

# **Asian Immigrant Women and their informal work in Canada: The Process of change**

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**Abstract:** Highly educated immigrant women from Asia choosing to work for cash in Canada is an indicator of the fact that their employment and economic outcomes are not positive. Drawing from the empirical study, this paper discusses the reasons for work choices and outcomes of this work on immigrant women.

## **Research Focus and Purpose**

My doctoral research focuses on immigrant women from Asia and their work experiences in the informal sector<sup>17</sup> in urban Canada. Under the term “informal sector” a broad range of work activities takes place in different spaces and locations. In this study, the focus is on women involved in cash-based work at home or in their neighborhood. The reason immigrant women from Asia are selected for this study is because in the last two decades, the majority of immigrants who came to Canada are from Asia and over half of those are women. Immigrants are identified as crucial for the socio- economic development of Canada (Chui, 2012). However, research on immigrants and their employment experiences reveals that the labour market is highly inaccessible for the immigrant population, especially female immigrants of color, regardless of their previous educational and employment achievements (Guo, 2009; Mojab, 1999; Maitra, 2011). Trying to find alternatives to formal employment and the need for economic survival situate immigrants in a difficult position. The rationale behind choosing this specific population and topic for this research was that cash work is often invisible and is under-researched from a developed countries context. Furthermore, immigrant women's work in the informal sector is an important area to study, as it reveals how, why, and where informal work occurs, and how it is shaping their lives.

Highly educated immigrant women with and without professional work experiences from their home countries choosing to work for cash in Canada, is an indicator of the fact that they are going through a process of change. In the actual research, I have focused on three levels or aspects of change that occur in the life of immigrant women as a result of transnational migration. In this paper, to keep the focus on informal work specifically, I am only discussing one aspect of this change, that is the informal work choices, outcomes and learning for immigrant women of this study. The main activities that participants at the time of interview were involved in included child minding, catering, beauty care, cleaning, ethnic garment selling and community work.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In order to develop an analysis of the various dimensions of immigrant women's everyday life and work and the process of change, I draw from various theoretical strands and

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<sup>17</sup> All economic activities outside the formal Institutional framework is considered informal.

disciplines. I critically explored transformative learning theories (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 2000) antiracist feminist approaches to transformation (Carpenter & Mojab, 2011; Hooks, 1989) informal economy (Car & Chen, 2001), and immigration studies (Guo, 2009; Ng, 1996, 1989). The main three approaches of transformation examined and used in my theoretical framework are first the individual and psychological approaches to transformation, second, the feminist anti racist approaches and third, the global and socio-political approach. These three approaches portrayed different aspects of everyday/night life experiences and transformation that signified change in the individual, social and global scales. However, stemming from different disciplines and philosophical frameworks these approaches do not necessarily intersect with each other, which limits the scope of building a comprehensive theory of transformation that reflects multidimensional aspects of change that an individual faces as a result of life-altering situations like transnational migration. Therefore, I traced how change is perceived under each of these three approaches and intertwined it to develop a comprehensive model that helped me unfold the process of change among individuals in the margins specifically immigrant women of my study. My theoretical framework informed my data analysis and helped me understand and articulate what transformation is and how current theories of transformation fit in the context of immigrant women's life and work in the cash sector in Canada, and specifically, Toronto. Furthermore, it helped me explore how the notion of change, work and learning is approached and demonstrated in each of these perspectives examined.

### **Research Design**

My method of inquiry is qualitative and is collaborative in its approach as it draws from various elements of narrative inquiry and ethnographic approaches. The narrative inquiry method helped me participate in this research in a personal way. I used narrative style to discuss my data as it allowed me to preserve the voice of women and their experience without significant modification. Applying ethnographic approaches helped me address the issue of power imbalance between the research and the researched (Smith, 1987). Data was collected in three stages that ranged from individual interviews, focus groups and participant observation. There were 27 individual interviews and three focus groups (no. 20) with women between the ages of 30-45 who arrived in Canada between 1998-2009 and identify themselves as immigrants. Interviews were one-on-one, using semi-structured, in-depth, open-ended questions. The focus of inquiry was on their perceptions of work (paid and unpaid), life in Canada and integration process, and their work experience in the labour market before and after immigration. Furthermore, the research explored the types of activities women are involved in to supplement their family income or to find money for personal expenses and the reasons why they chose cash over other types of precarious work. My data analysis started with transcribing the data verbatim, and field notes were added to the transcribed data. I used an integrative mode of analysis to develop my themes and to lead the discussion followed.

### **Research Findings**

My research findings indicated that after transnational immigration, highly educated and /or professional immigrant women's choices become limited in terms of professional and personal growth and many are forced to take up menial jobs such as cash work for survival. However, immigrant women show agency and resistance to go above their current situation when choosing to work in the cash sector, viewing this only as a first step to financial and social

integration and are willing to go through a transformative process to refashion themselves to fit in the socio-cultural landscape of Canada.

Based on these findings informal work in this study represented the individual's needs and desires to be part of the wider society, a possible avenue to challenge the oppressive labour market. Additionally, it allowed them to sustain networks/ ties that help preserve their culture and traditions while adapting to the new cultural and social norms. Participants also view this as a way to increase social capital, engage in informal learning and create social cohesion without having to put too much resources and energy to the action plan. In a small yet significant way there is a collective movement in the community through these informal activities, and participants tend to believe this will open doors for more collective action. Drawing from these findings, I also argued that the concept of transformation is multidimensional for people who go through major socio- economic and political changes in their life, and therefore, a broader and more inclusive theory of transformative learning is necessary to address the issues of individuals and societies that are going through significant changes.

The most common reason that lead immigrant women to cash work is directly or indirectly shaped by labour market outcomes. Additionally, there are many underlying issues and interconnected factors such as women's role in the home, gender inequality, economic need and so on that also influence their choice. On a surface level, it can be viewed as primarily driven by a social and economic strategy to survive. Investigating informal work choices and activities reveals that their activities are often connected and mediated by their other responsibilities at home. Jameela, a professionally trained social worker from Pakistan, narrated this contradiction eloquently,

Life has two parts in my view: family and personal life is separate from our social life, yet it is one, that is the issue we women face.

While Jameela is able to do community work and be part of many leadership activities geared for women in the community, she feels it is only possible when she is outside and with others. At home, in her private space, she does caregiving work and household chores dutifully. However, she sees her work more often than not is extended beyond the walls of her home through her children or husband. Thus, Jameela also feels it is a complicated process and cannot be not easily separated as private. Informal work choices make it even more complicated because the work is often performed in the privacy of one's home, but the production is for outsiders. According to Jameela this needs a careful navigation to claim the right balance of what is private and public in the realm of informal work. However, many participants viewed informal work as not the end of the process but the beginning of a long stretch 'home'. She is aware of the particular location in which she is placed in terms of production and the struggle to break down the barriers this particular location creates for her. A number of specific positive and negative outcomes are discussed below:

#### **Income supplement**

It won't make you rich but it really helps you when you are kind of new in the country  
(Zeena, China)

The majority of the participants considered their informal work as a life-giving experience in Canada. Women find that one of the main advantages of this work is the financial contribution they are able to make to the family, and less dependency on their spouse for their personal needs. According to Suma (Sri Lanka) "it is a way to break out of poverty and move forward in life". For some, even if it is a small amount, it still represents value, confidence and a glimpse of hope.

#### **A learning opportunity**

Another big theme that came as a significant positive outcome of informal work is the opportunity for learning from each other. Many mentioned that being part of informal work has provided them with new opportunities for learning new skills and gaining more knowledge about Canada through their peers. For example, Lola (Philippines) (who moved from work outside the community to child-minding) found doing childcare work provided her with skills in teaching, acting and planning games for little children. She finds herself contributing further to the community when she shares her knowledge with her peers and young moms who come in touch with her.

### **Networking opportunity/Breaking isolation**

A third outcome identified as central to their work is the opportunity to network among community members and neighbors. For some the people they meet through this work opportunity is the only door to the outside world, to break isolation, create new friends, and meet their neighbours. For example, Soumya (Sri Lanka) who shut herself from the outside world after losing one of her babies to an unknown illness was invited to tutor one of her neighbour's children. This opened up a world of hope and is now providing a regular income for the household. Home tutoring not only took away her loneliness and depression it provided her with a network of people she could connect with if she needed support. Her dislike for Canada and its culture slowly disappeared as she met more and more people.

It was the u-turn in my life, I was at a point in my life I saw no meaning in going forward, no extended family... no friend. During or after my pregnancy, all I saw was the unfriendly nurses who visited me once in awhile and looked at me as if I was an alien...I didn't have anyone to share my pain with, they (hospital) never told me what happened.. Everything started changing for the better when my neighbour asked me if I would tutor her child after school....

### **A meaning making process**

For many women being part of the informal work also meant a meaningful way of engaging in community life. It is an opportunity to make sense of their lives and changes they experience after immigration through mutual dialogue and reflection with other women who are engaged in similar work or with their customers. Kamala (Nepal) interestingly notes this process, As we revamp our life in the new planet, this work creates room for negotiation with my husband on housework, opens up dialogue with my neighbour on our life in Canada...it helps me to think of our lives, our ideas and views on life and work in general...it gives meaning and purpose to our everyday life.

A majority of the participants did not view this work as a life-changing experience but an activity that reinstated their sense of purpose, made them visible in the community and improved their otherwise diminished presence as a valuable worker.

It gives me a reason to get up in the morning, kids are in school, husband is hardly home, this work motivates me to get out and be active (Selma, Bangladesh).

### **Freedom, flexibility and better status**

The other three main advantages participants pointed out as important to them by being engaged in some type of work that was not deemed as just house work were the sense of freedom they felt, the flexibility in time, and status within the family. The stories and experience of the women in this study indicates that commodification of household labour brings value to the worker. Although deemed informal and precarious in nature this provides a way forward for many who are involved in informal work (Carr and Chen, 2001, Losbly et al, 2002 discuss this aspect of informal work in detail). For immigrant women of this study, by becoming a

financially contributing member of the household means somehow regaining their lost status as a 'worker' due to immigration. This also meant for many a better status among their peers and friends. According to many participants, when they did formal work they also did a double day of work, however, in this work at least they see increased autonomy within their household and more negotiating power with their husbands.

### **Disadvantages of informal work**

For the participants who were part of the formal labour market back in their countries working in the informal sector is useful in terms of money and other gains but not in terms of their career development or growth. In fact they see being part of the informal work can diminish their chances of ever being employed again. This is because they believe the gap that it creates between their profession and current work is huge and is probably a hard one to fill. On the other hand they also point out this work is better than staying home idle. Another major concern women had was the lack of growth/expansion opportunities with this work unless there is infrastructure in place for making this into a full-blown business or a social enterprise. Invisibility of the work is also a concern for people who are hoping to get back to some form of formal work outside the community, as they fear they cannot put the experience and learning gained from this work into a resume or in a job application. This invisibility adds a further burden to their double day of work, which is part housework and part informal work with no clear boundaries. The comments on invisibility of work came mainly in relation to outside work where outside (formal) workers have the characteristics of a worker with clear time lines, rules and regulations.

Isolation from the broader community was another disadvantage people noted. Linda (Philippines), who used to work as an office assistant, articulated these as a 'vicious circle' people are forced to stay in and go round and round in a circle. While for many this is a clear break from the isolation and loneliness they felt in their private space yet this also caused an invasion to their private space as much of the work is done in their household. It only increased the contradictions women experienced in this change of relations between private and public, visible and invisible work. On one hand it freed you to mingle and meet new people and on the other hand it forced you to the confines of your own networks and community with not much option to be outside of them. Wage exploitation and competition was another issue people associated with this work. It is already lower priced but now with competition it brings the prices even lower. For example Betty (India) points out how she lost a regular customer to fierce competition with a neighbour.

I used to make roughly two hundred dollars a week and then one day she (customer) came and told me that she found someone else who will do it for hundred fifty... there is no loyalty, no commitment on both parties in this work, people come and go. You could never depend on it as the only source of income...

It is important to note that most of these women were part of the formal labour market before and they possess great human capital in terms of high educational credentials and work experience. Those special skills and education are being underutilized or not used at all in this translation of job and circumstances - that may be the biggest disadvantage of all. Another significant concern that permeates through these findings for me is that these are women who broke the stereotype and challenged the notion of traditional women back in their countries by entering the educational and employment scene. Here they are restrained to the boundaries of their household and immediate community in their everyday life. It can create a false and potentially harmful

outcome for immigrant women as it separates them further as racialized, inferior identities compared to their counter parts - 'Canadian' women.

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

This study will contribute significantly to adult education literature as it highlights various aspects of transformative learning paradigms drawing from several theoretical approaches. This study also emphasizes the challenges current theories have in addressing marginality and learning and the ways to address this challenge. For feminist studies this will positively add further challenges to the conceptualization of immigrant women of color and their everyday/night life in a western country. This research exposes the need for a marginality theory that examines different levels of marginalization experienced by people in different contexts to create learning frames and analytical tools that will make it inclusive for people whose voices are not traditionally heard. In addition, my research findings and analysis contribute to the immigration studies. This study also will contribute to the informal economy literature in a specific way as it contributes qualitative account of the data to a traditionally quantitative research field. I also hope this will influence future immigration policies and program development as well.

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