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Recommended Citation

Mojab, Shahrzad; Ng, Roxana; and Mirchandani, Kiran (2000). "Immigrant Women and Labour Flexibility: Resisting Training through Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/26>

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Immigrant Women and Labour Flexibility: Resisting Training through Learning

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Abstract: *This research roundtable focuses on the lives and experiences of immigrant women in the context of the casualisation of labour and job deskilling. The presenters document the failure of training programs to challenge the ghettoisation of immigrant women in contingent and peripheral jobs and focus on the ways in which women learn to resist racialized and gendered exclusion in state approaches to training.*

In the past two decades, much has been said about the change 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 involved in the production of knowledge and information. Intellectual property, it is claimed, is replacing physical property as a source of profit. This economy cannot thrive on a worker with a fixed skill working in a stable lifetime job. It rather demands a situation of shifting skills, that is, flexibility in an ever-changing job market. The notions of “flexibility” underlying the knowledge economy include just-in-time work processes, the fragmentation of jobs, and continuously shifting employer-employee relationships.

The knowledge economy calls for a radical overhaul of adult education. It requires an educational system that can provide “lifelong” learning for workers in an uncertain and unstable job market. These demands have created considerable debate among educators about the relationship between the educational system, workers, the market, and the state. Many educators view lifelong learning as a right of citizens, and as a life-sustaining undertaking. By contrast, many Western states have, since the 1980s, increasingly tried to gear adult education to the interests of the market. The market, in turn, continues to depend on profits in an environment which encourages globalization, concentration of ownership, and labour “flexibility.” These interests constitute a political struggle between citizens and the state/market power bloc.

This roundtable focuses on three studies which explore training provided to immigrant women. The presenters argue for a need to situate discussions of training within the broader context of globalization, economic restructuring and labour market flexibility. The following is a summary of these studies.

Shahrzad Mojab – Immigrant Women in the “Knowledge Economy”:

The Dynamics of Skilling and De-skilling

This study provides a critique of the theory of “flexible” labour force by examining the case of a number of immigrant women who were undergoing training aimed at introducing them to the job market in a major Canadian city. Most of the immigrant women who participated in this study were highly skilled “knowledge workers” with considerable professional experience in their countries of origin. They failed, however, to benefit from the knowledge economy. How can we account for the failure of immigrant knowledge workers in the “information economy” of Canada? Many researchers look at racism, sexism, language barriers, and high unemployment rates as factors that constrain the access of immigrant women to the job market. While such obstacles are certainly present, Shahrzad Mojab argues that a major source of exclusion is the “new economy” as well as state policies on re-training immigrant women for the job market. The new economy tends to both skill and de-skill the labour force. The problem is by no means an educational one, and cannot be addressed without a major restructuring of the economy.

Roxana Ng – Training or Learning?

Reflections from the Perspectives of Garment Workers

Roxana Ng notes that training has been advanced as the solution to work restructuring and the redeployment of workers in the new millennium. In the case of the garment industry in Toronto, where the majority of sewers are immigrant women from Asia, training has been firstly inaccessible and secondly ineffectual in improving the work security, wage level, or working conditions of sewing machine operators. Why? Roxana Ng offers some answers to this question, and examines initiatives undertaken by the Homeworkers’ Association

to involve workers in non-formal education experiences. She explores what and how workers learn in these settings, and discusses the pedagogical and political implications of her findings. The discussion is based on a four-year project on the informal learning activities of garment workers in Toronto, Canada.

**Kiran Mirchandani – Self-employment
Training Programs in Gendered
and Racialized Labour Markets**

Kiran Mirchandani challenges recent reports on women's self-employment in Canada which paint an optimistic picture of the gains made to challenge labour force exclusion and discrimination. Underlying many of these media reports and public policy documents is a celebratory tone through which self-employment is seen

to be 'immune' from the discriminatory practices which are present in the labour market. Training programs often reproduce this optimism. Accordingly, self-employment is presented as an emancipatory vehicle allowing for the upward mobility of groups which are discriminated against in traditional labour market jobs. Based on interviews with self-employed women, Kiran Mirchandani explores the multiple ways in which race and gender processes impact self-employment. She documents the need for training programs first, to address the ways in which women who are self-employed are affected by racialized and gendered exclusions in the labour market and second, to explore the forms of exclusion implicit in policies aimed at facilitating business start-up.