Gendered geographies of power: Exploring immigrant women engineers’ career pathways with transnational sensitivity

Abstract: Maintaining a professional career is a consistent challenge facing professional immigrants in the industrialized West, particularly women immigrants trained in traditionally male-dominated professions such as engineering. Given this context, this paper focuses on the challenges faced by 11 women engineers from eight different countries, and the strategies they undertook to retain or regain a professional life after immigrating to Canada. I argue that the career pathways of the women are typically paved with the labour of love and the labour of learning; the former rooted in the gendered organization of home and work, the latter in response to Western-centric recognition practices in the host labour market. I also show that while the women share some common challenges, they are differentially positioned within matrixes of power; gender, race, class and other social relations of differences such as culture and language intersect with one another in converging and yet complex ways to shape differential opportunities for the women. This paper is informed by the transnational perspective of gendered geographies of power, which focus on the social agency individuals exercise to effect changes in their social locations.

Introduction

To achieve a competitive edge in the global economy, many OECD countries have adopted preferential immigration policies to appeal to highly trained professionals and skilled workers (OECD, 2014). By the turn of the 21st century, the United States ceased to be the only “magnet” country for the “best and the brightest”. In addition to traditionally immigrant receiving countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, the EU and some Asian countries have also seen an increasing growth in the number of skilled immigrants (Schachar, 2006). Accompanying this skilled turn in immigration policies is a trend noted as the feminization of immigration – that is, the number of immigrant women has been on the rise. Almost half of immigrants in OECD countries are now women (OECD, 2014). While women were previously considered secondary immigrants trailing behind their male spouses, woman today move not only for family reasons, but also independently for job-related purposes (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2007). Furthermore, they are trained not only in professions traditionally associated with women – such as nursing, and education – but also in male-dominated professions such as sciences and engineering (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005).

Despite the competition for skilled immigrants on the global scale, immigrants who move to the industrialized world find it a consistent challenge to integrate into the host labour markets (OECD/EU, 2015). In virtually all OECD and EU countries, immigrants with higher-education degrees struggle more than their native-born counterparts to enter their fields of training (OECD/EU, 2015). This is true especially for highly educated immigrant women. In the United States, Lopez’s statistical study (2012) shows that highly skilled immigrant women in general experience a double-earnings
penalty by virtue of their gender and nativity status. However, a report by the National Sciences Foundation (2014) shows the scenario for the sciences and engineering fields is even more complicated. In 2011, foreign-born individuals living in the United States (ranging from long-term residents with strong roots to recent immigrants to the country) accounted for 21% of workers in nonacademic sciences and engineering occupations, which was higher than their representation in the overall population (13%). Despite this generally positive picture, the same report shows that in 2010, women of all backgrounds constituted only 13% of the workforce in engineering. This reflects that a persistent gender gap within the workforce employed in the sciences and engineering (National Science Foundation, 2014).

In Canada, Adsera and Ferrer’s analysis of the Canadian census (2014) suggests that labour market integration and wage assimilation is a long-term process for immigrant women. When it comes to the fields of engineering, internationally trained women engineers, according to Boyd et al.’s (2016) analysis of 2011 National Household Survey, are more likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts or Canadian-born women; they are also less likely to hold occupations directly related to their engineering training. Given these findings, Boyd et al. (2016) argue that gender and nativity intersect with re-accreditation requirements to produce barriers for internationally trained women engineers.

Within the large trend of deskilling and de-professionalization, qualitative researchers in the developed West - Cooke (2009) in the UK; Ho (2006) and Webb (2015) in Australia; Liversage (2009) in Denmark; Pio (2005) and Meares (2010) in New Zealand; and Man (2005), Salaff & Greve (2004); Shan (2009a; 2009b) in Canada - have started charting how skilled or professional immigrant women manage their career lives after immigration. To date, however, existing research tends to focus on the experiences of women from particular ethnic origins in specific, and often bounded, host labour markets. There is a lack of sensitivity to both diversity among women and the context of transnationalism which may also contribute to the shaping of women immigrants’ career experiences. To address these issues, in this paper, I take the transnational perspective of gendered geographies of power (Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Pessar & Mahler, 2003) to examine the experiences of 11 immigrant women engineers from eight different countries. I will focus on both the barriers the women faced and the strategies they exercised, giving special attention to the matrixes of power relations within which women are located.

**Gendered geographies of power: conceptual framework**

To explore immigrant women’s career experiences with transnational sensitivity, I refer to Mahler and Pessar's (Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Pessar & Mahler, 2003) gendered geographies of power (GGP). The term 'transnational' (as well as 'transnationalism associated with it) is of multidimensional meanings. It was initially coined to suggest that immigration is not a unilateral process. Rather, immigrants “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 6). It has since also been used to reference the rise of transnational social fields, or interlocking networks of social relationships, that are constituted by, and constitutive of, migrants’ simultaneous embedment in more than one society (Levitt et al., 2004). Vertovec (2004) has used transnationalism to indicate the
enhanced ‘bi-focality’ of outlooks that orient migrants’ consciousness and everyday activities. Ong (1999) sees it as a “cultural logic” through which individuals respond opportunistically to the flexible regime of accumulation in late capitalism. Yang (2008) also suggests that transnational movement is a mode of labour-market incorporation enabled through variations in cross-national labour markets, which afford differential employment opportunities and rewards. Taken together, transnationalism can be encapsulated as enhanced sensitivity to the mix of social relations that stretch beyond the here and now to shape local experiences. Immigrants, as subjects socially, culturally and perhaps economically situated across place, necessarily bring these relations to saliency.

Gender, as the relation of focus in GGP, is characterized by Mahler and Pessar (2001) as a process. They believe that gender is a social construction that imbues biological differences with cultural meanings, which in turn naturalize differences that entrench male privileges, such as in the demarcating of male versus female domains of work and lives. It is also a work that people do as we construct identities and participate in the reproduction or contestation of gendered ideologies and relations, none of which is fixed, but rather fluid in nature. Finally, gender is also embedded within institutions, which requires us to be sensitive to what Mahler and Pessar call “structural factors” that condition gender relations (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, p. 442) Mahler and Pessar further argue that gender never operates in isolation. Other social relations of differences such as race, ethnicity, class and nationality often work in conjunction with gender to produce differences.

Mahler and Pessar’s GGP is a transnational “framework for analyzing people’s social agency – corporal and cognitive – given their own initiatives as well as their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains” (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, p. 447). To start with, GGP directs researchers’ attention to how gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales, such as the self, the familial, and the institutional across transnational terrains (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). The argument is that gender relations do not only operate within, but also between these social and spatial scales. GGP is also sensitive to women’s social location within “interconnected power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” (Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 816). As such, people are differentially positioned vis-à-vis the flows and interconnections between places. Mahler and Pessar further emphasize that although we are largely born into these matrixes of power, our social location does shift over time as individuals take actions to transform their social locations.

The type and degree of agency that people exercise to effect change is the ultimate focus for Mahler and Pessar. To them, agency is not merely determined by the matrix of power relations in which people are located. It is also about individuals taking initiatives. As Mahler and Pessar point out, two people hailing from similar social locations may exert differential social influences. They attribute such differences to some people being more resourceful than others. They also emphasize that in studying individual agency, we should take into account not only the sustentative agency that people exercise, but also the cognitive agency, or the imagining, planning and strategizing of individuals, which can be extended to include Vertovec’s “bi-focality” that may be particular to immigrants (Vertovec, 2004). While I agree that personal agency
can change our social locations, it is important not to romanticize it. It may also be implicated in the perpetuation of existing power hierarchies. For instance, they could as well be technologies of the self (Foucault, 1982), or techniques individuals operate on their own bodies to reach certain life goals discursively defined. In other words, through exercising particular initiatives, some immigrants may effect changes in their individual social locations, but not in the large social and ideological relations of power.

This paper conceptually benefits from Mahler and Pessar’s GGP (2001). As it charts the career pathways of the women, it gives special attention to how gender relations operate at different social scales, the social locations of the women within matrixes of power, as well as the agency the women exercise to effect changes.

**Research methods**

This paper draws on two qualitative projects that I am currently conducting simultaneously. The first study examines the career pathways of 15 Chinese immigrant women with a background in sciences and engineering. All the women have migrated between China and Canada at least twice for settlement or work purposes (Shan et al., 2016). Of the 15 respondents, 11 came from engineering and 4 from sciences. Among the 11 with engineering backgrounds, only four retained a connection to or rebuilt a career in engineering. The second project focuses on how internationally trained engineers mobilize knowledge as they enter and move up within the engineering profession in Canada. 22 immigrants from 17 countries responded to the study. Among them, seven were women. For both studies, life history interviews were conducted with immigrants. Interviews focused on mapping their career lives, giving special attention to the significant moments where decisions were made or actions were taken, in relation to the large social, cultural contexts in which they found themselves (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Additionally, textual analysis and key informants interviews were used to flesh out the historical context of women’s experiences. This paper mainly draws on the experiences of the four Chinese women who retained a career in engineering in the first study and the seven women who responded to the second study. Small scale textual analysis is used to provide a fuller understanding of women’s experiences.

**The research respondents**

The table attached shows the demographic information of the women respondents who are the focus of this paper. Among the four women from the first project, two (Anqi and Bing) were between 36 and 40, one (Juli) between 41 and 45, and one (Irene) between 51 and 55 years old. They were all married with at least one child. All came to Canada as skilled immigrants in or after 1996. They were trained in interior architecture (Anqi), urban planning (Bing), civil and architecture (Irene), and structural engineering (Juli). The seven women respondents from the second project came from seven different countries: Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Mexico, Romania, the UK and Venezuela. They were between 26 and 45 years old and arrived in Canada between 1997 and 2012. They were trained in chemical, mechanical, mechatronic, operational, structural and transportation engineering. At the time of the study, they were all married except for one who was divorced. Four women had at least one child.

Prior to immigration, all of the women obtained at least a bachelor degree in engineering or a related field in their home country except for Anqi who acquired her
bachelor degree from a third country (the UK). Klara (from Mexico) and Fiona (from Venezuela) also studied in the United States for a period of time; the former as part of a joint degree program, and the latter merely to learn English so as to work within international settings. All practiced in engineering and related fields except for two: Nancy came to Canada right after she finished her PhD program, and Lestari, a new university graduate, was prepared to join her newly-married husband in Canada. Among the experienced practitioners, Bing’s case is distinct. After working in urban planning for a few years, she started her own engineering companies. At the time of immigration, she still owned an engineering company, plus two educational companies in China. Among the rest of the women, six worked in transnational settings where English was the working language: Irene worked in Singapore, Amanda worked on international development projects in a number of developing countries prior to migration, and Anqi worked in Hong Kong before joining an international space planning company based in Beijing. Gena (from Iran), Klara (from Mexico), and Fiona (from Venezuela) all worked in international manufacturing companies.

After immigration, Irene from the first study and all seven women from the second study constructed or regained a more traditional career path. Majority of them started with supporting positions in engineering such as drafters and then experienced promotion. At the time of the study, all eight women were actively practicing in their fields with one exception; Gena lost her job before the interview as her company went bankrupt. Three women from the first project constructed alternative career pathways. Bing retained her ownership of her companies in China, and she has since turned her attention and effort to establishing an educational company between China and Canada. Anqi easily became a project consultant for a Chinese investor in the construction business and moved on to become a project coordinator for a family builder who resided outside of Canada. Juli kept working as a consultant for an engineering company in China after immigration and at the time of the study had opened an immigration consultancy company.

Research findings
While in their home countries, all women led a professional life, economically secure and socially established; upon migration, they were differentially positioned within the matrix of power where gender, as a social relation, interacts with other axes of social differences such as class, race, culture and language to shape the contours of the women’s career lives. Meanwhile, regardless of their backgrounds, the majority of the women were faced with two common challenges. The first was to balance their career plan and their gendered obligations at home. The second was to get their professional qualifications recognized in the host labour market. To cope with these challenges and enhance their career opportunities, the women exercised incredible agency (planning, imagining, strategizing, and enacting), which could be thematized as the labour of love and the labour of learning.

The labour of love: Negotiation at the intersection of home and work
Immigrant women have traditionally played a significant role in the maintenance of their families (Landolt and Da, 2005; Parrado and Flippen, 2005) and contributed significantly to the interlocking spheres of productive, kin and caring work (Kofman,
Studies of highly skilled women, specifically women originating from China and South Africa in the developed West, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Ho, 2006; Cooke, 2009; Shan, 2009a) have all suggested that immigrant women have to negotiate a balance between their roles at home and their desire for career lives. My current studies also show that gendered obligations to the family entailed much deliberate pondering, or labour of love, as the women imagined, planned, and strategized to (re)construct their career pathways. In the process, gendered norms where women are positioned as the caring and supporting family members largely got entrenched, although occasionally they were also disrupted. Meanwhile, the organization of engineering working across place also has a bearing on how the women could negotiate their career pathways.

Anqi, Juli, Irene (from China) and Amanda (from the UK) were all pregnant at the time of immigration. They had put their career on hold. Amanda had a fulfilling career as an engineer/policy specialist working for the United Nations. Here is her plan when she landed.

[Our plan was] …[we]d come to Canada and [my husband] would spend some time on his career and I would take care of the children just for a couple of years. The intention was [for me] to then go back to my job / career... Things did not go that way. - Amanda

Things did not go as she planned. She could not register as a professional engineer because her international experiences could not be verified. As a result, after spending 4 years caring for her kid, she worked breaking down drywall for three years before she landed an engineering position at the junior level.

Of note, at the time of the study, Amanda was separated from her husband. As a single parent, she offered that she was able to maintain her current job in part because her employer was flexible with her work schedules so that she could take care of her children as needed. In fact, a few women shared that when they weighted their career options, they desired flexible hours, and/or preferred to work close to home, neither of which is readily available in the mainstream labour market in Canada.

The need for flexible hours and convenient locations was particularly true for this is especially true for Anqi, Bing, and Gena, whose spouses stayed behind in or returned to the home countries for career reasons and to sustain the family financially. While caring for their children virtually as single parents, these particular women mobilized all the resources that they had (e.g., support from their parents) to become professionally engaged. Some of them also exercised bold imagination in coming up with alternatives. In the case of Anqi, she, despite her exceptional educational and work record, did not look for regular jobs in the mainstream labour market. She said:

[With my previous job], when you had a deadline, you had work over time to get it done...Our circumstances at [the time of landing] was ... My kids were small. You had to send them to the daycare early in the morning and then pick them up early in the afternoon. Daycares have regular hours. As such, I never...spent my energy looking for the type of jobs that I had before. I casually posted an advertisement [about myself], or looked
“casually on the Internet, prepared to do some casual job - but the job has to be in Richmond, or very close to it.” – Anqi from China

Eventually, Anqi responded to a job advertised by a Chinese investor who was looking for an expert consultant to bid for projects in the construction business. Anqi was offered the job, which existed to the extent that she was able to win projects. With this job, she had some flexibility with her hours and locations which helped her with childcare.

The examples given above should not be taken to mean that women are necessarily oppressed in the private domain. For instance, Juli believed that gender relations at her home were equal. In fact, she insisted that she was the decision maker at home. However, what is clear from both studies is that the women tended to take the family as the unit of consideration when planning their own career lives. Going back to Juli, she still retained her engineering practices after immigrating to Canada; with her professional status as a chartered engineer, she was working as an engineer consultant for her original company while primarily based in Canada. As her husband established a stable job in Vancouver, she started exploring different career options. At the time of the study, she had just started an immigrant consultancy company. Juli’s example shows that depending on the resources that the women commanded in both their home and host countries, they may have cognitively if not emotionally anchored their career lives across cultures as well as places, sometimes creating unique and flexible niches in the transnational space. The stories of the women also point to the direction that the labour market including the engineering market is simultaneously local and global, shaping as well as shaped by individual’s career pathways.

Regardless of how the women framed their career decisions, it is often that it is often the male spouses who are naturally positioned as the unencumbered subjects free to pursue a career life. Of note, in the case of Fiona, traditional gender roles were reversed. Both Fiona and her husband worked in an international manufacturing company in Venezuela: Fiona in the technical division, her husband in customer services. Before immigrating to Canada, they had their second baby. Through attending a job event, Fiona landed her first job within weeks after landing. When asked what made everything possible, she responded:

“My husband is amazing because … we decided when we came here, that the first one who could find a job would go to work; the other one would take care of the baby. In our culture it’s not common that the woman is the one working. Normally it’s the man working, but… as a couple we didn’t have that problem. So I found a job, and I’m okay. I will sustain the family. … He was fine and he was taking care of the kids and such a lovely father. So that helped.” - Fiona

In this case, the gendered norm at home was disrupted as the couple took a practical turn in their settlement plan. What Fiona and her husband decided to do may not change the gendered norms that are manifested differently across culture. Yet, it has certainly helped Fiona moved forward in her career lives.
The labour of learning: Dealing with Western-centric recognition

The women’s career pathways are not only paved with the labour of love, but also the labour of learning in response to the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications in Canada. This section starts with the issues of recognition facing the women, before turning to the strategies that the women adopted to cope with t

Geography of recognition

Getting prior qualifications (both credentials/educational backgrounds and prior work experiences) recognized in Canada was a common challenge related by most of the women. It was, however, a challenge of different degrees for the women. The respondents’ places of origin, places of original education, and places of prior working lives all had a bearing on how they experienced recognition in Canada.

Nancy (from Ireland) is one of the people who had the least problem getting recognized in Canada. She said:

The [professional] association… has international recognition agreements for professional qualifications and for academic qualifications with most… international countries. And I think they’ve already done a lot to make it relatively easy [for us] to move around as a professional. - Nancy

The “international countries” that Nancy related are those that have accreditation articulation agreements with Canada. Engineering Canada, the umbrella organization for regulatory bodies in engineering in Canada is a signatory country of Washington Accord, which is an agreement between organizations responsible for accrediting engineering degree programs in 17 countries or areas. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, the United States – all major Western countries – were the initial signatory countries between 1989 and 1994. Hong Kong, South Africa, Japan and Singapore – mostly developed countries, or major economic centres where they are located if not in the world – joined the Accord between 1995 and 2006. Since 2007, the Washington Accord has expanded to include Chinese Taipei, India, Korea, Malaysia, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. China and Mexico are among the eight developing countries currently with provisional status; that is, they aspire to join the Accord but have yet to achieve signatory status. For accreditation organizations to join the Washington Accord, they have to develop and prove that their accreditation criteria, policies and procedures of the signatories have are substantively comparable to those adopted in signatory countries (International Engineer Alliances, n.a.). A graphic view below of the development of the Accord shows that the Washington Accord can be considered a Western centric project, led by Anglo-Saxon countries, which has extended its influence by including other countries into its epistemic standards and systems.
Joining the Accord means that accredited engineering degree programs will be
directly recognized in signatory countries for registration purposes. In addition to the
Washington Accord, Canada has entered five Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs)
for licensed engineers with Australia, France, Hong Kong, Ireland, and the United
States (Texas), although adoption of the MRAs varies among local regulatory bodies.
Immigrants coming from countries outside of Washington Accord and the MRAs need to
prove their university education to be equivalent to Canadian standards, and
accumulate a number years of work experiences including one year under the
supervision of a licensed Canadian engineer to become a registered engineer (Shan,
2013).

In the current studies, depending on where the women graduated, their
credentials may or may not have been easily recognized by the regulatory bodies in
Canada. If we plot the women to the map of recognition geographically, only Amanda
(from the UK) and Nancy (from Ireland) did not have to worry about their credentials not
being accepted in Canada. In the case of Nancy, she directly focused on bridging actual
differences in engineering practices between Ireland and Canada by taking advantages
of different courses, conferences and events offered through professional associations
and organizations. She actively engaged in learning to get herself “up to speed with the
codes of practice, the materials, construction practices, how people build things in
Vancouver.” It was also during one of the events that she attended that Nancy met her
employer, which led to her position as a research engineer in Vancouver. Nancy is the
only active job seeker who started her engineering career in Canada at a level that is
commensurate with her educational backgrounds.

Amanda’s experiences were entirely different from Nancy. Prior to immigration,
she worked initially as a site engineer, but moved on to work in international aid and
development across countries such as the UK, the United States, and a number of
developing countries for the United Nations. When she applied for licensure status in
Canada, she found that much of her experiences could not be verified. Her senior
colleague who should have warranted her experiences turned out to be out of good
standing with the regulatory body. As such, after a 4-year parent leave after

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immigration, she went into demolition, breaking drywall for three years, before she got back into engineering through a junior position.

In response to the lack of recognition, the majority of the women lowered their career goals like Amanda, at least for the initial period of settlement. Instead of applying for engineer positions, they went for supporting positions such as drafters, designers and technical support persons. Yet, not everyone had the same “luck”; Fiona (from Venezuela), Klara (from Mexico), and Irene (from China) landed a job within five months after they started searching. It seems that the women who had more experiences with the West had a relatively easier time getting noted by employers. For instance, Irene said:

*When my son was seven months old, I randomly applied for jobs, jobs related to architecture. I was right away hired… It might be because… it was a mainstream Canadian company. It might be because when I was working with the government in Singapore, I spoke only English. Plus my backgrounds (in architecture)… I was hired right away* - Irene (China).

Of note, although all three women who quickly landed a job came from the developing world, they all had working and educational experiences with the developed world. In addition to Irene who worked in Singapore, Fiona and Klara both studied in the United States, and worked in international companies while based in their home countries.

*Labour of learning*

In addition to lowering initial career goals, investing in re-training and re-education in Canada is another strategy taken by the women. Among the 11 women, all sought career opportunities in Canada with the exception of Anqi, Bing and Juli. Among the nine who did seek career opportunities in Canada, two (Sandra and Irene) joined a Master’s program, one (Gena) a college program and three (Amanda, Fiona and Lestari) short-term training programs. The trend largely echoes the findings by Adamuti-Trache’s (2011). Based on her analysis of the longitudinal survey of immigrants in Canada, Adamuti-Trache (2011) finds that 11% of immigrants enrolled in post-secondary education within 6 months after arrival, and 46% within 4 years after arrival. Furthermore, highly educated immigrant women, Adamuti-Trache (2011) shows, are more likely to enroll in shorter and less expensive college programs than university education. My current studies also show both the strategizing behind women’s training and educational investment and the power dynamics shaping their strategic moves.

Below, Sandra (from Romania) weighed her options upon entrance to Canada:

*I basically [had] two choices, one [was] to try and get a minimum wage job. And then [to] try to get my degree recognized [by the regulatory body]… and … to convince an employer to [hire] me. Obviously the situation in 1997 [the labour market] wasn't the greatest, … as an alternative I could try and do a master and have my immersion into the Canadian society and market while upgrading my education…. my English was pretty good when I arrived…, but [still] the technical language is not*
that straight forward so my thought process was by going into a university and into that field …I could … transfer my knowledge into English.

Instead of seeking direct recognition for her prior credentials and experiences at a time when the economy was weak, Sandra chose to Canadianize her educational backgrounds so as to avoid the issue of recognition and to stock up her language capitals. In a slightly different case, Irene did not want to settle with her initial position as a designer, nor did she think it a worthy project to apprentice herself with a registered architect in order to register for the profession. She then took a Master’s program to switch to a lateral field of practice: graphic design.

My previous research has institutionally embedded immigrants’ training and educational investments within what I call “the Canadian credential and certificate regime (CCR)” (Shan, 2009b). By naming the CCR, I hoped to bring attention to the rising entrance requirements for credentials and certificates, often Canadian or more broadly Western-based, across occupations in post-industrial Canada. In the context where foreign qualifications are not easily recognized, these paper-based entrance requirements become the cognitive reference for immigrants. My current studies once again show the prevalence of this regime, which affords the learning objects if not the learning curriculum for the women. They also show that the women were differentially positioned within the CCR. For instance Gena said:

Right away I started a computer-aided design program [in a college] … a modelling program for mechanical engineers. I knew [the program] a little bit from before…. I thought that I[’d] better have an educational training that gets me quickly ready to for a job, any job, entry level job. And [the program’s] recognized by Canadian industry.  - Gena (from Iran)

In this case, Gena quickly conducted her own analysis of the labour market in Vancouver. She also looked into her own skill sets and decided to brush up on a particular skill to align with a niche need in the industry as quickly as possible.

Benerjee and Verma’s statistical analysis (2012) suggests that finance was an important factor affecting immigrants’ participation in re-training and re-education in Canada. Additionally, they find that having children in the household significantly decreases women’s likelihood to engage in post-secondary courses but not job-related training seminars. In my studies, four people (Irene and Sandra enrolled in Master’s program, Gena in college program, and Lestari was planning to go back to university but missed the deadline) conducted or considered post-graduate programs. None of them mentioned finance or children as affecting their decisions. Some of them however reported that they were socially privileged in their home countries (Sandra). Two of them stressed the importance to get into a program that can prepare them for the labour market as soon as possible. In the case of Gena, with her husband going back to work in Iran to financially support the family, a short and targeted program was her best choice.

The power of learning and the “privilege” of not to learn
As the women tried to enhance their job opportunities in the host society, they also play an important role in reproducing and mediating the matrixes of power that they
bring together as transnational subjects. In the case of Lestari, her first job as a drafter in Canada was obtained through participating in a training program that helped new graduates to transition from school to work. Trained in transportation engineering, and being Chinese by heritage, Lestari said her career prospective in Indonesia was close to nothing. This is “because all transportation [jobs] would be [with the] government, and nobody [who] is Chinese … would be [able to] work in the government.” Getting a job in her profession of training in Canada significantly disrupted the racialized power matrix that held her back in Indonesia.

While getting a job in transportation engineering is empowering for Lestari, it should also be noted that to a large extent, the kind of training and education the women participate may also accentuates the West as the epistemic centre, producing subjects that are socially, culturally and economically desirable in Canada. When asked how she benefited from the training program that she attended, Lestari said:

*Building my confidence for sure. [I learned] [h]ow to talk, how to speak, how to market myself, [and how to] build a resume that the company … would be interested in looking. Persistent calling and persistent asking about the opportunities.* - Lestari from Indonesia

Being able to learn the “right” ways to look for jobs and to present the self is no doubt instrumental to the success of the women in locating jobs. The right ways to present the self during job search processes could as well be what Foucault calls technologies of self (year) through which individuals knowingly participate in the reproduction of social norms endorsed in the mainstream society. In the studies, while learning the “right” ways to present the self, the women also became acutely aware of the hierarchical social order where certain identities are preferred to others. One woman said:

*I responded to a few [job ads]. I didn’t get any responses before I changed the first line in my resume - I changed my resume to a more Canadian sort of name. Right away I got three responses to my resume… I’ve been told by one of my family members… who was an engineer here, who knew that would be the case.* - Gena from Iran

While the majority of the women learned laboriously to make their entrance to engineering in Canada, Juli seemed to be anchored her mind more to China. Leveraging her status as a chartered engineer in China, she kept her engineering practices in China while based in Canada. When asked whether she considered becoming an engineer in Canada, Juli said:

*Where to find professional positions in Canada? Some of my friends tried [to look for jobs in engineering]. They ended up becoming drafters. At my age [and stage], it is impossible for me to do drafting work for others. That is, I do not want to start from scratch again.* – Juli from China
Conclusion and Implication of Findings
Using the transnational lens of gendered geographies of power, this paper examined the challenges faced by 11 women engineers from eight different countries, and the strategies they undertook to retain or regain a professional life after immigrating to Canada. I argue that the career pathways of the women are typically paved with the labour of love and the labour of learning; the former rooted in the gendered organization of home and work, the latter in response to Western-centric recognition practices in the host labour market. I also show that while the women share some common challenges, they are differentially positioned within matrixes of power; gender, race, class and other social relations of differences such as culture and language intersect with one another in converging yet complex ways to shape differential opportunities for the women.

The research findings have implications for labour market policy makers, and employers. Of note, to reconstruct their professional pathways, skilled immigrant women are faced with struggles on multiple fronts. To start with, my studies suggest, immigrant women, particularly women with children, have to conduct much laborious strategizing out of love. That is, they have to simultaneously negotiate gendered responsibilities at home and their desire for a professional career. Given this finding, labour market policy makers may consider accessible and expanded childcare, which could be crucial in enabling the women to pursue or renew their career lives after giving birth. As well, employers may revisit the organization of engineering work with gender sensitivity. The access to flexible working schedules or the options of working from home may enhance the opportunity for employers to retain skilled women. In fact, all these strategies can be used to enhance the chance for the engineering industry to retain women engineers in general.

Another key finding in the studies is that to get recognized in the host labour market, immigrants often have to conduct extensive labour of learning, including identifying opportunities, bridging perceived gaps, and investing in Canadian credentials. Such learning endeavors are often hidden from our view when we consider immigrants’ employment experiences. For policy makers, it may be important to make such labour visible so that corresponding support can be made available to newcomers. Meanwhile, I stress, it is problematic to naturalize the learning labour that immigrants have to undertake. It is instead necessary to recognize that it is within a Western-centric system that immigrants are turned into learners. Questions should be asked around what the host society could learn from the immigrant professionals. Bold imagination is needed to perhaps turn immigrants into teachers or to at least re-distribute the learning and teaching responsibilities among the newcomers and the host populations and institutions.

Selected references


