Learning Strategies of Resistance: Immigrant Women in Contingent work in Toronto

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Introduction

This paper is based on the preliminary findings of a SSHRC funded project at OISE titled “Skilled in Vulnerability: Democratizing Workplace Learning amongst the Contingent Workers.” As part of that project we interviewed fifty-one women who were working in call centers, supermarket stores and garment factories. The women workers we interviewed had diverse cultural, educational and family background. Most of them were immigrants mainly from South Asia, South-East Asia, and Africa. Majority of the women had a college or university degree while some had high school education. However, in spite of being well educated and well equipped for professional jobs, a large proportion of them took up low paid, temporary jobs in order to sustain themselves in Canada. Unable to find employment in their own fields, due to de-recognition of their qualifications in Canada, many women started working as call center operators, supermarket cashiers or sewers in the garment industry as these jobs are easily available and provided them with some financial resource. Others looked at these jobs as stepping-stones to upgrade their qualifications in Canada with the hope that they could secure better employment in their own fields.

Women workers, especially immigrant women of colour, employed in supermarket stores, call centers and garment factories represent a growing portion of what is known as contingent labour market in Canada. It is a highly gendered and racialized market that tends to sustain on the labour power of mainly immigrants, especially immigrant women of color (Sassen, 1998). Scholars have variously defined contingent work. Christopherson (1987) defines contingent work as part-time, subcontracting and temporary work where workers are hired more on an ‘as-needed-basis’. Mirchandani (2002) argues that contingency is not actually related to a special nature of work agreement (such as part-time work, contract work, temporary work etc) at workplace but is a highly contextual form of work and has to do more with the vulnerability of the worker and that this experience of contingency and vulnerability may differ from worker to worker. In this paper our understanding of contingency is informed by Vosco’s definition of what she calls precarious work. According to Vosco (2003) it is a form of work that involves unusual job contracts, inadequate social and legal benefits, job insecurity, temporary position, low wages, fairly poor working conditions and high risks of health hazards.

In the course of the interviews that we conducted, we gathered extensive information regarding the working conditions of immigrant women workers in contingent work in Toronto that is similar to what Vosco defines as conditions of contingent work. Some of the glaring issues that these women talked about were about low-wage, uncertainty of job, long and uncertain working hours, stress, health hazards, and a threatening work
atmosphere where they were under constant surveillance and often faced abuse at workplace (verbal, emotional) from employers as well as customers, especially those women who were in customer services like call center operators and supermarket cashiers. Drawing on the concept of everyday forms of resistance and informal learning theories, this paper looks at how these women workers, who are so much susceptible to exploitation, and have very few opportunities or resources to organize, nevertheless do engage in learning how to resist in various ways, either individually or together, as an immediate response to their exploitation and manipulation at workplace.

**Resistance and Learning**

In this paper the concept of resistance mainly builds on what Scott (Scott, 1985) has theorized as ‘everyday forms of resistance’. This form of resistance is different from the traditional definitions based on the corpus of labour process theories where resistance is seen more in terms of a struggle of labour (read: factory worker) against the exploitation by the capitalist mode of production (read: management) through strikes, picketing, or active union involvement (Jermier et.al, 1994). Scott defines resistance as more informal, individualized and [sometimes] clandestine that includes more ordinary strategies of the common people such as foot dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, slander, sabotage and so on (Scott, 1985). Scott further professes that these actions are often non-confrontational, aimed at accomplishing just enough social satisfaction to make life and work more bearable rather than transforming the social structure altogether (Scott, 1985). However, Scott contends that these forms of resistance are quite popular with many subordinate groups (such as workers, women, and peasants) as they can be more vulnerable to retribution and coercion if they indulge in open confrontation (Brook, 2001). Therefore these covert forms of resistance are more realistic for these kinds of groups, something that naturally happens, and with in those covert forms are actually hidden the inspiration and motivation for major collective action in future.

The contingent work force that we interviewed is an example of a subordinate and vulnerable group who are treated as “unthinking machines” (Collinson, 1994, 31), who can be hired and fired any time, who are excluded from any organizational decisions and planning, who are subjected to inferior terms and conditions on employment (Collinson, 1994). The contingent work structure that the employees experienced, together with financial instability, lack of job opportunities and, other racial and gender discriminatory practices often prevented them from organizing mass movements like strikes or picketing. Yet many of them had consciousness and knowledge about their maltreatment and showed their resentment in various ways that were similar to what Scott calls ‘everyday forms of resistance’. As we will see that in most cases their strategies included sabotage, gazing, manipulation, so on and so forth. However at the same time there were few instances of collective mobilization together with active participation in union to create collective awareness about workers’ rights. Thus we will see that although structures of domination and exploitation do generate grounds for resistance but they do not necessarily determine “the repertoire of actions once and for all time or on a day-to-day level” (Gottfried, 1994).
What is also important to explore is how these workers learn to strategize in various ways. Learning at work constitutes an important task undertaken by adults during their lives. This paper also looks at this fundamental aspect of life that is learning at work. This is important for two reasons. First scholars (eg. Boud, 1999, Boud and Middleton, 2003, Garrick 1998) suggest that often the influence of informal learning on practice is much more effective and important than formal systematic learning. Second, in the absence of adequate learning mechanisms from the employers and lack of trust on the management for support, workers often learn informally from peers and on their own (Boud and Middleton, 2003, Hughes, 2002). The contingent workforce that we interviewed often lacks any formal training or learning about labour rights and issues. Therefore as we will see their learning is more informal, consisting of such processes as mentoring, networking, working in teams, receiving feedback etc (Garrick, 1996). Learning can also happen through experience which is identified as incidental learning and may include other self-directed activities to gather knowledge outside formal education settings, for example, at home, the workplace, libraries and through the mass media (Quarter and Midha, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to identify the various ways in which workers in the three contingent sectors, learn individually as well as with and from others to form resistance and create awareness against the management’s exploitation.

**Learning to Resist**

In our data we found that in the face of exploitation, subordination and insecurity that women workers experienced at their work place, they often tried to undertake some learning on their own or as a group in order to find ways to thwart their maltreatment by the management. Our observation was that even though these workers often found themselves working under adverse conditions, they learned to change these points of adversity into positions of strength around which forms of resistance, or negotiation can be articulated. While these strategies were not necessarily revolutionary or effective in securing significant organizational changes, yet they were crucial in demonstrating how contingent workers can learn to engage in resistance and what circumstances limit or facilitate their learning process.

**Refusal to work**

One of the common strategies women employed was their refusal to work or attempts to sabotage the work in some way or the other. A Chinese garment worker who had been sewing for the last ten years after immigrating to Canada mentioned how some of the workers would deliberately sew slowly so that the supervisor would take steps to alleviate some of their adverse working conditions. Their strategy worked as the management was forced to accept their complaint and make necessary changes. Another worker who worked in the manufacturing sector of a garment firm mentioned that in the absence of proper cooling systems she and some of her coworkers would frequently go to washroom to slow down production, so that they could get the manager take action. She mentioned,

\[Since\ \text{the\ manufactory\ has\ no\ air-conditioning\ so}\ \text{we\ go\ to\ the\ washroom\ as}\]
we [can] pass the retail department. So we can be cooled down a bit at that time. So people frequently go to washroom. That’s a way to show our resistance [to solve overheat problem]

In her view, the success of her resistance confirmed the fact that she had the knowledge to exercise some control over her working time when needed. The toilet for these workers constituted a “free space in which time could be appropriated and surveillance could be escaped” (Collinson, 1994, 35).

**Manipulation**

Some workers mentioned how they tried to take advantage of the situation to fight for issues like better wage or proper amenities at workplace. A Filipino garment worker to insinuate her employer for higher wages chose not to go to work for a day or two. She indicated,

*So I told him [manager] I want the increase. I am working hard you know and you have to be fair to me. I am not just working like this only. Yeah trick is if he is not going to give me what I want, I just don’t go to work for a day. He is going to be mad.*

Being in the same profession for more than nine years, she had enough knowledge of not only the factory but also the strengths and weaknesses of the owner. That knowledge enabled her to stand up to her employer, as she knew that her skills were indispensable for the work she was doing, as she was the only sewer at her workplace. Therefore, she could manipulate her employer accordingly to get a raise when her employer started exploiting her. A call center worker also stated how she manipulated her supervisor who wanted her to work further shifts, as they were lack of workers. She argued that she could only work if they would supply her with headset and the management was forced to comply.

**Gazing back**

Besides refusal to work or manipulation, another unique form of resistance was related by a Nigerian cashier working in a supermarket store for three years. She stated how she looked directly at her supervisor and returned the gaze of authority when he was treating her badly for something she has not done. She mentioned,

*[T]hen the manager’s like how do you feel like if I take 20 minutes off your pay check? ...I am like just looking at him. He was feeling un comfortable[...] ...I think that just unnerved him, the fact that I was looking at him...To me it was resistance that I looked at him in the eye and not looking away or down. You know I don’t have to talk back to him, I can [now] make him uncomfortable by looking at him.*

She mentioned that although she knew that this job was important to pay for her tuition and other expenses, the very exploitative structure of her job made her realize that she had to stand up for her own rights otherwise everyone else would try to exploit her based on the perceived vulnerability of her position. She further mentioned that her successful
resistance made her realize how important it was for her to get knowledge about labour laws and labour rights so that if needed she could “get back to them [management].” So she started taking a course to learn more about labour issues and laws. Thus we see that often workers also feel the need to complement their informal learning by some sort of semi-formal training like taking a course or reading “union agreements”. Our interviewee further mentioned that many of the workers were not aware of these rights and were unable to argue with the management. Therefore she tried to “educate” them by discussing with them what ever she learned at the course so that they were kept updated.

It is also important to note here that in the above cases the dominant process involved was learning through experience also known as experiential learning. Workers who have been in this contingent field for long, gradually learned to develop several tricks and shortcuts to think of strategies to resist and negotiate, as was the case with many of the workers. Furthermore, some of the above workers also indicated that informal discussions about exploitation do take place amongst the workers that helped them to come together, strategize and learn from each other’s experience. Here are few comments from some of the workers:

*When I have something in my mind, I need to express it to anybody. So if this happens with me I just talk to my community people who are my co-workers.*

*We talk and learn from each other*

*I share with them. This is my perception. They also shared.*

This willingness to learn from each other and interact informally is an example of the social relations and trust that is possible within the workplace and that can enhance the scope of informal learning to a great extent. This also indicates the possibility of workers coming together and mobilizing, something that Scott (1985) mentions is necessary to build a movement out of the subterranean forms of resistance prevalent in the contingent workplace. In fact in the next couple of instances we will see some emerging forms of collective action.

**Collective mobilizing**

In our data we also found some instances where women tried to mobilize as a group to talk to the management about their problems. A Chinese worker was facing racial discrimination from the supervisor who used to assign harder jobs to her. Unable to negotiate with her supervisor because of English language problems she ended up mobilizing her co-workers to fight for her cause. She mentioned,

*They [co-workers] would go to talk with the supervisor for me. Then, the supervisor would give me lighter work to do.*

Another Chinese worker interviewed migrated in Canada four years ago and had a degree in engineering from the university in China. Unable to find a job in her field, she ended up being a sewer in a garment factory. She tried to learn and gather information on her own about how to appeal at the Ministry of Labour for getting Employment Insurance
when she found out that she was not getting paid what was being recorded officially by the owner. A case was eventually set up for her at the Ministry of Labour against the employer. She not only used the information from the Internet for herself but also copied down the number and address of the ministry and distributed them to her coworkers who were facing the same problem. The other workers motivated by her, followed her footsteps in lodging complaint against the employer. Thus the worker acted as a learning resource for other workers who were not be able to get those resources themselves because of lack of knowledge about computer and internet usage. In our data we have found several instances of peer learning where one particular worker would take the initiative to share her expertise and help others learn informally. This is also an example of self-directed learning where the worker took the initiative to surf the Internet to find the relevant information herself, something that should have been provided by the management. The following instance is another excellent example of peer learning as well as self-directed learning amongst the contingent workforce.

**Joining Union**

For many women learning started happening from the moment they joined these kinds of work. Some months in to this job was enough for many of the workers to understand the deplorable working conditions and other discriminatory practices. A retail worker, who had been in this sector for only one and half year acknowledged, how she came to know about some of the gender discrimination that goes on in this sector right after she joined the store. She mentioned,

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\text{we have 2 male cashiers, but there is no girls working in the back, and...in the history of the store, there has not been a girl stocking shelves...It's just based on...precedent, like it's been that way for all time, it's kind of status quo, it's been that way for so long that nobody's ever thought of changing it... This job has opened my eyes.}
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Unable to bear the various discriminatory practices, this woman took the initiative to change the situation by becoming a union stewardess. She regularly attended union meetings and brought back information to her colleagues who did not have enough time to attend union meetings. She also passed information onto them about what the workers could do if they would need to take any action against any kind of unfair or ill-treated working conditions. The same worker mentioned that her coworkers were not aware of the active presence of union at workplace or the collective agreement although they had been paying union dues right after they got hired. They even did not feel approaching the union if they had any concern or complaint against the employer. But after she became a union stewardess the workers got to know that they had someone with whom they could share their problems and get help. She expressed,

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\text{In the past, nobody's had the number for the union, and it's hard to go to your employer and say 'Can I have the number for the union?’, they're going to be like 'Why are you calling the union?’ It's a little bit daunting to go to your employer and say 'I'm calling the union on you, na na na na...' But now it's a lot easier for people to understand, and I make it so that people are aware, like I said, I'm really involved in my workplace, I'm friends with everybody, I talk to everybody,}
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so if somebody even mentions a problem, I'm like 'Well, read the collective agreement, if you have a problem with it, let's talk about it. ..........People are aware more and more so now.

Her participation kept the other workers informed about labour laws, collective agreements and other worker’s rights that they did not usually have access to. She mentioned that now the workers are becoming aware of their rights and about issues like wage, working hours, increment etc. At the time of the interview she also mentioned that she had already applied to work at the back of the store, with the rest of the men, and hoped that her decision would pave the way for other women to take a similar stand to challenge the gender discrimination.

Factors affecting resistance and learning

Although many workers were able to resist and learn from their own experience as well as from the coworkers, some were unable to do so. Many of our interviewees actually analyzed the reasons behind some of the worker’s inability to successfully learn to resist. Workers identified the various factors that prevented many of their co-workers from taking collective action. In the course of the interviews they explained that the very job structure and labour market situation would hardly allow them to be unified. Interviewees pointed out that as they were kept very busy with their assigned job they failed to build a team in order to stand against the management. A call center worker indicated how she desired to take up some steps against their maltreatment but because of lack of unity she failed to do so. Following quote reveals her understanding,

So sometimes it is very difficult to make a team. Team means...when you giving. Say something to guide then you need that strength. But you know everybody thinks they are thinking in a different way. So you can't organize the group in a very good manner. So that's why I never tried anything collectively you know...how it be. [And] probably... you know for five or six hours everybody is busy on their phone. So they don't have any options to speak.

We found that workers realized that in many cases, the organization of the work process, the wage structure, the strategies implemented by the management to atomize the workers, and the stratifications between them certainly had a negative influence on the development of a 'we-group’ feeling as well as identification with the work performed.

In these contingent jobs, most workers remained in constant threat of being fired or being treated badly if any complaints regarding the working conditions were made. Thus the fear of losing their job made them passive even when they did not like the discriminatory treatment at workplace. As we pointed out earlier, most of these contingent workers had high qualifications but were forced to take up low paid jobs. In the face of intense competition for work, they would rather suffer exploitation than losing the job. A call center worker’s experience was very much indicative of this kind of situation,

Especially people...like a lot of people who don't have a second job and who may have a family and high rent and stuff. The people, who are working there, as far as I'm concerned, are only people who are really desperate for work. I don't think
anybody wants to work in a call center because they love to talk to people on the phone. They're there because they had no choice.

Being in such situation workers especially immigrant workers often lacked the courage to involve in overt or mass political confrontations. Therefore, they resorted to various informal and ordinary strategies of resistance to show their resentment and anger. These strategies emanated out of their workplace experience, informal sharing, peer learning and sometimes semi-formal knowledge acquired through courses and Internet. We also found that not only these workers learned but also they concurrently reflected on their actions in order to interpret and reconstruct the knowledge they acquired. The knowledge and strategies to defy may have been unique to each individual but it was shaped no doubt by the workplace culture, experience and learning.

Final Thoughts

The forms of resistance as evident from the above examples are diverse in nature just as the ways through which these women learn to resist. The process of learning can be through multiple ways and manners that are unique and at the same time overlapping each other. It can be both semi-formal and informal. For instance it can be through a gradual interaction with co-workers facing similar forms of exploitation. Again, it can also happen through a process of emerging consciousness and experience about the exploitative nature of their work or the employee and the need to challenge that exploitation. It can also be a spontaneous reaction to a particular event possibly expressed in anger and frustration. The resistance strategies informed by their learning, although not necessarily representative of a mass action, and perhaps more akin to negotiation or manipulation, yet are significant in bringing some change in their workplace. It is important to recognize that these women have to overcome different forms of constraints and contradictions, before they could actually stand up and speak for their own rights. De-recognizing their learning and resistance strategies might undermine future efforts of workplace resistance. Thus it calls for further substantiation of conceptual and theoretical understanding and examination.

Bibliography


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(The paper is equally authored)