

Constitution of transnational social space: Migrant women managing careers in sciences and engineering between China and Canada

Canada-China people flows are increasingly characterized by two-way movements. These transnational migrants have formed what some would call a “human capital nexus” that both countries desire to tap into. To “capitalize” on such a nexus, however, it is problematic to consider migrants merely in terms of the human capital they offer. Instead, it is important to position and support them as human beings with social needs to meet and professional aspirations to fulfill. The proposed study endeavours to reorient the sensitivities of policy makers with an exploration of the everyday experiences of transnational migrants. It focuses specifically on the experiences of Chinese migrant women managing careers in the male-dominated fields of sciences and engineering, as their stories may bring to light the multiple struggles of migrants at the intersections of career and life spaces. *The objectives of the study are* 1) to understand the opportunities and challenges for migrant women to develop professional careers in the context of transnationalism; and 2) to provide immigration and labour market policy makers, employers and educators with gender-sensitive insights to facilitate migrant women’s movement, settlement, and career development.

Conceptually, this study is informed by the feminist method of inquiry institutional ethnography (Smith, 1990, 2005) and the theoretical lens of gendered geographies of power (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). It is geared towards explicating transnational social spaces as a gendered process from the standpoint of migrant women – transnational social spaces refer to not only the relational ties that people forge across place, but also the institutional conditioning of transnational mobility and settlement. Gender, rather than a fixed set of sex roles, is used to refer to the ideologies and norms that script institutional policies and practices, and the work that individuals conduct to negotiate identities, values and positionalities.

The study *asks three research questions*: 1) how has transnational movement become a desirable option for the women?, 2) how have the women managed their careers in the context of transnationalism?, and 3) what social and institutional policies and practices have shaped the migration and settlement experiences and career trajectories of the women across places? The study is a two-phase study spanning two years. The first phase involves semi-structured interviews with 10 migrant women who 1) have worked in sciences and engineering in both China and Canada, 2) have moved twice or more between the two countries for educational, employment and settlement purposes, and 3) are currently residing in Vancouver, Canada, Beijing and Guangzhou, China, three gateway cities in which the principal and co-investigators reside. Interviews and data analysis will be conducted to understand 1) the challenges and possibilities the women face in pursuing careers in sciences and engineering across place, 2) the strategies they mobilize to manage their careers and lives; 3) the cultural images, meanings, and values that they negotiate, and 4) the changing social positionalities of the women across place. Efforts will also be made to identify mediators of the women’s transnational experiences, such as policies, texts, and technologies, which will in turn direct us to the sequences of social happenings across institutional, professional, and other social contexts that shape their experiences. The second phase of the study is an institutional ethnographic investigation. It involves 1) interviewing key informants such as immigrant and settlement policy makers, corporate headhunters, employers, educators, and trainers, 2) observing recruitment events, talent forums, and training sessions for migrant workers, and 3) analyzing texts such as (im)migration policies, job promotional ads, and media reports. These methods are used to flesh out the social relations constituting the transnational spaces for migrant women, with particular attention to gendered ideologies underpinning policy and practices across sites.

The study will not only produce knowledge on immigrant women’s transnational career experiences, but will also construct a heuristic device on gender-sensitive policy and practices that would facilitate the movement, settlement and career development of migrants. Related knowledge will be disseminated in the forms of a research finding report, reader’s theatre, conference presentations and academic papers.