From Strength to Weakness – Changing Position of Women in Societies of New France and British North America

The aim of this paper is to show how position of women in Canada, both native as well as immigrant, changed from the 16th century when Europeans set foot on the territory which was to become the Dominion of Canada, until the beginning of the 19th century when new ideal of womanhood became prevailing.

At the time when first Europeans came to North America the position of Indian women was remarkable, although there was definite division of tasks according to gender lines. Women generally concentrated on the things, which were compatible with work over the children, thus tended to keep close to the camp. Among the agricultural Iroquois and Hurons men were responsible for clearing the land but growing corn, bean and squash was entirely responsibility of women. In this way the wealth of community consisting chiefly of the land and the food was controlled mainly by the women. Mary Jemison, a white settler who had been taken captive by the Indians and adopted into the tribe provided very approving description of the lives of Iroquois women (Brown, 1076). She described their work as not very severe, although their responsibilities were manifold, they had to gather all their fuel, bring water, had “[…] bread to procure and cooking to perform” (The Indian, 138). Yet she noted that their cares were not that numerous as that of white women. “In the summer season, we planted, tended and harvested the corn, and generally had all our children with us; but had no master to oversee or drive us, so we could work as leisurely as we pleased” (The Indian, 139).

Anthropology and historical records suggest that before the arrival of white men and soon after it, native women of almost all tribes (with exception of women from non-matrilineal coastal tribes like Haida and Salish) had considerable power in three crucial areas. First of all, they could easily participate in religious and ceremonial life of the group. Secondly, they had
voice in group decision making – candidates for chiefs were put up by clan mothers and other respectable women (Grabowski, 20). Thirdly, they were relatively free in the choice of spouse and decisions concerning marriage, although among the Iroquois marriage was formally arranged by the mothers. Marriage was not considered as a union for life and divorce was accepted if the parties were not happy in the union. When a couple decided to split up, woman retained control over the children from such a union. Among the Five Nations and the Hurons inheritance was through female line, both as far as property and chieftainship was concerned. Also woman’s life, as the one who is the life-giver, was valued higher than the life of a man. For instance, for a woman killed in tribal fights Montagnais Indians demanded forty beaver skins as compensation, while for a man only thirty (Grabowski, 25).

According to 17\textsuperscript{th} century observers, especially Jesuits, the role of native women in decision making equalled men’s. In the diaries from the period the following note was found: “A man may promise you something and if he does not keep his promise, he thinks he is sufficiently excused when he tells you his wife did not wish to do it” (\textit{Women}, 26-27). Roman Catholic missionaries, who began missionary activities among Canadian native peoples, carried on intensive campaign to change the relations between sexes. Indian way was perceived as lacking all “natural authority” and patriarchal tradition. Jesuits complained about the lack of male control over women and preached that wives should obey their husbands. Change of gender relations was essential if the native peoples were to be brought under control of the Roman Catholic Church and the French state. That is why Indian women generally did not have positive attitude towards Europeans and their patriarchal culture. For example, Huron men who adopted Christianity were ostracised and ejected from the long houses. Generally, if a tribe was not taken by starvation or defeated in battle, native women had little temptation to adopt missionaries’ culture as it threatened loss of power and offered little in return. Only economic reasons could prevail, that is why marriage to a white trader could become temptation to a native woman. In this way the model of marriages according the custom of the country developed.

Traders very quickly started forming relations with Indian women, although the official policy of Hudson Bay Company initially prohibited contacts of this type between its traders and Indians. Despite prohibitive regulations the governors or chief factors were the first who formed more or less permanent unions with Indian women, knowing that such unions helped to cement trade ties with the Indians. For the Cree and Chipewyan tribes it was
common to offer their women as a token of friendship and hospitality. In this way by the mid – 18th century it became an established practice for a Company governor to take an Indian “wife”. It was only in 1821 that Hudson Bay Company regulated the custom of country marriages through introduction of marriage contracts, which emphasised husband’s financial obligations and the status of the woman as a legitimate wife. North West Company, differently from Hudson Bay Company, was not too orthodox about such unions of their employees and it was among North Westeners of all ranks (officers, clerks and down to common labourers) that marriage according to the custom of the country developed into recognised and widespread custom (*Canadian Family*, 67-91).

According to this rite hundreds of fur traders formed more or less permanent unions with Indian and later mixed-blood women. As soon as the fur traders established first posts in Canada and began first contacts with the Indians, they started to appreciate the work of Indian women, especially their skill of mending clothing, making moccasins, netting snowshoes and the production of pemmican, indispensable during long journeys. Success in the world of *coureur de bois* depended to a very large extend from the skill and help of an Indian mate.

A trader could not take an Indian wife without taking into consideration the customs of her people, and first of all had to gain consent of her parents, which was usually achieved thanks to proper presents. Then, after a ceremony performed in accordance with Indian tradition the couple was considered husband and wife. Initially, marriage *a la façon du pays* was not viewed as a binding contract, so when the relationship was unhappy the partners were free to separate. It was also accepted that if a man died or his term in the colony expired and he decided to return to France, his Indian wife and their offspring returned to her Indian relations. With time, the custom of “turning off” developed, which meant that the trader leaving the country placed his spouse under the protection of another white man. One of such men wrote in his diary:

[…] when I return to my native land shall endeavour to place her [his Indian wife] in the hands of some good, honest Man, with whom she can pass the remainder of her days in this Country much more agreeably, than it would be possible for her to do, were she to be taken down into the civilised world, where she would be stranger to the People, their manners, customs & language (*Sixteen*, 98).
At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, when missionaries started reaching even the most remote places, mixed marriages began to be treated as indissoluble unions and many of the earlier unions solemnised according to the custom of the country were also sanctioned during official religious ceremonies. Yet, paradoxically, possibility of entering into marriage blessed by a Roman Catholic priest or protestant minister limited the number of unions between white traders and Indian or mix-blood women as church marriage excluded possibility of “turning off” or divorce (Blackhouse, 16-20). Also the slow but steady arrival of white women caused that native women became less desirable marriage partners. White wife became a symbol of high status, and many traders sent off their native wives in order to marry white women as quickly as possible. In this way the status of native or mix-blood women became reduced to that of a mistress or even a prostitute. “Native women were particularly victimised by the introduction of Victorian double standard. While men might indulge their pleasure without obligation, women were expected to abide by rigid European standards of propriety” (Van Kirk, 84).

Similarly to native women, first white women in the colonies enjoyed strong if not privileged position. Historical data offer considerable evidence that women of New France with respect to their education, range and freedom of action compare favourably with Victorian women who came after them. It stemmed from various reasons. Firstly, at that time the line between public and private life was not very strong as it was later in the 19th century and the idea that man should be the breadwinner and woman a home maker was not clearly developed. That is why women’s range of economic activities was almost as wide as men’s. Also French legal system, Coutume de Paris, protected women’s right to much bigger extend than the British law, assuring that the husband did not have the power to alienate the family property and the dowry that the woman brought when she entered marriage. Secondly, women were in short supply and this situation worked in their favour. For example in 1653 in Troi-Riviérs the ratio of single men to single women was four to one. In more remote places it was even bigger (Mann-Trofimentkoff et al., 14). Thirdly, at the beginning women were a highly select group of immigrants, as they represented either the class of well-born, well-endowed and extremely dedicated religious figures or they fell into the category of filles du roi, who were not as outstanding as the devotes, but nevertheless privileged in comparison to average immigrant to New France or New England who arrived alone, without government assistance.
One of the first to come were the French nuns, who inspired by Jesuit relations from the New World, saw it as especially promising place for their work. Convents played vital role in the material, spiritual and social development of the colony. In 1639 the first two sisters from the congregation of Hospitalieres, Marie Grunet and Marie Forrestier arrived into the vicinity of Quebec where they started Hôtel Dieu – hospital for the French population. Also Ursulines came in the same year, expecting to devote themselves to the education of Amerindians, but when their civilising mission failed they turned to education of daughters of French colonists. (Canadian Women, 42). Another order of hospital nuns of Saint Joseph de la Fleche, was established due to efforts of Jeanne Mance, a single lay woman who came to Canada around 1641. She first studied organisation of mission in Quebec and later established a medical dispensary in Ville Marie (today’s Montreal). Yet another congregation present from the very beginnings of New France was the Congregation de Notre Dame, the community which focused its attention on female children of the poor, and was at the beginning frowned upon by the Bishop of Quebec as their members preferred not to wear distinctive habits, take solemn public vows and cloister themselves.

Religious communities established in the New World apart from missionary, educational and hospital work shared also with the fur trading monopoly the task of recruiting brides for French soldiers and traders. Nuns took care of single women who came to the colony until they found husbands. In 1663, royal officials became actively involved in promoting the immigration of single women. Between 1643 and 1663 only 230 unmarried female immigrants came to New France (Canadian Women, 44), but already in the next decade almost 800 women known as filles du roi – “daughters of the king” arrived. They were endowed with substantial dowries by the king, which were to help them and their future husbands in setting up their households. The value of king’s gift was between 100 and 500 livres, some of it in practical items like clothing or equipment or household goods.

An analysis of how these women chose their husbands can illustrate the atmosphere of marital matters in the colony at that time and show how these women acted in a situation where gender balance was in their favour. Life of most of king’s daughters had been marked by both economic and cultural poverty as most of them were orphans – declarations on their marriage certificates and contracts suggest that close to 65% of them lost their fathers before they reached adulthood (Landry, 15). Among them there were also girls whose living parents were not able to arrange good marriages for them.
mainly for economic reasons. Nevertheless, among filles du roi there were also women like three Raclot sisters, who not only had substantial dowries for that time but also were accompanied to the New World by their father (Canadian Women, 45).

It is interesting to investigate schedules of marriages of filles du roi, looking at the interval between their arrival and celebration of their marriages. Roughly 80% of them married within the first six months. It is a bit surprising at first glance since in historiography and in folklore marriages of filles du roi were considered extremely hasty. King’s orders were to limit courtship to absolute minimum and a ruling handed down in 1670 was to oblige: “[…] persons old enough to enter into marriage to marry within 15 days of the arrival of the ship carrying the filles under pain of being deprived of the rights to any kind of fishing, hunting and trading with the natives” (Canadian Family, 18). Despite such a strict order it seems that newly arrived women did not rush into marriage union, most probably preferring to take some time and try to find the best possible candidate for a husband. What is more, future wives almost always demanded to stipulate the material terms of the union in a marriage contract. According to historiographers more than 82% of filles du roi marriages were preceded with signing of such a contract (Trudel, 78) prior to a religious ceremony. Around 15% of the filles du roi who had already signed marriage contract decided to withdraw before getting married in church (91 out of 621) (Canadian Family, 21). Nothing is mentioned in the records about the reasons why the contracts were cancelled. It seems, however, that it was because filles could take some advantage of the fact that it was relatively easy for them to find another (maybe better) partner in quite a short period of time.

The venture of the French crown aiming at sending wives for settlers in the colony turned out to be extremely successful, at least in respect of population growth. Already in the period of the first ten years from the arrival of the first filles du roi birth rate almost doubled and the size of all the population grew almost three times, reaching around 8300 people in 1673 (Landry, 18). Throughout the 18th century sex proportions became almost equal, which brought gradual weakening of the position of women.

The fall of New France began a century of extraordinary change in North America, connected with great movement of people and rapid increase in the number of people of origins other than French, living in the territory that was formerly New France. Families from New England began moving to
the north-eastern regions of British North America already after transfer of Acadia to the British crown in 1713. The next big wave of migration came with the American Revolution and great move of Loyalists to the territories of British North America. American Independence War brought huge changes in the lives of a substantial group of women forced to move north and start new life in a different country and surrounding. The newcomers belonged to English-speaking group, they were in majority protestants and did not want to mix with the French population but rather reconstruct the conditions in which they lived in the British colonies. Thus, with the arrival of big groups of loyalists, the social structure of the colony has changed as the number of English-speaking citizens grew rapidly and consequently, the influence of British culture and ideals became prevailing.

In the same way traditional British model of femininity, with paternalistic and patriarchal relations between men and women became prevailing, stressing women’s weakness, subordination, dependence from men and ascribing them entirely to home sphere. Thus women did not participate in public life, could not purchase land in their own name, run financial matters of the family or take any important decisions concerning well-being and education of their children. Women were ascribed only to home, family and female companionship, although many of them proved during American Revolution that they are able to assume new responsibilities and take up the burden of running farms, estates and businesses in the absence of their men, who were either arrested or joined Loyalist units on the frontier. In fact, Loyalist women for their contribution to the war effort and society received little or virtually no recognition or respect even though they overcame devastating challenges and great obstacles during the war, faced Patriot harassment and persecution and were in the end forced to leave their homes and seek refuge behind the British lines (Strong-Boag et al., 61).

It can be clearly seen that the position of women, no matter whether of Indian, French or English origin, changed over time, from relative independence and strength in 17th and 18th centuries into a subordinate and dependent position which became prevailing during the Victorian era. At the beginning of the colonising process it was considered normal, especially for the well born and well – to – do women, to be resourceful, ingenious, enterprising, educated and not excessively limited by the demands of the etiquette. Resourcefulness and ingenuity were particularly valued in the pioneer society of the colonies. Yet, already at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, when colonial society became more or less settled, in connection
with rapid economic development of the colonies and growth of prosperity the position of women changed substantially. Women were placed on a pedestal, admired and revered, yet at the same time deprived of the possibility to take part in public and social life. It was argued that delicate physical and psychical construction of women makes them unable to deal with life outside home sphere. That is why the model of “ideal wife” or “perfect lady” became all pervading and was to become personification of such features like submissiveness, obedience, innocence, piety, moral purity. The main and only aim of life of each woman was to bring up children and run home. This ideal remained unchanged and generally accepted throughout almost all 19th century. The reverse process would start only towards the end of the Victorian period and find its way in the time of the World War I.

Two new places on the world’s map: New France and British Canada gave women new opportunities and helped to establish new social and family roles for them. Intermingling French, British and American influences helped to create separate, unique Canadian model of femininity. Unfortunately historians have been only able to recreate only a part of overall picture of the early colonial woman. As women have always been a neglected group, historical evidence and historical data concerning them is fragmentary and scattered, based on sparse and fragmentary relations or documents. Unfortunately, in this case major part of historical memory is lost and will never be retrieved.

Works Cited


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