De-skilling Immigrant Women

BY SHAHRZAD MOJAB

Cet article examine les contraintes autour de l'emploi des immigrantes au Canada dans les débats sur la demande des travailleurs spécialisés dans notre économie post-industrielle. L'auteure nous dit que notre économie en transition n'est pas essentiellement dépendante du travail spécialisé, elle rassemble plutôt le spécialiste et le non-spécialiste et montre une forte tendance à la polarisation. Cet article met l'accent sur le rôle de l'éducation des adultes dans une économie qui se (dé) spécialise.

In the past two decades, much has been said about an ongoing transition from the production-based capitalist economy to an information or knowledge-based system. It is argued, for instance, that the labour force is also changing from one engaged in physical or manual work to one immersed in the production of knowledge and information. A related development is the displacement of physical property by intellectual property.

The transition to a "knowledge economy" occurs in the context of globalization, which is associated with trends such as transnationalisation, deindustrialisation, privatisation, and the restructuring of the economic order, especially in the relationship between capital and labour. The workforce is expected to be adaptable, flexible, and able to rapidly change its skill base under conditions of the unceasing movement of capital in search of more profitable opportunities. Restructuring, occurring in the midst of a worldwide economic crisis, has contributed to the formation of an unstable and fragile job market, which makes numerous demands on the entire educational system. In this market, according to a Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) analysis, the era of "a single transition from full-time school to full-time work" is "giving way to the idea of multiple pathways, back and forth, through different life cycles—the concept of lifelong learning." Responding to the forces of globalization, some theorists and activists in adult education tend to redefine the field as "lifelong learning" (CERIS 1999a).

It is often claimed that the new economic order demands a highly skilled and multi-skilled labour force. In fact, an underlying assumption of government policy, in Canada, is the growing demand of the market for high skilled jobs (Shields). Accordingly, the Minister of Employment and Immigration initiated a major shift in immigration priorities by introducing Bill C-86 in 1992 (Avery), which made professional and skilled immigrants one of the preferred target groups.[1] The claim that the postindustrial economy demands skill upgrading and greater creativity on the part of workers is controversial, however. According to one study, "beyond the rhetoric, there is little hard evidence that the level of education needed within actual labour processes has greatly increased" (Livingstone 83). According to one report, Canadian workers are among the best educated in the world. In 1995, 46 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women in the labour force had a post-secondary certificate or diploma or a university degree (CERIS 1999b).

This study examines constraints on employment of immigrant women in Canada in the context of debates about the postindustrial economy's demand for skilled workers. The immigrant women interviewed in this study were highly skilled "knowledge workers" with considerable professional experience in their countries of origin. However, instead of a smooth entry into the knowledge-based market, they remained either unemployed or pressured into non-skilled jobs, which demanded "the use of their hands rather than their minds." The paper argues that the changing economy is not essentially dependent on highly skilled labour; it rather combines skilling with de-skilling, and shows a strong tendency to their polarization. The goal of the paper is to discuss the role of adult education in a (de)skilling economy.

Immigrant women and learning: methodological perspectives

This inquiry is inspired by feminist, anti-racist and participatory

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methodologies, which depart from the positivist-empiricist research traditions by privileging the following assumptions.[2] Good research can be conducted from the community's perspective, and serve the interests of the researched; this type of research facilitates the building of theories and analyses based on people's experience. Research design must be simple but not simplistic; research should be sensitive to power, and its unequal distribution in relations of race, gender, and class; research should recognize the social construction of knowledge and power; research should develop a holistic understanding and appreciation of human experience; research should avoid the oversimplification of the individual identity; research should recognize the interconnectedness of participation in and access to employment, education, and decision-making process within the historical, economic, and cultural contexts of the society.

Stories told by the participants were also our stories of exclusion, racism, sexism, alienation, or isolation. The understanding of these women helped break down the boundaries between us.

This study examines the training of immigrant women with a focus on the economic and policy contexts of their integration into the job market. Given the broad scope of the project, data were gathered from diverse sources. Evidence about training is based on interviews with the immigrants and agencies which provided them with training and other services, as well as published material about available training programs.

The main body of data comes from a series of interviews with immigrant women who were participating in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and computer training programs. These programs were provided by various community-based organizations in Toronto area. The ESL classes were offered at different levels of basic, intermediate, and advanced. The computer classes were mostly basic processing lessons or familiarity with a specific processing software.

A total of 86 immigrant women in Toronto, coming from 30 countries, participated in the interviews. These women were from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Columbia, El Salvador, Eritrea, Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Iraq, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Venezuela, and Vietnam. We were interested in finding out about the pattern of their participation in adult learning programs; assessing the impact of the learning opportunities on their access to employment; and evaluating the relevancy of these programs to their experience.

Two methods were used to collect data from the participants: the face-to-face interview and the questionnaire. The interview was "non-structured" or "non-directive." The participants were encouraged to rely on their experiences, to describe whatever events seemed significant to them, to provide their own definitions of their situations, and to reveal their opinions and attitudes as they saw fit. The questionnaire, on the other hand, contained both "factual" and "experiential" questions. Factual questions were designed to elicit "objective" information from the respondents regarding their background, their study history at adult learning programs, and the impact of the program on their personal and social life. Experiential questions were designed to help the participants to reflect on their experience with respect to their learning environment and express their opinions about it.

"Generating" data from immigrant women raises many ethical, political, and theoretical issues. The unequal distribution of power between the researchers and the researched is always present. We made the session informal, aiming at establishing a sense of collectivity in this study, explaining the objectives of the project, and recruiting volunteers among immigrant women. Throughout these sessions, the research team was conscious about the power relations between the team members and the immigrant women. The team, including the principal researcher and two interviewers, were first-generation immigrant women and graduates of doctoral programs from Canadian and American universities. We were, thus, aware of our position as outsiders and insiders of the group. For some of us, stories told by the participants were also our stories of exclusion, racism, sexism, alienation, or isolation. The affirmation of sharing and understanding the experience of these women helped the break down of the boundaries between us, researchers, and the participants in the inquiry. Creating a safe and trusting environment where women could freely share personal stories was instrumental in the rich data that we managed to collect.

Prior to interviews with immigrant women, one-to-one or group information sessions were organized for front-line workers or the contact person at potential service-providing agencies, immigrant women's organizations, and community organizations. The purpose of these information sessions was to introduce the project to the agencies, refine the objectives of the research based on their knowledge and experience, and, with their support, get access to the training classes. Information about various formal (such as colleges, universities, Boards of Education) and non-formal (com-

munity or home-based) adult learning programs was gathered from publicly available reports, program calenders, course descriptions, annual reports, etc. Another source was experiential data which included information from immigrant women regarding their experience of accessing and participating in adult education programs.

An important source for understanding the situation under study is my own experience of living as an immigrant woman in Canada for more than ten years prior to the research. My struggle was to find a job compatible with my training, a doctoral degree in education, and experience in teaching in a Middle Eastern university. Throughout these years, I worked in a women's centre and in the employment equity office of two post-secondary institutions. Outside the academy, I knew about the job histories of many acquaintances with both highly skilled and less skilled backgrounds.

Another source of data consisted of studies of the changing economic life of Canada and the world. It is difficult to understand the relationship between skills and jobs without looking at the dynamics of economic restructuring in the context of the world-wide economic crisis. This is a highly contested area of research with polarized conceptualizations and theorizations.

Findings: the (re)training of skilled immigrants

The majority of immigrant women from Eastern European countries or from the former Soviet Union were highly educated. Thirteen out of 19 women were university educated including one with a doctoral degree in chemistry. These women were distinguished from others by the fact that most of their degrees fall within the category of disciplines which are known as non-traditional, male-dominated fields of study such as chemical, mechanical, and electrical engineering. Similarly, 12 out of 15 Latin American women were university educated, too. Their degrees, however, were predominantly in the humanities and social sciences. There was more heterogeneity among East Asian, Indian, and African immigrant women. The women from Afghanistan had the lowest level of education, while some were illiterate in their own native language.

Overall, prior knowledge of English language was low among all the participants. Contrary to Latin American, East Asian, and African women who had some exposure to English, East European women expressed a great deal of difficulty with the learning of the language. In more mixed classes (in terms of country of origin) there was a tension between the demand for more structural/grammatical and more conversational lessons. The more educated women who aspired to either pursue a degree in Canada or apply for professional licensing requested more instruction in written and specialized English.

These women had various reasons for attending ESL and other skill training classes. Access to the job market was the predominant motivation, followed by the need for socialization, and access to social services such as welfare. The East European women identified lack of language proficiency as the main barrier in access to employment, especially in their own field of specialization. All the women with university education also described the difficulties they encountered in the evaluation of their professional degrees. The view that "we have to start all over again from scratch," they said, was disheartening. Some even indicated that had they known better prior to the migration to Canada, they would have made a different decision. This is consistent with the results of a survey on the issue of the recognition of foreign credential where one recommendation was:

> Those private and public agencies brokering information on foreign credentials should coordinate efforts to enhance the reliability and consistency of information being provided to those migrating to Canada. (NOIVMW 17)

The interviewees indicated that, overall, their intellectual capacity had been undermined in Canada and, consequently, they were seen as a potential source of manual labour. One Cuban woman who used to teach physics and astronomy now works as a janitor because her job does not require much communication in English. A 29-year-old Peruvian woman, a biologist who had been in Canada for only five months, when asked about her experience with ESLclasses replied, "for immigrants in Canada, I get the message that you should use your hands, not your minds."

There was a close relationship between level of education, the length of stay in Canada, and the post-1992 immigration policy, which favoured highly skilled immigrants. Thus, the higher the level of education among immigrant women, the lower was the length of their stay in Canada. For example, the majority of women with university degrees from Latin America and East Europe had been in Canada for less than two years.

The number of women with post-secondary education was 35 or 40.6 per cent of the total 86. Five had

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stayed in Canada for two or more years and five others between one to two years. At the time of interview, 22 (62.8 per cent) of the 35 were unemployed. Of the ten women who were teachers in their country of origin, three were housewives, three were unemployed, and the rest were in traditional jobs (alteration work, janitoring, postal work, hairdressing, or cooking). Four of the five engineers (electrical, computer, civil) were unemployed and one was a bookkeeper. One of the two lawyers in the group was unemployed and the other worked as a maintenance manager. Four of the six women who gave their university degree instead of their previous professions were unemployed and the rest worked as cooks. One woman in the ESL course had been in Canada for 16 years and was a math teacher in her country of origin. She was employed as a worker in a locksmith business under a management and work environment where her native tongue was spoken. Her knowledge of the official language was, therefore, limited.

Since the majority of women were recent immigrants, the market did not value their skills as equal to or fitting what is known as "Canadian experience."

The job market

Downsizing, privatization, reengineering, mergers, and lay-offs were making headline news in local, national and international media in the 1990s. In Canada, unemployment rates were double or near double digits throughout much of the decade. According to a Statistics Canada report, employment in March 1999 "edged down by an estimated 29,000 ... following a strong upward trend over the previous eight months" but the unemployment rate remained "stable" at 7.8 per cent ("Labour Force Survey: March 1999). Between 1993 and 1996, up to 20 per cent of the population was in a low-income situation for at least one year. Individuals who immigrated after 1976 had a "relatively high risk of exposure to low income."[3]

In early 1999, Statistics Canada released figures that cast doubt on the indispensability of high skills in the changing economy. Although new immigrants had a better knowledge of English, and those in the age group of 25 to 44 were better educated than their Canadian-born cohorts, they were less likely to get jobs. A daily newspaper in Toronto reported the trends:

> The '90s have not been kind or welcoming to Canadian newcomers. Despite their high qualifications and grasp of English, new immigrants have never had a tougher time finding work.... The 1.4 million immigrants who came to Canada in the first five years of this decade were far less likely to get jobs than those who came in the 1980s.... The employment rate for immigrant men between 25 and 44, who make up almost half of all immigrants, fell 10 per cent in a decade to 71 per cent in 1996. For Canadian-born men, it fell by only 3 per cent to 86 per cent. Immigrant women were even more disadvantaged. While their employment rate was only 58 per cent in 1986, it fell to 51 per cent in 1996, while for Canadian-born women, it rose 8 per cent to 73 per cent.... Yet newcomers in the '80s and '90s between the ages of 25 and 44 are better educated than those in the same age group who were born here (Carey A19).

The trends outlined above indicate that education is not a determining factor in access to the job market. The play of skill, high or low, is constrained by other factors such as gender, national origin, race, ethnicity, and knowledge of the official languages.

The conflict of the classroom and the market

Much of the literature on contemporary capitalism argues that the transition from a production-based to a postindustrial economy requires upgrading in the technical skill levels of the labour force. Another trend of research emphasizes the deskilling requirements of the system and, even, its dependence on a state of un- and under-employment. There is, in other words, a situation of "education-job gap," which demands upgrading but imposes underemployment.[4] It would be more accurate, therefore, to see advanced capitalism as a highly dynamic system of production, which simultaneously creates and destroys jobs, and requires both the skilling and deskilling of the labour force.

The coexistence of deskilling and skilling may be related primarily to the maximisation of profit and its "anarchy" of production. In this system, goods and services are produced by individual firms in an unorganized market where uncertainty, competition, and risk reigns. In this system, market forces decide the "participation" of the population in the labour force and the job market. As a "social relation," however, capital is constrained in its operation by many forces such as organized labour, gender, race, nationality, politics, and culture. The skilled immigrant women examined in this study were undergoing a process of deskilling not only due to the requirements of the market but also because of their

gender, national origin, and systemic racism.

Since the majority of women were recent immigrants, the market did not value their skills as equal to or fitting what is known as "Canadian experience." This obstacle of access to the job market has been extensively studied. Some of the highly skilled women were professionals (lawyers, teachers) who could not readily continue their profession even if they had adequate knowledge of English and if their credentials were accredited. This is in part because the legal and educational systems of Canada and other countries are different. While necessary training is available, women are in a disadvantaged position to invest in such a rather lengthy and costly re-skilling. Some of the interviewees were married and had children, a situation which did not favour lengthy or intensive Canadianization of their skills. While the lack of Canadian experience is a technical problem, it has, at the same time, racial, ethnic, and class dimensions. There are numerous studies focusing on the intersection of race, gender, class, and access to and participation of immigrant women in the social, economic, and political life of Canadian society (Flynn; Giri; Jamal; Ng and Das Gupta; Ng).

Systemic racism and ethnicism affects immigrants differentially. It is likely that immigrants from countries such as the United States, Australia, Britain, or New Zealand would be treated differently from those originating in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, or Asia. Whatever, the national origin, immigrants with financial resources at their disposal are more likely to be able to afford the Canadianization of their experience or to acquire new skills. Lacking financial resources for daycare services and/or the cost of transportation, many women in this study were experiencing considerable difficulty in attending the ESL and computer-literacy program. Under these conditions, if they find a job it is usually in the informal, service-oriented sector of the economy, which profits from the labour of immigrant and other marginalized members of the society. In this sector exploitative relations are prevalent with low-paying jobs, and no possibility for personal or professional growth. Here skilled immigrant women are deskilled.

The immigrant women in this study expected to find skilled jobs or to acquire skills in one of the best societies among the G7 nations. Ironically, however, they seem to learn more about the negative impacts of globalization, "flexible" workforce, and "jobless" society, or *The End of Work* (Rifkin).

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[1]Wong's study illuminates the relationship between "Business Immigration Program" and Canadian economic policy.

[2]I found George Dei's articulation of principles of anti-racism education in his book, *The Theory and Practice of Anti-racism* very useful for this research.

[3]Based on "Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics: Encountering Low Income." "Low" was defined as income below Statistics Canada's "after-tax low income cut-offs," e.g. $23,460 for a family of four in an urban area with a population of 30,000 to 99,999 in 1996.

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EILEEN CURTEIS

The Wisdom Of Torn Skirts

Roots in my cellar
and more roots
enough to cover me
from the shame of living here
but I am not ashamed.

Fighting for life
I've gone down under the brambles
held love like a lily
seen terror
the poisoned blackberry
cut me up like a thorn
cut me down like a tree.

I've seen death on the highway
flown into her like a blind bird.
Driving down wrong roads
in search of the right shore
for a girl to walk on
I've crossed over the bridge
called ugly
to embrace the goodness in me.

My torn skirts
have aged me considerably.

The poem previously appeared in Grail.

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HEATHER DUFF

I Look In Your Library, Find Something By Susan Musgrave

I look in your library,
find something by Susan
Musgrave
assonance by candle
mildew and web

I wish on a Legion Hall
a place to eat blackberry
tarts
play Crazy Eights
for vets of the loony bin
sea witches and skinks

Alders bend low
hush, my breath
in the stillborn forest

I stare at your wall
at rust on machetes
bow and arrow
darts for a fir target
shiskebob skewer
pellet gun loaded for mice
World War I bayonet
with trough for running
blood

Next PMS
like library books
I will borrow your weapons
slay mental doctors
from my sordid past
dangle their heads
from birches that weep

Alders bend low—
hush, my breath
in the stillborn forest

Heather Duff's poetry has appeared in PRISM international, Textual Studies in Canada, Pottersfield Portfolio, Dandelion, Grain, *and is forthcoming in both* Descant *and* The Antigonish Review.