Women, resistance, and learning
(Roundtable)
Bahar Biazar, Bethany Osbourne and Soheila Pashang,
OISE/University of Toronto, Canada

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One of the pervasive features of the last half century has been growing forced migration of millions of people world-wide. Many countries, including Canada, have increased their labour force through the influx of refugees and immigrants. This global population movement is not always voluntary; distinctions are formed between those who have the option to migrate and those forced into displacement. These distinctions affect the kind of access that people have to social resources, including education. As a result, sites of learning are shifting beyond ‘formal’ schooling to include ‘informal’ or ‘non-formal’ learning sites. This roundtable will be examining the ways in which women have used their agency to learn informally in the midst of difficult social circumstances. We will explore this concept in three different contexts.

The first context is high-profile Middle Eastern women activists of Toronto. As adult education policy shifts towards a rationale-economic model, spaces for radical education and learning shrink; however, the need for such learning grows more than ever. Social movements exploded onto the scene of adult education and emerged as a new discourse in the adult education research community in the 1990’s (Hart, 1990; Quigley, 1991; Cunningham, 1992; Welton, 1993; Holford, 1995).

Although social movement is the dominant paradigm in radical adult education today, this theory is based, almost completely, on research rooted in Western liberal democracies. The study of Middle Eastern activism can help to enrich knowledge and broaden perspectives for those who study social movements and contentious politics. To do this, I will interview a group of Middle Eastern women who have been activists both in their countries and now in Canada. The focus of the interviews will be the development of critical consciousness in each woman throughout her personal development and the learning that happened as the result of participating in a social movement.

The experiences of these women will not only broaden our understanding of social movements and adult learning outside of Western liberal democracies, but also will help to demystify the notion of the helpless, passive, Middle Eastern woman in need of liberation in the current political climate. This research is needed to understand the connection between activism in the homeland and the exercise of critical consciousness and social awareness after immigration to Canada. This understanding will allow Canadian immigration policy to merit the considerable knowledge that these women bring with them upon immigrating to Canada.

The second context is the collective struggle of non-status women in Toronto and the function of informal learning as a source of resistance. Based on the preliminary results of 200 survey questionnaires collected from non-status women this presentation will look at the stories and lived experiences of women living in Canada without legal immigration status who have limited access to essential social and public services. This limitation hinders access to formal learning schemes; thus, informal learning strategies find their way...
and act as a mechanism for these women to organize themselves into social support networks in order to survive. The theoretical framework of this study is based on critical transnational feminism (Mohanty, 2003) and social network perspective (Granovetter, 1982). The presentation explores how non-status women learn to form underground social support networks, and how these networks operate both as a source of support and oppression.

Through their networks non-status women build solidarity as an effective strategy to resist oppression and through this process they have become a model residence which is extremely faithful to one another. By bonding and relying on their informal networks, non-status women demonstrate a significant will and incredible capacity to survive. There is a historical and adaptive coping mechanism that they use in various circumstances to form agency and to build social connections, so that they can live with dignity and pride.

The third context includes stories of resistance and learning from Iranian women who were political prisoners under the Islamic regime from 1979 to 1995. As these women settle in Canada, there has been a growing need to tell their stories as a testimony to a form of state violence. While learning a new language is essential for this endeavor, attempts at learning English through ESL classes are often fruitless and lead to a sense of failure. Teachers need to recognize the presence of violence in both the literacy and ESL classroom in order to enable more effective learning processes (Horsman, 1999). There is a great need to engage in new approaches to enabling learning in this population.

Educators talk about the effectiveness of artistic expression as a catalyst to help foster creativity and self-expression (Margo, 2006; Stone, 1995; Herbst, 1992). This study looks at the use of narrative and visual art as possible tools for enabling English language learning. Their use has helped women to mitigate the effects of trauma and has served the function of unlocking self. The very nature of breaking the silence and speaking into the places of shame that often accompany the experience of violence, can lead to personal freedom as well as moving individuals towards transformative political action.

Despite the many challenges that women from marginalized communities faced, through our studies of these three different groups of women, their agency is evident. So often we look at people who have experienced violence as victims, we see only their deficits. The women that our research represents exhibit strength and resiliency. By taking education into their own hands, these women are taking positive steps towards empowering themselves as well as others around them. As practitioners, working in educational and social service agencies, it is our responsibility to increase resources and acknowledge the already vibrant networks that these women and others like them, have established.

References


Kerka S (2002) 'Trauma and Adult Learning', ERIC Digest, 8.


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