Father has been so merciful. My son applied in a number of places. I said I would go wherever. Wherever I’m assigned I’m going because I was having problems with my daughter in law. And just then I was given this apartment, thank goodness, precisely where I wanted. God gave it to me.

One year and a half after his arrival into Canada, Rosa moved into an apartment in the social housing complex in Strathcona with her younger teenage son. Rosa did not have any furniture or cooking utensils but this did not stop her from moving as she was very excited about an easier journey to work and most important, her independence:

*...when I was given the house, I immediately said, “I’m leaving”. I came running. I had no pots and pans, I had nothing! Absolutely nothing, not a chair, not a small table. I said it didn’t matter, I’m going to get cans, anything to cook in. I don’t know. Whatever. I came right away, 15 days later. I applied and 15 days later at the most after the application it was given to me. I came right then and there. “I lay on the floor” I said, I mean...Well yes, my son gave me a little old bed. But until it came...
But for me...it was a blessing from God because I’m telling you that I came...It filled up right away, because I made a friend and told her about my problem. I didn’t know about MOSAIC, I didn’t know about anything, absolutely anything about where to go, especially because of the English language, I wouldn’t go anywhere. But thank God this friend gave me furniture, she gave me a kitchen table, she gave me everything, practically everything. Oh! Thank God my house filled up, even though the things are old but...(laughs)...since then my sons have been buying new things., like that.*

While working in the factory, Rosa fell and injured herself. Rosa, however, was unaware of Canadian laws and regulations, and did not report her injury for fear that she will be

fired. Rosa lived then in permanent pain and was constantly bleeding. She was diagnosed with two intestinal tumors and was hospitalized undergoing surgery. After three months of slow recovery, Rosa planned to return to work, but she found that she had been fired. Since then, Rosa has not worked as she lives in permanent back pain and has difficulties walking and moving. Currently, Rosa attends two Latin American seniors groups and spends time with her relatives and her friend and neighbor, Maria, who takes her shopping, to the food bank and other social activities. Four of her children and great grandchildren live in Canada. In Peru, she has another four children, 12 grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Maria is in her late 30s and is originally from Honduras. María arrived “illegally” in Canada in 1994 and once in Vancouver she made a refugee claim. She came to Canada with her pregnant fourteen years old daughter and her two years old daughter. María describes her journey to Canada as plagued by suffering and difficulties:

...honestly it was a very sad and difficult time for us. We did not come by plane or anything like that. We didn't eat well. We had one change of clothes, you can say we were poorly fed and my daughter was pregnant. We had a difficult time crossing all the borders. Of course our objective was to reach Canada, not the USA, we were not interested in the USA. We were interested in something stable, we were carrying no money. So we decided to come here. It took us a month to get here from Honduras. We slept in the bush, no hotels, eating or enduring hunger for 2 or 3 days and with my youngest daughter. Once we went without food for three whole days. It got to a point where there was nothing else for the child to eat. We had money but there was nothing to eat. The “Coyote” had dumped us in the USA. Two days had gone by and the child had not tasted any milk. In the hotel she would say “Mum. I want “tete” [milk]. Mum, I want milk.” And I couldn't give her any because I didn't have any. And I said, “OK, if I'm going to get caught, let them catch me. Let them deport me.” And I opened the door because we were hiding in a hotel and went to see what I could get. And I opened the door and I came across... (unclear). And then he said to me “What happened?” And I said that we had a problem, the truth is that this girl had not drunk any milk for two or three days. And my pregnant daughter was crying because she was so hungry. Her stomach seemed as if it had got stuck. When I saw her crying I got more.. (unclear). “Are you illegal?” Yes, I said. “Don't worry, I'll be back”...the man left. “Well if he's going to take the money, let him take it, if he goes to the police, let him”. But no, a short time later he was back with a gallon of milk, the man returned with the milk... And that day this man tells us that he has come to fetch us. We were 18 people, I think. We were in the U.S.A and he was looking for a van. When he returned with the van, we all climbed into it. It was so sad. When all the people saw me get into the van with the gallon of milk, everybody wanted some. And they took the gallon of milk and they all drank. Everybody was hungry. So then he took us to the place, to the house where supposedly he was going to hand us over to his relatives. But we really had an awful time...these are things I never want to go through again.

Maria arrives in the house of a Honduran man she knew from home. Her friend is married to a “*Canadiense*” [Canadian] and has a large house where they rent rooms. Maria and her daughters are given the basement. María, grateful for having a place to stay, begins to clean the house on a daily basis. Soon, she discovers that she has become an unpaid worker, expected to do all the cleaning and not to leave the house:

I am not one of those people that like to have everything served to them. If someone gives me a place to stay I like to repay, not to remain sitting. I do house chores as if I was in my own house. It was worse because she gave me food so I woke up early and cleaned the entire house. Of course the woman enjoyed seeing that I wasn't lazy. She had a house where she lived and rented apartments and rooms to students, especially to the Chinese who came to study. She made good money and I did massages to her and all that. So of course she no longer did things around the house. She just kept the house tidy because frankly she didn't have too much of a mess, nor luxury items, ...but not me, I would clean the house thoroughly, to dust, change the sheets, make the beds, everything, everything And I would get up very early and go to bed really late. Some big windows, I remember, that had to be cleaned. [...] And when we wanted to go out she would get angry if I came back late. I didn't have the right to go out, she practically wanted to keep me like a slave.

María makes her refugee claim and is granted residence six months after her arrival in Canada. Once she had made her claim and receives her first assistance cheque, her landlady takes her to the bank, opens an account on her own name and tells her to request her money when she needs it. She charges her for rent since her arrival and María, advised by a Honduran friend, realizes that she is working for free, paying for rent and food and being restricted to enter and leave the house. María who is exhausted from her painful journey to Canada finds herself in a situation that creates much grief and stress for her. Her daughter pressures her to do something about as she sees that they have become “slaves.” The troubles continue for Maria and things go worse when the milk she herself has bought is rationed by the landlady:

Well, the last thing I didn't like was when I went to buy milk with the money I had and with the money I would buy in bulk. She had one of those large freezers where she kept food as she fed the young boys. But the saddest thing that happened was when I went for a glass of milk. My daughter had been told to drink seven glasses of milk because the child was undernourished and was told to eat as much as she could and to drink 7 glasses of milk. I would buy the milk and I had to give it to my little girl. One day she came and froze the milk. When I went to feed the little girl there was no milk. What had happened to the milk? Then she came and told me that I was using up too much milk and supposedly the milk was mine. She would use hers, I had 4% and hers I don't know if it was 1% or 2%. At the time I had no more money so I went for a walk with my daughter and I told her that I felt like stealing one of her gallons of milk. My daughter then suggests I tell my friend about this. I went from Granville to Fraser without knowing where I was going (unclear) and we walked all the way to the house and found the house.

He asked me "What happened?" And I told him. And he said it that was very wrong. "Your milk is your milk and how do you manage.." (unclear). "She says we eat too much. My pregnant daughter had to eat. I can't buy anything in this house" so I asked him how was I going to manage. I don't feel well there. So he told me that I had to find my own place. So that day we stayed at my friend's house...I arrived back at the house at 10:00 p.m. She did not want to open the door and when she opened the door she scolded me and told me "In this place you come in at 9:00 p.m. and you don't leave again." [...]When I was indoors she locked up, you could say, I felt she feared I would leave. But she didn't treat me well. When I left she did not say good-bye. So my daughter said, "Did you see that? [...] she's not happy about you leaving."

After María lives the house, she moves to East Vancouver. Currently, María lives with her 9 years old daughter, her seven years old grandson (under her care/custody), and her 4 years old daughter. Her older daughter who is now 21 lives somewhere else with her husband and represents María main social support when she needs interpreting, dealing with the system, and for social life. Once she drops her children at school and pre-school, Maria goes to English school from 9:00 to 12:00m. Three times a week she goes to a Christian church and during the week she takes her children to a variety of activities such as music and swimming.

Julia is a woman in her 40s and is from Guatemala. Julia arrived in 1995 with her disabled husband and two children and with other sister and her family. They all came as government sponsored refugees having to leave Guatemala during the Counterinsurgency war period. Although they were assigned to arrive and live in Toronto, Julia requested to be sent to Vancouver as she had two sisters living here.

We arrived in Toronto, but well, I told them we didn't know anyone and I was scared and they sent us here on the same flight. We slept one night in Toronto and we were sent here. We told them that we couldn't speak the language and well my husband had a bad leg and my 12-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter. So I felt very lonely. Additionally I had arrived with a sister who returned to Guatemala. She was older than I and had also come with her two children. We were 6, 8 family members on the plane, but they returned to Guatemala, as they did not like it here. No, no. Two siblings that came, my brother and my sister went back. So 3 of us remained here, two that were already here and I that remained here. Yes.

Upon their arrival in Vancouver, a representative of the Welcome House receives Julia and her family. He explains to them that they will receive housing and food in the Welcome House but warns them not to expect that his company. Julia is puzzled when he furthers tells them that they can call him when they get lost. Fortunately for Julia and her family, he accepts that they go to her sister's house:

When I arrived at the airport they wanted to take me to the Welcome House. There was a counselor there, [...], I can't remember his name. But he did go to

the airport and told us "You are coming to the Welcome House with us. We will give you food and everything. But I will not go around with you. You will have to take a bus and phone me when you get lost". So then my sister said "Why are you going to stay in a strange place? You'll be better off at my house". So she told them "No, I am going to take them to my house and I will help them find an apartment". They agreed and gave us some money because we were not carrying any Canadian money. They told us "Well, go with you sister and on such and such a date you must go to Immigration. I went with my two children because we couldn't take my husband by bus. But my sister had friends here and the second time we were able to take my husband in a car. But other than that man, I have felt very well here. Other than that man who really did scare me. I had to be lost in order to phone him. This upset me.

After having done all the required immigration requirements, Julia and her husband start to study English. Her children, however, have to wait for almost six months to be placed in school. The initial adaptation in the new country was hard for her children who longed for home:

For example I noticed that my children felt the change quite a bit, because of their grandparents. They love their grandparents, my son was very close to my Mum and Dad, to my mother and father in law. I feel that the change did affect them quite a bit because my son would tell me that he wanted to return to Guatemala. He would say "Mum, better let's go back!" "No, honey, for this reason and that we cannot return!" Later they became adapted, once they began studying and learnt English. They adapted but my son always felt somewhat sad and at the same time would say that he missed being in Guatemala, that he wanted to return to Guatemala, because I have a very young sister there and she was always with him and he missed her quite a bit. But when we arrived he learnt English, made lots of friends. I think that helped him to feel well in Canada. He made lots of friends. He even had friends of other nationalities African, from Vietnam, from the Central American countries. He had many friends and he enjoyed helping the young newcomers because he said he remembered how he had felt when he arrived, that he had felt sad and lonely and the young arrivals felt the same way. So for him...Now Rosanna, she also felt the change because before we used to live at my mother in law's. She was very close to my mother in law and she missed her quite a bit, no, the change and the habits are different. But also when she began learning English, she made lots of friends. She has many friends from Vietnam; most of them are ...English. Yes, she has many friends and I feel that she has adapted.

Julia's other sister lived in the DTES and recommends to Julia and her husband to apply to her building as it has an elevator and relatively ample apartments. They feel very attracted to this housing as it is a wheelchair accessible and will permit an easier displacement. They moved into the Downtown Eastside in the first year of their arrival in Canada and have remained there until today.

Almost immediately we came to live here to this building and in this apartment and we haven't moved since. But now that my son has passed away I thought we would be moving because I have three bedrooms. But the manager told us that he had taken into consideration my pain and that for the time being we were not going to be asked to move. I said to myself "We will be asked to move". But the manager said that nevertheless three people would continue living there. I do need space for my husband: wheel chair, walker, and crutches, which he carries, so we do need space for him. Yes.

Julia's son became an active participant of Britannia Latin American youth program and a bright and popular student at John Oliver School. In 1999, when he was playing soccer at age 19, he dies suddenly, leaving Julia and her family in deep grief and anguish. Since then Julia has struggled with the grief and pain of his loss. As both her son and husband are/were well recognized in the Latin American community, Julia's have established tight networks of support with community workers and the Catholic Church.

Julia's younger daughter is in high school and her husband is a respected community leader who plays a vital role as mediator and advisor to several of the Latin American men who frequent the Downtown East Side. His health problems have continued and are a source of concern for Julia. Julia works cleaning houses and tries to remain most of the day outside her home and the neighborhood visiting her relatives or working as a strategy to deal with her grief. On weekends, Julia goes to a Catholic Church. Julia and Miriam spend much time together and often rent movies and watch them.

Miriam is in her 30s and came to Canada in 1989 at age 17. She came to marry a Canadian man who sponsored her. Miriam left all her family in Mexico,

I married a Canadian who brought me here. I left all my family there which is very painful and later I gave birth to a little girl and then some time later my husband passed away - about two and a half years later.

When Miriam first arrived she went to high school and began to learn English. Miriam's husband dies two and a half years into her marriage. The death of her husband presented her with a main challenge as a young woman and new immigrant:

Yes. Only that it was very hard when my husband passed away. I was 18 at the time and my daughter was one and a half and it was hard. But, I gathered strength and pushed forward with my daughter.

Strength was the key for Miriam to survive in the society. The support of her mother in law was very important and to today, they maintain a very close relationship. Miriam is the most important support for this woman and spends much of her time driving her, taking her to the doctor or grocery shopping. She continues to support Julia babysitting occasionally. During the six years she remained single, she was determined to see her family in Mexico. With her courage and strength she often drove all the way to Mexico

and back with her young daughter. She later marries a Mexican man with whom she has now a son.

After living in different places, and generally in cold basements, a friend recommends to Miriam the DTES building. Julia moves in attracted by the cheaper rent and the warmer units.

I had seen this building but I did not know it was family oriented or anything. I came because those basements are very cold and they aren't good for the children and the children catch coughs with the cold and that is why I came here. And when I arrived I was two months pregnant, I was pregnant already, three months pregnant.

She moves out of the building for a year as her sister had arrived from Mexico and she was not allowed to have more people living with her. Unsatisfied with the cold basement Miriam returns to the building with her new husband. Miriam speaks English fluently and works at Value Village part time and on a call basis. Miriam takes daily her children to school and day care and her husband to work.

4. Living in the DTES

4.1. Arriving in the DTES

The decision to come to live in the Downtown Eastside was for these four women tied to three main reasons: economic benefit, central location and independence. For all these women moving into the area is part of a strategy to improve their quality of life, both in economic terms and because of the central location and closeness to services and shopping areas. When Maria and Rosa moved into the area, they were not aware of the social dynamics and social stigma surrounding the area. Their first experiences circulating on Hastings street came as a rude awakening and a source of fear about their children:

Maria: Well, I lived on Knight and 60th, in a very quiet, pretty area, I lived there with my eldest daughter and with the one who is 9 years old now, my eldest daughter and later with 3 grandchildren. I was pregnant...so I applied for BC Housing. I applied around 4 years or 5 years ago for BC Housing and me too, I didn't know this area, truly. I put anywhere on the application, right? When I received it I wrote the amount of children and then I got the house, no...their father came and took the money and left the grandchildren and a daughter. I took care of the little girl and then I got the news that I had got a house. So I came to see the house. When I came to see it, frankly I liked it. But as I didn't know the area, a person told me "Pity you were given this place because you have children". But I didn't know so I said "So what? What's wrong with this place?"

It is big because these houses are big. Yes, he said, the house is pretty, because it is comfortable, every one has his own bedroom, but the area you were given is not pretty. Well, I moved and was happy because I even had a market here...all the better but I had not gone to Hastings. I still didn't know anything. Until one day I asked my daughter to help me go to Hastings because I had to buy food. OK, so I went shopping with her. I went with the eldest [9 years old] who is quite nervous. So the first people we came across were a couple, a woman with a man. But frankly they looked very deteriorated, as if they led a bad life and she looked at them and continued to look at them and told me that there were some ugly people there. Not ugly physically. What she meant was...how can I explain, the things they do. She doesn't like that. We looked at each other. Every time we went shopping she held on to me, as she was scared. Well, we continued walking and the further we got from the area, this way and that way, we could see people injecting themselves in broad daylight, for everyone to see. Honestly, there is no such thing in my country. So then I would cover my daughter's eyes or turn her face the other way. Then she began telling me "I don't like this. I want to leave. Why did we leave the other house?"

Another day...as I was starting a new home I needed china, little things, so I told her "Let's go to Army Navy". No, somewhere where we could buy inexpensive things. She came. I don't know if it was my daughter or someone else who told me to go to Army Navy because their prices are very low. OK. When I went there it was a (unclear). Right then and there my daughter said "I want to get out of here. I don't want to live here". That's how she got. "I don't want to live here". I told her that we didn't live there, that we lived away from all this. Yes, but I don't like it. So we did our shopping quickly and got back home. At night...I would leave the house and go to my daughter's. For the same reason, because I didn't like it. And when I would go back it was worse. I didn't know there were hotels nor anything. Every time we returned we would find a man and a woman injecting themselves. And my daughter was there and she didn't like any of that. She got scared and stuff like that. We would find drunks shouting. People that are not nice to look at, for children. One ignores them, but the children don't like it, right? So that is how I came to live here, because of my children. Honestly, if I hadn't been given housing here I would be happy. It's not that I discriminate against people, it's because of what I've been telling you.

Rosa's apartment is located in a corner of a building and has a view on the green area surrounding the building and the street. As a consequence, Rosa saw herself becoming a witness of fights, brawls, and drug use:

Rosa: That's right! But when I came and saw all these things I frankly...because I had never seen that stuff they injected, nothing like that. Because in my country I had never seen so many drug addicts. There are quite a few drug addicts but I had never seen the amount I have seen here. Because here it is done out in the open. When I moved here I could hear the noise, the fights between men and women...Oh my God, what is this? And they would pull at each other, beat themselves and fight. How nasty! So I asked my God, God give me strength. One

day I looked out the window and saw someone sucking their blood all over their body. My God! It was that horrible! My God. There is a little garden outside the house, a little garden where the drunks would come with their liquor bottles, they would get drunk and start fights. Luckily they removed that section of the garden. Because it was like a little forest. Prostitutes would come and have sex in broad ... Well, it wasn't even late when I would come back from work and find couples making love.- smiles- How terrible! I wanted them to get me out of there. I sent in another application asking them to move me to another location because I didn't like this one, my God, but they never gave me another one.

Maria's daughter and Rosa's son both initially reacted negatively to living in the DTES. They both pressured their mothers to move. Their mothers did not move but ensured that they developed strategies to protect their children while remaining very concerned about the risks of "seeing all those things" for their children.

Julia and Miriam were advised by a friend and a sister of the possible benefits of living in affordable housing in the DTES. They had a vague idea of the social dynamics of the area but were not familiar with the daily life.

Miriam: About coming here? It was cheaper and it didn't cost much money, yes.

E-2 And you knew about it?

Miriam: Not much! I didn't know. I had seen this building but I didn't know it was family oriented or anything. I came because those basements are very cold and they aren't good for the children and the children catch coughs with the cold and that is why I came here. And when I arrived I was two months pregnant, I was pregnant already, three months pregnant.

Although the building in which these two women live is situated on the North side of Hastings Street, it is more isolated from the activity on the streets than the social housing complex in which Rosa and Maria live. The building has a surveillance camera and this gives a stronger sense of separation and protection from the outside.

4.2. A day in the life / Use of area, circulation and displacement

Daily life for these women evolves around their family routines of school, food preparation, shopping, transportation, children's activities, paying bills and social life. All four women travel outside of the DTES almost on a daily basis and for a variety of purposes: grocery shopping, buying products from Latin America, going to Church, visiting family, and assisting to community activities and groups. Work is another reason for these women to travel outside the area. Two of them work cleaning houses on an irregular schedule while one of them does shift [on call] work at Value Village.

The use and displacement through the DTES is mostly limited to their activities of shopping or paying bills and in two cases to the use of the parks. Two of them drive and tend to avoid walking on the streets. However, their experiences walking and going through the streets of the DTES are a source of continuous puzzlement, amusement sometimes, disbelief and a source of fear:

Miriam: I don't do too much walking out there. Rather, I drive, I always drive. If I have to go two or three blocks, I drive. I don't walk. Because if I go outside there are prostitutes. It isn't a very good area. Sometimes they are naked out there. That is why we hardly walk.

E1: So, when your daughter came to live here she was 8 years old. Did she have any reaction about living here?

Miriam: Nooo, she didn't pay any attention. She does look when she sees someone naked or something.

Julia: Well, I go out sometimes in the mornings and I get back but I do not talk to anyone. Straight to the bus stop and nothing else. We hardly mix with anybody. Sometimes my husband invites us to the park because there are many Latinos, but we go for a very short while and then back home. It isn't a very recommendable place for my daughter who is already a young woman. I don't like it. No one has said anything to her but I don't like it. The relationship is different. If we go out walking, we go to buy vegetables, fruit. We haven't had any problems. Once I was going shopping with my daughter to Army Navy. A man came up to her and shouted, but he was joking. She got very scared and I thought to myself "She is going to be scared now", but it didn't affect her. She did get frightened at the time but she held on to her brother and to me and she got over it. Now she comes and goes without any problems. We even tell her not to get involved with the people on the streets because she doesn't have any substance abuse problems. There are many drug traffickers and there might be a problem. But in that sense she is a very healthy girl.

Daily life and circulation in the DTES is marked by a feeling of insecurity and the development of a number of strategies for circulation and use of the services in the area in which they maintain a distance from the events and individuals who are frequent users of the streets.

4.3. Social networks

The social networks of friendship and support for these four women revolve around their extended families --all of them with relatives in the city, their Latin American friends – mostly women, their churches and in lesser extent community services and service providers. All four women maintain an active exchange with their extended families seeing them more than once a week, sharing meals, social activities, visiting each other

and sharing information. Often, they travel outside the area to visit their relatives, as it is often the case their families are reluctant to go to the DTES:

Rosa: I am already used to it. When I came here to live at first I felt very bad, you can say that I didn't feel too well. Because people I knew would say "You live where there are plenty of drugs, drunks and you are going to become one too". I would tell them "Well, one can live among thieves, one can live in an asylum. But if you want to do it to ruin yourself...But I'm fine here." Even now-a-days my sons, my daughter in law say that I live in this area where there are prostitutes, people leading bad lives and are ashamed and scared of coming to visit me. I tell them "Well, don't come to visit me and that's that. Nobody is forcing you to come and visit. If you want to come, you come, if you don't, you don't."

As well, their extended families provide them with various forms of social support: babysitting (Miriam's mother in law); interpretation (Maria's daughter; Rosa's daughter in law); economic and financial back up (Rosa's sons); moral and emotional support (Julia's sisters).

As well the two pair of women keep a close friendship and support each other in important ways. Maria and Miriam each take Rosa and Julia shopping, to the food bank, to church or social outings. They spent a large amount of time together and share also activities such as watching movies or eating out:

Maria: ...so then with her – referring to Rosa – we go to church. Sometimes I have to run an errand and I know that she is by herself. She has a son but it's as if she were alone, so then I ask her if she wants to accompany me or come along. I phone her, sometimes to say hello or to see how she is doing.

Relations with other women have also provided them with important information in their settlement process, thus Rosa was able to see her way out of depression when another Latin American women suggested her to get a job baby sitting and found contacts for her and when another introduced her to a church.

The relationship with the church in all four cases is an important one and this is observed in their mental maps in which two of them located the church as starting-reference point. For two of these women their relationship to the church is very relevant as a source of emotional support and guidance and as a mean to participate in an extended network of relationships and information sharing. They all attend church at least once a week with one of them going four times a week. In the case of two of them, they shifted church and faith (catholic to christian) upon arrival in Canada. The new churches offered them a base of support and a grounded practice of their faith that addressed some of their immediate need or provided them with a way to make sense of these experiences. María expresses this:

Well, firstly the most important thing for me is the church, because it was a place where I met Christ and I knew love and I got to know someone who taught me that there is forgiveness, that we must love one another. That is God.

Social and community services as elements of their social support networks are approached in different manners by these women. While Rosa, the senior woman, attends two senior groups a week (she attended at one point three) and occasionally uses services from the Store Front Orientation Services and Mosaic, Maria does not access any community agency or community group and her social and informational support relies mainly on her daughter and her church. Rosa and Maria access the food bank but outside the DTES. Julia is also well connected with a variety of services in the area and the rest of Vancouver. She and her family have received social and informational support from the refugee services of the MCC and have also been actively involved and supported by the Latin American youth program at Britannia Community Centre. Locally, Julia's husband is actively involved with some of the community programs of SOS and Watari, and Julia participates and occasionally uses the services of these two community agencies. Miriam accesses the services at Ray Cam Community Centre where her son goes to daycare and she is taking a course there but she is not involved with any community initiative. Overall and with the exception of Julia, the networks of support and the services accessed by these women are outside the DTES.

5. Housing and sense of satisfaction

The housing history of these women as recent immigrants to Canada is short. Miriam has lived the longest in Canada, having moved a total of seven times, every time within the East Side of Vancouver. Maria has moved four times within the East Side of the city. Rosa has lived in two places, first in Surrey with her relatives and in the Strathcona area. Julia lived originally with her sister in Killarney and then move to the East Side and after to the DTES. The first living experience for Maria and Rosa were marked by despair and abuse. Maria literally described her leaving from the first residence as an escape from a kind of domestic slavery while Rosa saw it as a regaining of freedom and independence. There is no history of evictions among these women or instances of homelessness. The decision to move in the great majority of the cases has been theirs.

All these women saw their arrival in the DTES as an important step in improving their living and housing conditions, and an important step towards independence, particularly in the case of Rosa, and of having a space of their own. However, for three of them the goal is to move outside the area. I have noted an ambiguity of these women in relationship to the advantages and satisfaction of living in the DTES. The ambiguity of feelings and opinions about the area can be best illustrated through their views and appreciation of their houses as comfortable, clean and beautiful insides and of the DTES as unclean, dangerous, and ugly outside.

Maria: I don't like the Chinatown area but I live there, because BC Housing gave a house there. But I like the house I live in. I'm used to it. Inside the house it's

another story. There you can take care of your children and forget the ugliness outside.

Julia: Well, this building I live in is very nice inside. I like it. It is comfortable, the manager is very understanding and everything and it is kept very clean. I also enjoy going to the "Army Navy" store. I don't like this park. Having to walk by the park is something I do not enjoy in the least. It is the Pigeon Park, but the store is very nice inside. And behind our building there is a poultry shop that stinks. We don't like it because when it is hot the smell is unbearable. We can't open the windows.

[...] I like it here. This is very central, a park very close by, there are many things nearby. It is true that there are prostitutes in this area, drug traffickers and everything, but as I tell you, one doesn't get involved with them, so there isn't a problem. It's like they say here "They do their business and we do our business". So we haven't had any problems. He died [her son] but no, there were no problems, and Tania [her daughter], she is very quiet and she doesn't go out walking or anything in this area. But we do go to the parks, we both go walking to Chinatown to shop and we haven't had any problems.

Miriam: The place I live in is very nice. The only bad part is the outside especially for the children, but here it is nice and warm.

[...] The blue dots show the good things, for example these have red on the outside, because I don't like the outside very much. It's the same with my daughter's school. I don't like the outside of the school same as the Mc Lean Park where I like the inside but on the outside there are people who shouldn't.

They are all very satisfied with their houses and housing options and have a sense of attachment with them. The advantages and benefits of their housing options are beyond their economic and locational advantages, to include their ample space, their well-finished interiors, and their cosy and warm environment. Their houses are associated with beauty and with a clean and welcoming environment. Although the outside is seen as the opposite of their houses, there are several places that they find aesthetically pleasant: buildings, schools, and parks, however, they define these places as beautiful insides surrounded by ugly outsides. Ugliness is related to the untidiness and uncleanness of the streets and public spaces, but most important, to the looks and behaviour of "others" who hang out in these areas and that in the view of these women behave improperly (e.g. nudity, drug use and selling) or are engaged in dangerous activities (e.g. brawls, street sex).

During the last session-workshop and after having shared their mental maps, photos and a day in the life, the four women reflected on what their experiences had in common and what was different.

Julia: Well, I would say that there are some very good buildings in the area, that are very nice on the inside, but the areas are bad. The buildings are good, but the areas are quite dangerous.

Maria: more so for those with children and teens.

Rosa: I have to be careful too with my son. He is 21 but one has to be alert when he goes out and sometimes it is 11 or 12 o'clock at night and one starts thinking. Well, as one lives in this area where there is so much evil, one thinks that when our children go out that they are doing something wrong. My son doesn't do anything wrong but someone might give him something because there are many people at night, I can see them selling drugs as if it were fresh bread, so one has to be very careful. [...]But frankly, the building I live in is nice, and well, nothing has ever happened to me. But I see things, like I've said. They sell drugs. There are two people that have become partners and are now selling drugs in that building.

The two strongest elements that shape the experience and perceptions of these women of the area, their housing satisfaction, and as we'll see later their perception of health are "cleanness" and "safety." Cleanness and safety are core culturally grounded values that they stress given their location as mothers who believe that their main duty is to provide a safe and a clean environment to their kids. While keeping this duty in the interior of the house is not a problem, the outside challenges them continuously and it can be said that they live with a daily stress and fear that they may not be able to control or protect their children. This concern and sense of duty regulates their establishment of social and geographical boundaries and their marked typology of an hostile outside and a secure inside.

This strategy of boundary making is used to deal with their fear and as a response to the duty of protecting their children. Through the creation of a kind of a social and physical bubble (e.g. children not allowed to play outside), they isolate their kids from seeing, experiencing or facing the risks associated with the DTES. When Maria walks on the street with her daughter, she covers her eyes when there is an unpleasant or "frightening" sight; Julia walks her teenage daughter to the bus every day; and Miriam tends to avoid walking with her children on the streets of the DTES, driving even for very short distances. For Rosa and Julia with teen age children the challenge is in protecting their kids from getting involved with drugs (Rosa) or from the harassment of others (Julia); for Miriam and Julia it is a matter of protecting their children from seeing unpleasant scenes and behaviours.

Julia: We live in a very nice building. There are security cameras and everything. It is good. But the surrounding areas... For example I do not allow my daughter to go out by herself, I always go out with her. There are always teenagers of her age that stand around waiting for something. So, I feel bad about her going out and having to wait for the bus all alone. I try to go with her although sometimes she has to go by herself.

E1: What concerns have you got when you go out?

Julia: You feel uncomfortable, you don't feel free because there are many vagrants and prostitutes. If you have to stand, you have to check where you stand, because the cars drive by or they honk at you and one has to...

Rosa: It's terrible. About two weeks ago I was walking down the street to do some shopping and a car stops and someone whistles at me. I thought it was one of my sons in the car so I turned to see and this guy asked me if I was working.

(Laughs) [...] for me arriving here to this country has been a blessing from God. This country is God's paradise, for me it's paradise. Well, I feel very content, very happy. I feel fine, I feel fine here. Honestly I don't want to go back to my country. For me this is my country. The only thing is that I'm worried about my youngest son, I wouldn't want him to stumble or to get involved in bad things, right? Because there is so much evil here with the drug addicts selling drugs as if it was daily bread.

Miriam: I don't like going to the butchers because of the area, but I have to go because I like the way they cut meat. From the building I go to school and from there to Ray Cam. Then I get back home and take my husband. Ray Cam is nice inside but the outside is dangerous and I don't like it.

Living in the DTES provides these women with the advantages of a central location and a variety of services. Their housing experience in the area, however, is shaped by their view of the area as locus of critical social problems and the presence of specific social groups, particularly drug dealers and sex workers and in some cases of Latin American men and other ethnic groups as a potential threat to their family lives. They consequently do not feel members or part of a community and do not engage in local community networks or social relations.

Accordingly, they establish their relationships with a welcoming, safe and protected inside and a threatening insecure and unhealthy outside: filthy, smelly and with undesirable individuals who they find even unpleasant to look at. Their choice for an economic housing alternative and their rejection of the area has meant that they live in a kind of a self imposed marginality and solitude in regards to their neighbours.

Although I have stressed these sharp distinctions and their isolation, it is also important to stress that there is a very pragmatic attitude by all these four women about living in the area. They all are aware that many others will choose not to live in the area. They consider themselves able to do so because of their social and moral integrity but furthermore because as women, they have already faced and dealt with very difficult things and challenges in their lives. Endurance and courage have ensured them that they can sort difficult situations out,

Rosa: I am already used to it. When I came here to live at first I felt very bad, you can say that I didn't feel too well. Because people I knew would say "You live

where there are plenty of drugs, drunks and you are going to become one too". I would tell them "Well, one can live among thieves, one can live in an asylum. But if you want to do it to ruin yourself...But I'm fine here."

What is important is that for them it is possible to live fully and well in the area if you have developed proper strategies of protection for your children and if you have a firm moral ground. It is precisely their resourcefulness to develop such strategies what allows them to live in the area in the ambiguity of enjoying and disliking it.

6. Health

The association between health and housing is a direct and functional one. Health is seen as a result of the quality of the living conditions:

E1: So, let's see what health means to each and every one of you.

Julia: To be in a clean place.

Miriam: Inside and outside and the surrounding areas too

Julia: Because the poultry shop forces us to keep our doors shut.

Rosa: Frankly Chinatown is filthy, flies! Rats, at night you couldn't walk by there.

E1: So you feel that the outside might not be too clean and that it might affect your health.

Chorus: Yes

E2: So what else do you associate with good health?

Rosa: Well, a clean uncontaminated place.

Miriam: A place that isn't so cold.

Marie: Nutrition, the cleanliness of what you are eating, eating habits.

Julia: For me to be better emotionally ..my husband should stop drinking.

"Health" is primarily associated with clean spaces and secondly with warm spaces. The beauty of the "inside" stressed by these women is mostly a matter of a clean space that is well equipped: "comfortable and beautiful at the same time for the children, and clean to ensure that the children are in good health." As well, beauty and comfort are the result of spaces that are warm and absent of mice and cockroaches.

But the main thing is that these places are warm, because as I told you before I used to live in a very cold place and my children would get coughs frequently. Look here, this is a very comfortable place (where she lives now), because there are places full of rats and cockroaches and that is not very good for the children. And here it is very healthy, everything is kept very clean.

The sight of flies and garbage, the smells from the chicken “factory” and garbage, and the street scenes of drug injecting and consumption represent potential sources of contamination, disease and threats to their children’s health.

Health is also associated with safety. Safety is understood as an environment protected [not free] from seeing drug use and violence and as a crucial component of a healthy living. The strategies mentioned of protecting their children through avoidance of contact and sight are also part of a health strategy. The great fear and source of stress is of the negative influence that “the outside” may have on their family stability and for this there is an appeal to a disease metaphor, as their fear is of “contamination.” This pertains mostly to their children and to their achieved “harmony” in their family life which they fear could be destabilized by the “bad” influences from the outside, and in the case of Rosa and Maria for the threat of insecurity due to robbery and house break ins. The fear of contamination and the threat of danger are materialized for these women in various stereotypical figures of an “other” who can have several faces: a street person, a Chinese person who either is involved in the sex or drug trade or a Latino who is involved with drug dealing in the area.

Health is a concern for this woman but primarily in relation to the well being of their children. During the interview process, Rosa was the only one who made comments about her health, her history of illness and the pain she lives in. The other three women referred to aspects of grief, stress, and worrying but did not relate these embodied emotions with aspects of illness or deterioration of their health.

The association between health and housing is explicitly made by these women and is understood primarily as a matter of living in a place that is clean and uncontaminated. The housing options they have made ensure this better than previous housing in cold basements that often had mice and/or cockroaches. The major risk to their health is brought by the discomfort felt about the outside and an ongoing “worrying” about their children. This permanent source of concern impacts on their emotional well being. Emotional health is therefore an important element in their perception of health and as Julia timidly mentions in her comment above, it also involves the decisions made by members of their family to live a healthier lifestyle.

7. Community

There is a very limited sense of community with the DTES on the part of these women. Although they live in the area, they do not locate themselves as members of the community or do not express any form of attachment. There is a degree of self imposed marginalization from the services and activities in the area (with the exception of Julia who sometimes joins her husband in some of the activities) and an overall sense of loneliness on the part of these women. They, however, have constructed some networks within the area, particularly their strong friendship and support bonds between each pair of women. Their relationship with neighbours and other residents of the area is minimal

and responds to a typology of social distance that is organized around ethnic differentiation, language, and perceptions on life style and friendliness.

Language is one of the main mediators of the perception of these women about their immediate surroundings, of their sense of community and relations and participation in mainstream Canadian society. Out of the three only Miriam is fluent and comfortable speaking English. Julia understands English and can express herself while Maria has a limited command of the Language and Rosa understands very little. For Rosa and Maria, language is the cornerstone of progress and they feel limited and marginalized for their lack of command of the English language. The rejection of these women to drug users and sellers does not stem from a blatant prejudice against drugs or drug addiction but to their disbelief that these individuals, who speak English (including those Latinos in the DTES), are missing the opportunity for a better life:

Rosa: I feel sorry for them. More so because they are Canadian, they speak their own English language and are doing drugs and frankly I feel very sorry for them. If I had the language, that English language I would get any kind of job [...] but unfortunately I can't learn it now because my brain doesn't help any more.

Rosa: ...I see so many young people, so many people, Hispanic and Canadian, I see them speaking English, that language that I don't have. If I had it, I would be working anywhere, but working in something good. But there are people that know English and don't know how to take advantage of it.

Although Miriam is fluent in English her sense of loneliness is deep and it is shaped by the longing for their family who is in Mexico and the coldness she perceives in her neighbours: *"the only thing I don't like about here is that the Canadians are very cold. Also the cold weather..."*

Some of their perceptions and sense of community with other Latinos in Vancouver is mediated by language. For Maria her experience with some of the Latinos who speak English has not been very positive as she perceives that an unwritten hierarchy of superiority is created between those who speak English and those who do not speak it. She had found that having to rely on an interpreter for dealing with the system is a reason that some Latinos use to take advantage and charge other Latinos for interpretation services. As a result, she perceives that the environment has weakened the quality of social relations: *'there are no human relationships here. Here the wealthier ones look down on the ones that have nothing'*.

One of the strongest viewpoints expressed, particularly by Maria and Rosa, was in regards to their neighbours of Asian origin/heritage. Repeatedly, they made prejudiced comments about Chinese people living in the area. The local Chinese residents are perceived with mixed feelings as a source of threat and risk (e.g. unprotected children who scratch cars and damage things, stealing, drug dealing, pushing while shopping and noisy) and as an example of family and community support, of a community who does

not spread rumours and gossip and that consequently are able to implement economic strategies for saving money (e.g. large number of people living in one unit). Rosa has a strongest viewpoint of the Chinese as sees them as major source of the problems she experiences: “they” Rosa says, take over the laundry room with no concern for others who wish to use it, “they” are untidy, unclean and noisy.

Conclusion

A common characteristic among these women is their leading role in the family either as single mothers or as women who have faced and dealt by themselves with very difficult situations. In the narratives of their immigration and settlement histories, “suffering” and “courage” are two central referents from which they position themselves as strong women who have gone through painful life experiences. Their experiences of suffering mark their lives and memories, however, it is through resilience and courage that they survive and cope. The skills built through these live experiences provides them with a repertoire and resourcefulness that shape the ways they enter the experience of living in a new country, dealing with adaptation and settlement issues, and figuring out housing and access of services and benefits.

Overall, these four women expressed their recognition of the advantages and benefits obtained upon their arrival in Canada. This they saw it in contrast with their past experiences and living situation in their country of origin. With time, however, their feelings towards the society are more mixed as they have become more concerned with issues of safety and protection of her children from drugs, violence and “bad companies.” It is through this ambiguous feeling that they locate themselves as members of the society and that they define their satisfaction with their housing situation and the potential threats to their families well being and health. All four women have no doubts about remaining in Canada and consider their future lives as Canadian citizens. This ambivalence is best expressed in Rosa’s comment:

Rosa: It’s terrible. About two weeks ago I was walking down the street to do some shopping and a car stops and someone whistles at me. I thought it was one of my sons in the car so I turned to see and this guy asked me if I was working. (Laughs) [...] for me arriving here to this country has been a blessing from God. This country is God’s paradise, for me it’s paradise. Well, I feel very content, very happy. I feel fine, I feel fine here. Honestly I don’t want to go back to my country. For me this is my country. The only thing is that I’m worried about my youngest son, I wouldn’t want him to stumble or to get involved in bad things, right? Because there is so much evil here with the drug addicts that sell drugs as if it was daily bread. When I go along Hastings I see them pushing drugs with some things, conducting business during the day...that’s the only thing I don’t like about this country. So many people wasting their lives. I feel sorry for them. More so because they are Canadian, they speak their English language and are doing drugs and frankly I feel very sorry for them. If I had the language, that English

language I would get any kind of job [...] but unfortunately I can't learn it now because my brain doesn't help any more. (Laughs). But I will try to learn, I want to go ahead, to work, no...to work until I have the strength to do so (unclear words) When you are 65 years old, nobody cares about working.

“Their very struggles are, I think, partly the reason why they have stayed. They’ve done combat against an alien culture and, as combatants, in time have become deeply engaged in it.” Richard, Sennett