

A Journey of Her Own

A Critical Analysis of Learning Experiences Among Immigrant Women

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A critical analysis of learning experiences among immigrant women: assessing transformative learning and women's resilience in community-based education programs

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study that provides insight into the learning experiences of internationally-trained professional women from Israel, Iran, and the countries of the former USSR. The study focuses on analysing women's transformative learning experiences and how those experiences may impact their resilience and well-being. The findings of this research inform the development of learner-oriented community-based programs for immigrant women and provide an opportunity for critical reflection on predominant assumptions about immigrant women. In addition, this study challenges the "deficient immigrant" approach and explores the concept of women's empowerment in relation to cultural contexts and gender-power dynamics that influence immigrant women's resettlement and learning.

Keywords: immigrant women's learning, transformative learning, immigrant women's resettlement, empowerment, resilience, critical feminist theory

Introduction

This paper offers a transformative learning framework for analysing and understanding immigrant women's experiences of learning and resettlement in Canada. The research project is centred on investigating the learning experiences of immigrant women who have been involved in various community education programs, with the aim of discerning the transformative potential of such programs. In this research, I explore which experiences women describe as transformative, what constitutes those transformative learning experiences, and how those experiences impact their resilience and well-being.

In adult education literature, transformative learning is defined as a learning process that transforms existing frames of reference to make them more inclusive, reflective, open, and able to change (Mezirow, 2000). It is generally understood that transformative learning happens when we encounter an event that calls into question what we believe and leads us to revise our perspective (Cranton & Wright, 2008). The occurrence of such an event has is described by Mezirow (2000) as "disorienting dilemma".

One of my working assumptions was that transformative learning may promote the development of resilience among immigrant women and may therefore contribute positively to their resettlement outcomes. Developing resilience involves finding new and enhancing existing behavioural and psychological strategies in order to maintain health and well-being (Leipert & Reutter, 2005).

Dossa (2004) argues that, while immigrant communities are increasingly constructed as "vulnerable," little is understood about what makes immigrants resilient and which strategies help them to maintain this resilience in adverse circumstances and to overcome systemic barriers and odds (Beiser, 2005). Magro (2009), exploring the learning experiences of newcomers and refugees,

points to the potential for transformative learning to serve as a framework for understanding resilience and empowerment within the resettlement experience.

As a subset of the immigrant population, immigrant women are involved in numerous non-formal educational opportunities through which they experience informal and incidental learning, which is highly influenced by the socio-cultural context of these opportunities. Interpretations of such learning and consequent actions are highly influenced by the social and cultural norms of others and may be distorted by power dynamics (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Hence, the focus in this study is on women's learning and resilience in gender-based and cultural contexts.

I used Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2000) and critical feminist theory to understand the learning experiences of immigrant women. In applying these theories, I was cognisant of the limitations both theories may have for analysing women's stories. I therefore paid special attention to current critiques of Mezirow's theory as lacking a focus on women's learning and as overemphasizing cognitive process and logic in describing transformative learning. For this reason, I chose a critical feminist lens to address the shortcomings of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, but I was also aware that critical feminist theory may favour Western notions of empowerment for women. To address this issue, I focused closely on the issues of gender, race, and culture to ensure a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and power within an intercultural context.

Research methods

This is a qualitative study based on a small, purposeful sampling of participants. I used a criterion-based selection strategy to ensure access to information-rich cases based on the following sampling criteria: (1) female immigrants, either permanent residents or refugee claimants with a minimum of 2 years of residency in Canada, (2) experience of participation in at least one educational program for immigrants, such as ESL classes or one of the various training and skills development courses offered by community and settlement agencies. In order to be selected for the study, participants had to meet both sampling criteria.

Altogether, seven women participated in individual, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. Four participants of the study came from the former countries of the USSR, two came from Israel, and one participant is originally from Iran. During the interviews, I used an arts-based activity, the self-portrait projective technique, to help start the conversation, trigger memories, and gain insight into different levels of experience (Bagnoli, 2009). At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to draw a quick self-portrait. I asked the women to show in their drawings how they see themselves at this moment in their lives and how they saw themselves a few years ago, just before they immigrated to Canada. We then had a conversation about the differences between the two images, what happened in between, and

which learning experiences in various community programs contributed to the changed image.

While presenting research findings in this paper, I often refer to the women by name and use quotes from their narratives. To protect participants' identities, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant.

Summary of Findings

Participants' reflections on the images of "before immigration" and "now" helped to start conversations about each woman's experiences during their resettlement journey. The change was typically described as a *loss of professional identity* and, in some cases *social status*, but also as an *increased assertiveness and independence*. The themes of loss and of increased assertiveness and independence were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they often accompanied each other, pointing to the fact that the loss of status did not necessarily result in decreased self-esteem and self-sufficiency.

In analysing women's responses to their learning experiences, the main theme that emerged was that of *helpful* and *not-helpful* learning conditions. The women described helpful learning conditions as those that support:

1) *Learning from others* – with regard to the value of learning from their peers and teachers. Describing community programs, all of the participating women often referred to meeting other immigrants as an important source of learning, not necessarily in terms of receiving new factual information but in relation to learning about different perspectives and views.

2) *Interactive learning*. When asked which aspects of program design were most helpful for women in their learning, participants noted the value of collaborative learning that involves interactive methods such as hands-on activities, role playing, group projects, and group discussions.

3) *Identifying skills and strengths*. One learning condition described as being particularly helpful was the validation of the women's existing knowledge and the facilitation of learning environments that helped them to identify and articulate their strengths and skills. This was described by the women both as an important aspect of the learning environment and as a positive learning outcome in itself that led to increased self-esteem, confidence, and eventually to improved employment opportunities.

Not-helpful learning conditions were described as those where the information and material delivered were of a low quality or "too basic" and/or "not applicable" to the women's real-life circumstances. This point was especially stressed by those women who had gone through rigorous academic training in their home countries and had achieved a high professional status there. The participants also described how they sometimes felt patronised by program facilitators/instructors and how their skills and capabilities were either downplayed or not acknowledged at all. One of the participants, Ella, shared her observation that the experience of program participants is often not validated

and that the content of the programs shows the underlying assumption that immigrants are un- or undereducated. This dismissal of pre-existing skills and strengths generally conveys an attitude of distrust towards internationally trained professionals.

The theme of training/workshops being unable to deliver intended outcomes was discussed in connection with job search workshops. The women described the job search workshops as too general and insufficient. In some cases, these workshops and seminars were not able to deliver on certain expectations of outcomes that had been established.

Transformative change

When discussing the women’s learning experiences after they had immigrated to Canada, I was looking for those parts of their narratives that pointed to the change or shift in the participant’s frame of reference in relation to her understanding of herself. I was particularly interested in their sense of self-location and in their understanding of mechanisms of power within structures of class, race, gender, and/or alternative approaches to living, as well as in their sense of possibilities for social justice, peace, and personal joy (O’Sullivan, 2002).

During my data analysis, I identified five participants who described a change in their frame of reference that constituted transformative learning. The depth of transformative learning varied for each participant. Three areas of transformation were identified, with two participants experiencing transformation in more than one area and one participant experienced transformation in all three areas.

Participants	Farida		
	Veronica		Reconsideration of cultural beliefs and values in relation to gender roles
	Aida, Alice	Ella	
Area of transformation	Acceptance of different cultural/social groups	Recognition of systemic issues/oppression	

Figure 1. Mapping research participants and the area of transformation

Discussion

When reflecting on their experiences following immigration, the participating women generally described themselves as “changed” in one way or another. Their transformations were connected to a number of learning experiences that I classified as 1) learning about self; and 2) learning about others, which consisted

of diversity learning and intercultural learning. It is important to note that these experiences did not occur in isolation from each other, but were intertwined and often informed each other.

Learning about self

Almost all of the women in the research study reported that their sense of self changed, leaving them with a sense of the loss of their “previous self”, whether professionally, socially, or culturally, but also with an increased sense of independence and assertiveness. This increased independence was often prompted by reduced external social networks, which led the women to increasingly rely upon themselves. Often, this new independence called for a revision of certain values, especially those related to traditional gender roles and the behaviour associated with or belonging to certain social classes. During their resettlement years, the women learned that they had to become more proactive when dealing with their everyday problems.

In various ways, this *learning about self*, which led to increased assertiveness and self-esteem, was supported by those learning conditions that women described as helpful. In particular, methods that supported women in identifying and validating their skills and knowledge, as well as those that promoted group work and knowledge sharing, aided the process of *learning about self*. These conditions were opposed to a didactic approach based on “perceived lack of knowledge”, which immigrant women described as unhelpful and disempowering.

“Starting from scratch”, without the usual support systems and social safety nets, prompted the women to discover new facets of themselves. For the interviewed immigrant women, this *learning about self*, although under stressful circumstances, contributed to their assertiveness and increased self-esteem. Once they had affirmed themselves as more independent, flexible, and confident, the process led them to a broader worldview and an expanded frame of reference that prepared the ground for learning more about others.

Learning about “others” – Diversity learning and Intercultural learning

Learning about others is a recurring theme that was strongly articulated by all of the research participants. Learning experiences related to learning about others can be divided in two subgroups: *diversity learning* and *intercultural learning*. *Diversity learning* includes exposure to types of diversity beyond language and culture, such as race, class, education, religion, social background, and sexuality, while *intercultural learning* describes learning in a cross-cultural context. Although the two categories significantly overlap, I intentionally make a distinction between them, as the learning about others detailed in this study was not always limited to intercultural learning and often included learning about other types of diversity, sometimes within one particular culture.

All of the women emphasised exposure to other people’s experiences, including other immigrants and residents of the host country, through friendship,

collective group work, participation in discussion, and simply sharing one space, as instrumental for their transformative learning. Daloz has described opportunities for “constructive engagement with otherness” (2000: 110) as instrumental in developing empathetic connections with people who are different from ourselves. Exposure to the realities and opinions of other people as a learning experience that triggered a transformative process was facilitated through a number of venues, such as community group programs (including employment, resettlement, and ESL programs), volunteering programs, and the workplace. Although not necessarily in a linear fashion, *learning about others* was often preceded by *learning about self* in terms of affirming one’s individuation and authenticity, described in the section above.

Exposure to other people’s experiences and the way they interpret them led to a number of transformative outcomes. It made Aida reconsider the stereotypes she held about people of colour. For Ella, connecting with other immigrants and finding similarities in their experiences, regardless of the country of origin, led to a realisation of systemic issues, such as lack of foreign credentials recognition. For Veronica and Alice, it led to acceptance of other racial and cultural groups. In the case of Farida, it served as a major *disorienting dilemma* that made her reconsider her views on gender roles and, subsequently, completely change her frame of reference, which allowed her to become open to all groups of people, regardless of who they are and where they come from.

Intercultural learning

Intercultural learning, especially in the context of immigration, has certain specific aspects that, which I describe separately within the context of reference to transformative learning.

From the perspective of transformative learning theory developed by Mezirow (2000), immigration can be seen as a *disorienting dilemma* or a *trigger event*, as it often confronts the immigrant with many experiences that are outside of the ordinary. The *disorienting dilemma* may manifest itself as a general culture shock, the intensity of which depends on the breadth and depth of differences between the domestic culture and the host country. In this context, transformative learning is catalyzed by a cross-cultural or intercultural process through which the individual, encountering a new culture with beliefs and values that differ significantly from her own, must question her frame of reference, which sometimes leads to the development of new viewpoints. Chang, Chen, Huang, and Yuan (2011), when studying transformative learning amongst international service workers, described the cross-cultural experience as a major trigger for transformative learning and referred to Piaget (1975), who argued from a psychological framework point of view that people must adjust their schemas in order to adapt to a new environment.

Among the research participants I interviewed, Farida’s experience illustrates cross-cultural learning well. The other women also reported elements of intercultural learning, but only Farida stressed the significant difference between her cultural experiences in Iran, her home country and those in

Canada. During her narrative she revealed experience of *disorienting dilemma* once she began to compare her cultural experience as a woman in Iran, her home country, with the experiences of women in Canada. As a result, she had a profound shift in her mindset that began with the gender stereotypes she had held. Farida indicated her place of volunteering and work as her major source of learning. It seems that the potential for transformation was created in these supportive environments, where Farida affirmed herself as a valued and valuable individual. Farida reflected on her observation that women are treated differently in Canada. For example, when she was helping someone from her community to fill out a form for a child tax benefit she was surprised to learn that “all money go to mom’s account!” She gradually started to realise that she “has a voice” and that her voice “matters too”. Farida’s cross-cultural learning was coupled with learning about herself; her increased assertiveness increased her reflection process and helped her to progress to another level of her transformation where, upon examining her own oppression, she was able to reflect on the possibilities for others. Upon her reflection on the systemic oppression of others, be it women, immigrant, people of colour or LGBTQ people, Farida was able to advance to a more accepting frame of reference, and she is now able “to accept people for who they are” and to “open up”.

Importantly, both the *Learning about self* and *Learning about others* that led to transformation occurred under what the women described as “helpful learning conditions”, where the themes of *learning from others* and *interactive learning* occurred within aspects that are viewed by immigrant women as necessary for creating helpful learning conditions.

Women’s resilience and vulnerability through critical feminist theory framework

One of my working assumptions for this research was that transformative learning may contribute to the development of resilience among immigrant women. Resilience is defined as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Anderson, 2004, p.53) and can be viewed as a defence mechanism that enables people to thrive in the face of adversity (Davydov, Stewart, Ritchie & Chadiou, 2010). Developing resilience involves finding new and enhancing existing behavioural and psychological strategies in order to maintain health and well-being (Leipert & Reutter, 2005). An active approach to solving life’s problems, the ability to perceive negative experiences constructively, self-knowledge, and self-reliance are key characteristics of resilient individuals (Wright, 1996; Polk, 1997; Wagnild & Young, 1990).

The immigrant women whom I interviewed demonstrated remarkable adaptation capabilities and optimism. Women who have experienced transformation appear more resilient in resettlement because they demonstrate openness to alternatives and new experiences, are more likely to see mistakes as learning opportunities, and have a tolerance for ambiguity. They tend to explore new career paths, seek educational opportunities, participate actively in community life and, eventually, become leaders and mentors.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that transformation is a complex process where the intersections of culture, gender, and power play an important role. Some participating women stated that while “changing” they developed depression, a loss of identity, and a sense of becoming “a worse” person. When probed as to what supported them through this process, they did not name any external factors of support such as community, role models, or certain community programs. Instead, these women cited their sense of pride and independence as the factors that supported their resilience. They described themselves as “becoming tougher”, “more assertive”, and “independent” during their resettlement years. Establishing self-reliance through taking on new roles, effectively utilising existing abilities and opportunities, and looking for alternative options are all strategies these women used when developing their resilience during their resettlement years.

When studying how women support their health in northern, geographically-isolated settings, Leipert and Reutter found that “becoming hardy” (56) was an important part of how women maintained their resilience. Hardiness was described as increased confidence and the ability to carry on in spite of adversity. Similar to the immigrant women interviewed, women in these northern settings also had to cope with social isolation and limited options. Despite the great differences in the geographical and social environments of northern women and women from Toronto, there is a strong similarity in the way that women from both studied groups chose to respond to challenges, which centred upon taking a positive attitude and establishing self-reliance in order to advance their ability to control their situation. Toronto immigrant women emphasised the importance of supportive relationships with the teachers, peers, colleagues, and family members who played a vital part in their growing independence. Leipert and Reutter’s study also indicated that access to social support systems and to community resources was vital to the health and resilience of northern women.

In some cases, developing assertiveness and independence involved transformation for immigrant women. It is important to analyse these women’s experiences of transformative learning from the perspective of critical feminist theory, taking into consideration the interlocking mechanisms of power, gender, and culture. From this vantage point, immigrant women’s transformation is understood as enabling them to reclaim their voice and achieve a sense of empowerment. In feminist literature, the transformative experience is often described as “finding a voice” and is closely linked to women’s narratives (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Tisdell, 1998; Stalker, 2005). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) have theorized that in such experiences, women move from silence to a form of constructed knowing. When transformative, women’s learning is also characterized by a shift from inauthenticity to being true to oneself (Loughlin, in Hayes & Flannery, 2000) and includes an increased awareness of the limitations of societal expectations and structures imposed on women (Elias, in Hayes & Flannery, 2000). This all resonates with the transformative learning experiences that immigrant women described in the interviews through their reflections on how they “had to change”.

Women's transformations often begin with an individual first confronting her own hegemonic beliefs about what is appropriate and/or not appropriate for a woman in a traditional gender-stratified society. Once her new identity has been renegotiated at the individual level, she must then confront the hegemonic beliefs of the society in which she lives. Depending on the culture of a woman's immediate family/tribal/ethnic community, the risks involved with such transformations can be significant. Many women come to Canada from traditionally patriarchal societies, and even in those countries that are considered to be relatively advanced in terms of women's rights, much depends on geographical region or on the culture within the individual's family. Overall, the gendered and cultural norms that define the lives of women abroad are not necessarily congruent with mainstream Canadian culture (VanderPlaat, 2007).

Farida's narrative of transformative learning is a powerful example of transformation and of the struggle an individual goes through when she has to renegotiate her culture and religion and relinquish certain parts of her core identity. Before she was able to embrace change, Farida had to confront her own internalised beliefs about which actions and roles are appropriate for a woman. For a while, she felt as if she "was becoming a worse person" and described her experience as a "painful process" that made her depressed. She described her supportive relationship with her husband as the main source of strength that helped her to overcome depression. Although Farida did not explicitly mention her workplace/place of volunteering as a source of support, it is important to note that in the same interview she referred to the community program where she volunteered and attended training as the place that provided her with a sense of belonging. She also stressed that people from her own ethnic community would not encourage her "change" and that she therefore found a new community of belonging in her workplace. In her interview, Farida emphasised how crucial it was for her personal growth and development to find a place of belonging outside of her immediate ethnic community:

"...when I came to Canada we didn't have anyone here and people you see they are from your own community and they have the same mind sets so they don't really want you to change. They want to keep you a person you were. Then my workplace people became friends, my co-workers became my life" (Extract from interview with Farida).

Farida's renegotiated identity was obviously in conflict with certain patriarchal values and beliefs that remained operative in her ethnic community.

The implications of such a juxtaposition between the traditional cultural beliefs and practices of migrant communities and those of dominant Western systems, and of the ways in which beliefs and values of ethnic cultures intersect with gender and religious identities/roles, have been discussed by Williams and Labonte (2007). Their work has brought attention to the fact that when women from traditionally patriarchal societies immigrate to less patriarchal Western

countries, the patriarchal patterns within ethnic communities may prevent women from accessing educational, employment, and leadership opportunities that the new host culture might offer to women, albeit to a limited extent. Moreover, by trying to avail themselves of these opportunities, women may jeopardise their position and the kinship safety nets available to them within their ethnic communities. In a study of Ghanaian women, Wong (2000) illustrated the challenges these women faced when their increased consciousness of rights, which had emerged as part of their resettlement experience, collided with their traditional values. Women in the study had to balance their newly acquired need for individual freedom with certain social scripts that dictated constraint. Farida's advanced education and economic position allowed her to renegotiate her new role and behaviour, but for a woman in a less advantageous situation, with limited education and financial means, the outcome of transformation could have been different.

Gender bias and structural issues play an important role, from economic, social, and cultural perspectives, in shaping immigrant women's vulnerability in their host country. Iredale (2005) has described how family structures and obligations, combined with gender bias, undermine immigrant women's ability to access assessment of their professional credentials and training, while Persad and Lukas (2002) identify religion and racism as factors influencing women's experiences of the labour force in their host country. Similarly, Jiwani (2005) presents an example of young immigrant women's vulnerability caused by racism from peers in host communities, combined with domestic stress caused by the need to conform with their own cultural communities. Displacement of traditional cultural norms and social scripts governing gender-appropriate behaviour increases the risk of family violence for immigrant women (Brawnridge & Halli, 2002; Dion & Dion, 2001; Status of Women Canada, 1998; Wong, 2000 in VanderPlaat, 2007). In response to these trends, Moghaddam et al. (2002) have noted the relationship between discrimination and psychological stress, and Dyck (2004) has called for the recognition of immigrant women's racialised/gendered identity as a determinant of health.

Due to the factors described above, immigrant women's identities are often constructed as 'vulnerable' by policy makers, service providers, educators, and academics. Lancaster (1999) notes that vulnerability is not a personal deficiency, but a combined effect of many factors over which an individual has minimal control. Immigrant women's vulnerability is the sum of such factors, where economic hardships and a lack of larger social support networks, especially those available outside of ethnic/language communities, play an important role. When trying to advance economically or educationally in order to increase self-reliance as a part of their resilience development strategy, migrant women may risk damaging those supportive kinship networks available to them within their ethnic communities. Economic and educational advancement may take years before it translates into tangible benefits, while the risks of losing these protective social networks are more imminent. The weakening or total loss of protective networks within their communities, combined with economic hardships and barriers to accessing education and employment, further

marginalises immigrant women. Socio-cultural, political, and economic environments are ultimately the main contributors to immigrant women's vulnerability, exerting a much larger influence than their individual "deficiencies", be it the lack of proficiency in a host country's language, or an absence of domestic work experience or education. Yet it is extremely difficult for women to influence factors responsible for their vulnerability, especially within social and political systems that are new to them. Therefore, women's reliance on the immediate, protective social networks available within their ethnic or language communities becomes more pronounced.

Even as they develop their resilience, women still remain vulnerable to health and other risks. Indeed, the very process of resilience development through building self-reliance may jeopardise the support women have in their ethnic/language communities and exacerbate their vulnerability.

On the other hand, women may consciously choose to conform to certain behavioural norms and social scripts that are considered gender-appropriate in patriarchal communities as a means of securing access to community support. This may be done at the expense of other options that would allow women to advance economically, whether through access to education, employment, or leadership programs. Transformative learning undoubtedly opens doors to more opportunities for women and contributes to women's resiliency by promoting the development of assertiveness and self-reliance. However, academics and practitioners need to be cognisant of both the benefits and the risks of transformative learning for women renegotiating their traditional gender roles.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study suggests that immigrant women learn best in an environment where their strengths and wealth of expertise are appreciated. The women valued learning conditions that supported their personal development and growth and felt that it was extremely important for them to be involved in practical activities that helped them to reaffirm their existing skills while applying them in the new environment. The "deficient immigrant" approach, in which women's skills and experiences are dismissed as insufficient or irrelevant, was extremely disempowering for the respondents of this study. In particular, the women described as "unhelpful" those training programs that provided general and basic information without taking into account the high level of expertise among internationally trained immigrants. In addition, the disconnect between training content and the realities of life for immigrant women was also described as disempowering. Training programs that emphasize individual skills development while neglecting the impact of systemic barriers for successful immigrant settlement are insufficient in meeting the needs of immigrant women. Schugurensky (2006) has written that it is important to see new immigrants not as strictly "economic producers and consumers", but as informed and critically aware individuals (Magro, 2009). The abrupt changes in cultural, social, and economic environment immigrant women experience often cause them to revise

and review their previous frame of reference in order to survive and integrate in unfamiliar cultural contexts. From this perspective, transformative learning theory provides a better lens for understanding immigrant women's learning. Importantly, however, this study suggests that the dynamic of women's transformative learning is not as linear or rational as described in Mezirow's theory, and argues that transformative learning is not necessarily triggered by a specific *disorienting dilemma*. Rather, the transformation occurs over time as a gradual process in response to the accumulation of various experiences connected to encountering forms of diversity that include, but are not limited to, cultural diversity.

The study shows that diverse relationships with peers, teachers, colleagues, and mentors played a vital role in creating conditions conducive to transformative learning. It was essential for the women's learning that they were able to share their ideas, experiences, and emotions. Two factors that played an important role in supporting transformative learning among immigrant women were: 1) their exposure to diversity of various kinds, including, but not limited to, intercultural diversity; and 2) their meaningful interaction with diversity. Without the latter, transformative learning is undermined. The reflection necessary for transformative learning was also far more likely to occur in learning environments that promoted dialogue and meaningful engagement with diversity. In a study describing the intercultural learning experiences of teachers, Jokikokko (2009) similarly found dialogical contexts to be an important condition for fostering transformative learning.

Awareness of gender and cultural context is no less important for understanding immigrant women's transformative learning. For practitioners working with immigrant women, it is important to use gender as a lens for understanding immigrant women's experiences, especially those that relate to women's transformation and empowerment. For immigrant women, dynamics of gender, identity, and power within and outside traditional cultural systems can both promote and undermine their capacities (Williams & Labonte, 2007). Transformative learning can support migrant women's capacities by enabling them to 'find their voice' and to both reaffirm and reassert themselves as individuals. At the same time, it can alienate women from their traditional sources of support, thereby undermining their safety and well-being.

Using gender as a lens for understating immigrant women learners' experiences will provide more insight into how to appropriately structure and present material, whether for employment-related skills development, learning English as a second language, or health education initiatives. Creating a safe and open atmosphere where women feel supported in sharing their ideas and experiences is significant for supporting women's learning. In particular, such an environment plays an important role in supporting women's reflection, which that in turn supports their transformative learning process that is often triggered by their encounters with diversity.

Transformative learning occurring during immigrant women's resettlement is often a painful and alienating experience for women, one which calls for more

specific support and yet is often overlooked in program planning. For practitioners working with immigrant women, it is important to be aware of the fragility of these women's social support networks. Practitioners must recognize how structural inequities may condition women toward taking certain courses of action. These choices may seem incongruent with a Western "empowerment model", but are nevertheless survival strategies that ensure women's well-being within the cultural system to which they originally belong. Adult educators, especially those working within health and social service organizations, must devote greater and more critical attention to the way that power-culture dynamics inform the concept of empowerment (Williams & Labonte, 2007).

Practitioners working with immigrant women must be aware of the resilience strategies women employ in order to succeed in resettlement, and must be prepared to advocate for immigrant women in order to address the systemic factors that affect women's resettlement outcomes. Moreover, immigrant women need to have consistent and meaningful input into planning and evaluation of the programs created for them. Creating an environment that is conducive to transformative learning for immigrant women means providing these women with meaningful experiences with various kinds of diversity that challenge them to think of issues from the perspective of others. This needs to be done with special attention to the relationships between students within the group and between women and teachers. Although there are no clear-cut strategies that guarantee transformative learning outcomes, the approaches that foster authenticity, creativity, collaboration, reflection, and individuation provide a learning environment conducive to transformative learning, enhanced resilience, and mental well-being. Strategies such as dialog, opportunities for action and doing, working in small groups and/or cohorts, arts-based approaches, and exposure to alternative perspectives need to be incorporated in community education programs for immigrant women. Ideas derived from transformative learning theory can be applied to many dimensions of the immigration experience: psychological, social, and cultural integration, language acquisition, neighbourhood revitalisation, and structural changes in institutions that give rise to increased opportunities for women to utilize their potential (Magro, 2009).

The significance of the role of teachers/instructors also needs to be acknowledged, as the role of adult educators working with immigrant women is much more than that of a technical instructor. This role also involves being an advocate, a counselor, a co-learner, and a mentor, and requires practitioners to possess empathy, openness to diversity, and a tolerance for ambiguity (Magro, 2009). It appears to be extremely important for many women to have lasting relationships with their teachers that extend beyond program hours. Adult educators working with immigrant women need to bring their authentic selves into the classrooms. Authentic teaching goes beyond transmitting information, however valuable that information may be, as women also greatly value the relationships they develop with their teachers. The findings of this study provide an enriched understanding of learning experiences among immigrant women, including experiences of transformative learning. This study will assist practitioners working with immigrant women and will contribute to a fuller

account of the complexities of women's resettlement, including the influence of structural barriers, the impact of the "deficient immigrant" approach to program planning, the paradoxes of empowerment, and the risks involved with women's transformative learning. The critical feminist theory lens and qualitative research methods employed in this study were particularly useful in giving voice to women's experiences and in analyzing their significance. The use of the self-portrait projective technique, an arts-based technique employed during interviews, was instrumental in prompting the women in the study to reflect on their resettlement and enabling them to provide a rich picture of their experiences. This study has the potential to inform the development of learner-oriented, community-based programs for immigrant women and will encourage reflections on predominant assumptions about immigrant women by challenging the "deficient immigrant" approach. It will also encourage rethinking the concept of women's empowerment in relation to the cultural contexts and gender-power dynamics that influence immigrant women's resettlement and learning.

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