GENDER IMBALANCE IN EARLY BRITISH COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT

This article concerns the gender imbalance that characterized British Columbia for more than half a century after Confederation: the differences in male/female ratios among immigrant and occupational groups; and the economic roles of women in a preponderantly male society.

A tremendous gender imbalance persisted in British Columbia long after its entry into Confederation. A demographic historian would readily recognize this as feature of a frontier society growing mainly through the immigration of men. The one sector of the population that always had an equal ratio between male and female was that of the native people. One of the striking facts about British Columbia at the beginning of the twentieth century was that 30 percent of the births in the province were among native people, although they made up only 14 percent of the population. This did not reflect a high birth rate, but rather the paucity of women in the rest of the population.

The most striking early imbalances were among Chinese and South Asian (mainly Sikh) immigrants. Canada's discriminatory immigration policies were a factor. The head tax applied against the Chinese, and the regulatory obstacles put in the way of South Asians, stopped their women from coming. But economic and cultural factors also operated. Men had originally left their families behind in Asia because they preferred to keep them in their traditional settings, and because it would have been too expense to support them in British Columbia. As a consequence, at the time of the 1911 census, 96 percent of the Chinese and 99.87 percent of the South Asians in the province were men.

These were extreme cases, but every immigrant group possessed a preponderance of men. Among central Europeans, Italians and Japanese there were four men for every woman and among Scandinavians the figure was close to that. Even among immigrants from eastern Canada, the United States and Great Britain there was a striking shortage of women. In the population as a whole, through periods of rising and falling immigration, right up to the First World War, there continued to be more than twice as many men as women.

Throughout much of this period, British Columbia had not been easily reached. It was a distant and costly destination, especially when the routing was indirect over American railway lines and roads. The completion of the CPR in 1885 did less for immigrant traffic than one might have guessed because the Canadian railway offered only first and second class fares, not the third class fare that was the choice of working class immigrants. Wages were much higher in British Columbia than in Eastern Canada, but so were living expenses. The differences were even greater away from the urban areas of Vancouver and Victoria. All of these factors encouraged the immigration of adventurous youth who were more likely to be men than women. The families that came generally belonged to the merchant, managerial or professional class and they characteristically settled in Vancouver or Victoria or vicinity or in the more established towns of the interior and Vancouver Island. This was true among the Chinese and other immigrant minorities as well as the Anglo majority.

The gender imbalance of early British Columbia served to reinforce and perpetuate racial and ethnic lines of segregation. British Columbia did not offer a welcoming environment for Asians or even Eastern or Southern Europeans and that was a fac-

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tor for many men who came alone and chose to stay alone. But the sojourner attitude among them was also important. They saw their British Columbia adventure as a temporary one; and their long term goal was generally to go home, even when they failed to do so. In the meantime, they tended to live and work among their expatriate countrymen and to build few bridges beyond that community. Those who brought wives from home or who found wives in British Columbia and who began raising a British Columbia-born generation were putting down roots and promoting the process of assimilation and integration. These men were making the mental shift from sojourner to settler, but they were a minority in nearly every immigrant group right up to the First World War.

As we have observed, even among immigrants of eastern-Canadian, American or British origin, women were in short supply. Of course, the immigrants included the entrepreneurial, professional and managerial elite of the province who were most likely to arrive with families or to form families without too much delay. If families or married couples immigrated, it was mostly likely from Eastern Canada or the United States. British and other European immigrants were more likely to come out singly and with a preponderance of males. As a consequence, there were many households in British Columbia with British husbands and Canadian or American wives.

Given the costs of travel and the challenges experienced on arrival, it was difficult for women to enter the province on their own. For this reason, it is not surprising that, at the turn of the century, 75 or 80 percent of the women in BC were married or widowed and that most of these women were homemakers or informal partners in their husband's farms or businesses. In contrast to eastern Canada, with its greater industrial base, very few BC women found factory jobs. It was true that First Nations women had been employed seasonally in the salmon canneries of the Fraser Valley and the Skeena from the 1870s and 1880s; but this was not work that white women in BC sought. Still, there was a contingent of single white women with regular employment outside the home. Their earliest opportunities were in teaching, domestic service, dressmaking or keeping boarding houses. With the urban development of Vancouver and Victoria some gained positions as sales clerks or stenographers and by 1891 there were a few telephone operators. After 1900, nursing emerged as another field of employment.

One can see a sharp change in the first decade of the twentieth century as immigrants poured into the province and the economy diversified. The percentage of women in the paid work force in BC doubled between 1901 and 1911 with immigration promoting this development. By 1911, both domestic service and teaching were attracting immigrant women. In the beginning, white families had recruited domestics from First Nations communities. By 1900, they were relying mostly on Chinese men; but in the first decade 20th century immigrant women from England and Scotland were taking over this line of work. Teaching was another expanding area after 1900 and one that employed mostly women. A third of them came from outside the country – Britain, and the United States. Some were local women, but many had come out to BC from eastern Canada, mainly Ontario and the Maritimes. Most of the positions they found were in the vicinity of Vancouver or Victoria in the settled Okanogan. But they also served in one room schools in remote areas across the province.

By 1911, women made up 8 percent of the paid work force in BC. In Ontario they made up 25 percent. The difference illustrates the frontier nature of BC, with its resource-based economy and its unsettled population. The subsequent growth of the BC population, with the expansion of its major urban centres and the diversification of its economy, moved it towards Canadian norms in percentage of females in the population overall, and in the percentage of women in the paid workforce. But it took a long time for BC to completely lose the gender imbalance of a frontier province. Not until 1971 did the numerical discrepancy between the sexes disappear completely.