Marginalization and Leadership: Iranian Immigrant Women’s Challenges in Canadian Academia and Society

Zahra Hojati, Ph.D.
Graduate, Ontario Institute for Study in Education (OISE)
University of Toronto

Keywords: Iranian Women Graduate Students; Racialized Women’s Bodies; Higher Education; Marginalization; Exclusion; Identity; Integration; Social Justice; 9/11

ABSTRACT: Iranian women disappointed by increasing social and political instability in their homeland have migrated to Canada to achieve their dream of social rights and justice. However, the tragedy of September 11, 2001 directed considerable hatred toward Middle Eastern people. They did not feel at peace, were not treated with respect, and their presence in the west aroused suspicion. More recently, Iran’s president, Mahmood Ahmadinejad is largely seen to be a person who threatens world peace; this negatively impacts Iranians in the west as those remaining in Iran face heavy economic sanctions. In this article, which is a small part of my thesis research findings, I discuss the challenges of first-generation of Iranian immigrant women through their experiences in Canadian graduate schools and workplaces. How do they negotiate the many negative images of Iranians and how do these images shape their experiences within these institutions?

First-generation female Iranian graduate students’ experiences in Canada are unheard and undocumented. In interviews, these women questioned the ability of neo-liberal capitalist schools to connect them to Canadian society while honouring their Iranian origins and identities and enabling them to achieve their goal to live and study in Canada. I argue that Iranian immigrant women experience a double exclusion both at school and in the workplace despite their willingness to engage with both places. This dual exclusion is an enormous source of pressure on their minds and spirits. The goal of this research is to give these women a voice. Policy makers in school and workplaces will benefit from the findings of this research, which calls for significant changes to realize social justice in Canadian society.

Introduction

The literature on graduate students’ experiences in North American academia states that graduate students consciously pursue their studies to further their own personal goals, be it for better job opportunities or in response to their internal wishes. Regardless of their race and gender, they are frustrated by a lack of financial support, supervisor incompatibility, and a rigid curriculum in their institution of choice (Bannerji, 2000; Braden, 2000; Hutt, 2000; Willie, Grady, & Hope,
1991). These issues intensify when race and gender are added to the students’ characteristics (Acker, 2001; Bannerji, 2000; Braden, 2000; Hutt, 2000; Murray, 2008; Samuel, 2005; Willie et al., 1991).

Due to the growing immigrant population in Canadian society, more racialized women are entering graduate school. Thus, ethnicity, language, and nationality intersect with race and gender for further exclusion of racialized bodies. Bannerji (2000), Braden (2000), and Hutt (2000) explore how Canadian academia is biased against gender and race. According to their findings there were no significant improvements in the challenges faced by women graduate students nowadays than those encountered by women from 1980 to 1990. Not only did the bias not improve but students encountered more severe regulation and disadvantages. In this research, graduate students criticized the lack of financial and emotional support from their supervisor or department, and few opportunities to raise their voices, which are not part of the mainstream white, male, middle class. Mazzuca (2000) similarly investigates the challenges of second-generation female Italian students in Canadian graduate schools. She finds cultural adaptation even for the second generation is a major issue as the educational system, “rarely incorporates the languages and cultures of its students within the mainstream curriculum” (Mazzuca, 2000, p. 11). Samuel (2005) identifies immigration and nationality as contemporary sites of migrants’ struggles against colonialism (p. 51). Canada’s immigration and citizenship laws are racialized, classed, and gendered; for example, the point system is rooted in systemic racism, classism, and sexism and it especially adversely affects immigrants from developing countries (Samuel, 2005). This sexism and racism manifests in the educational system; South Asian students found it difficult to obtain work as teaching assistants or research assistants in their universities. Their skin colour, non-Canadian accents and cultural backgrounds were found to be factors that hindered them from getting jobs quickly (Samuel, 2005, p. 53). Migration intersects with gender and race, and I argue that migration is a source of marginalization and exclusion in Canadian universities. As a result, it is important to analyze the situation of immigrant/international students from a political-economic point of view, since they participate directly in the profit cycle of higher education. Thus, these questions need to be asked: What is the benefit of higher education for immigrant and international students? Is there an actual fair exchange of learning for social and economic mobility? Moreover, in this exchange, are racialized immigrant women students allowed to fully participate in the institutional structures that they are supporting? Can their voices be included in the restructuring of Canadian academia for social change and justice?

The experiences of Middle Eastern women, including Iranian immigrant women are absent from the literature on structural exclusions in the academy. My research attempts to elaborate and analyze these neglected experiences in a Canadian context. However, the experiences of these women in Canadian universities are not separate from their histories in their home country, which shape their perspectives on the society they are living and studying in – Canada. In this paper, I explore the social-political reform in Iran and the women’s situations in that milieu. Next, I examine Iranian immigrant women’s experiences in the Canadian context. Finally, I offer suggestions for social change and justice in Canada, in academia, and the workplace.

**Contemporary Social Reform in Iran**

In 1979, the Iranian people protested against 2,500 years of monarchy. Although Iranians are diverse in their beliefs, religion, language, and ethnicity, they all protested in a revolution that
ended up with the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since then, the Iranian people have witnessed dramatic changes in the social, cultural, and political areas of their lives. The revolutionaries had hoped for more justice and equity in the establishment of an Islamic state compared with the monarchical system. Unfortunately, their dream did not come true.

Iran is a country of young people, with a population of 72 million, of which two-thirds are under 30 years of age. Therefore, 70% of the population represents an extraordinary human resource, and yet they are not involved in the socio-economic development of their own country. These young people are deprived of cultural and political freedoms. Quality of life, according to the Economic Intelligence Unit, is the measurement of material well-being, political stability and security, family life (percent of divorce), community life, climate and geography, job security, political freedom, and gender equality (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005). Based on this index, Iran ranks 88th among 110 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005). The unemployment rate in 2012 is about 12% (UNFPA, 2012).

Iran boasts a growing literacy rate. In 2002, the literacy rate for men aged 15 and above was 83.5%, and for women it was 70.4%, and for the total population it was 77% (CIA, 2012b). As of 2012, the literacy rate for the total population has increased to 84.6% (UNFPA, 2012). From 1999 to 2000, the gross enrollment index (GPI) in primary school between girls’ and boys’ increased to 0.96 from 0.90 from 1990 to 1991 (Mehran, 2003, p. 1). Despite these encouraging statistics, the high rate of growth in Iran did not lead to a high quality of life for its people.

Iran’s population is diverse. While the official language is Farsi (Persian), there are also many other languages spoken, such as Arabic, Turkish, Luri, and Kurdish, to mention but a few. There is also a great diversity of religions practised such as Judaism, Christianity, Baha’i faith, and Zoroastrianism, but the dominant religion is Islam. Shia Muslims represent 89% of the population, and Sunni Muslims represent 9%. The Sunni Muslims do not enjoy the same advantages as the Shia Muslims. The diversification of religions and languages, has created a multicultural country, but minorities cannot freely practice their ethnic customs. As a result, Iran is a country of ambiguities with regard to moral values, which is why there are always people seeking social, cultural, and political justice and equity.

In post-revolution Iran, women’s conditions not only did not improve, but women were increasingly excluded from decision-making regarding their families and social rights (Kar, 1999). Such cultural, social, and political inequalities forced many Iranians to migrate to all parts of the world. These migrations took place in several waves. The first wave immediately followed the revolution; most refugees and immigrants were supporters of the (monarchical) system and were against the application of Islamic law, or sharia. The war between Iran and Iraq, from 1980 to 1988, resulted in the second wave of migration as people fled Iran to protect their families from the horrors of war. Later, as people witnessed more injustice and inequality, other groups, such as educated, critical Muslims and those on the political left gradually began to leave their home country. In 1996, Mohammad Khatami, who promised liberalization and reform, became president, and everybody expected the country to change dramatically. However, because of the influence of the autocratic regime, these dreams could not be achieved, and a third wave of migration happened. In the late 1990s, many educated people who had lost their hope for change and justice left the country. After 2000, the fourth wave of migrants came to Canada as a result of the country’s evolving migration policies. The new immigration laws provided more opportunities for business
people to invest in Canada (Knowles, 2007). Finally, when the Green Movement was silenced in 2009, the fifth wave of migrants, consisting of mostly young people disappointed by the lack of positive change in Iran, migrated to North America and South Asia. This vast migration of escaping intellectuals represented a brain drain from Iran, which has benefited Canadian society. Certainly, the shared experience of a lack of social justice, and cultural and political freedoms back home are common factors for Iranian immigrants.

Social change in Iran clearly influences Iranian women’s decisions to leave their native country, and in turn it impacts the challenges in and their resistance to their host society. Beyond the fifth wave of immigration, the imposition of Sharia law in Iran further pressures Iranian women to migrate. Sharia strips away gender equality by giving men more control over women. Women’s status in education and the workforce in Iran constitutes a significant challenge these women faced at home and this chapter of their life sheds light on these immigrant women’s relationship to education and work in Canada.

**Iranian Women’s Status in Contemporary Iran**

Compared with the monarchical system in pre-revolutionary Iran, in which women’s participation in higher education was not significant, in contemporary Iran 60% of university students are women (Hojati, 2011). This high participation can be analyzed from many viewpoints, such as a desire for a safer space for women’s mobility, a greater family awareness about enhancing their daughters’ futures, fewer job opportunities for women compared with men, more prestige for women and their families, and a desire to go abroad for further education since education provides opportunities for migration to other countries. In addition, educated women have more financial independence and mobility than uneducated women in Iranian society, and as a result, their voices are heard more. In Iran, women can study in all programs except male-dominated programs such as mining. Women can study law and become lawyers, but they cannot become judges. Also, men cannot study in women’s programs, such as midwifery. Even though Iranian women are able to achieve high educational levels, they are not necessarily welcome in the male-dominated employment spheres. Women’s presence in managerial jobs in Iran is 2% of 17,563 jobs, compared with the whole world, which is 11.2% (Shojaei, Samsu, & Asayeseh, 2010). As for women’s presence in government, among 137 countries, Iran ranks at 131st; Afghanistan is 27th and Iraq is 36th. Some countries that rank lower than Iran are Qatar, Oman, and Saudi Arabia (Shojaei et al., 2010). These statistics must be understood in the context of patriarchy and the presence of a glass ceiling, a universal issue that Iranian women face much more because of the social implications of sharia. Although the country has many educated people, the social, cultural, and political structure of the country does not provide equal rights to women. This is one of the fundamental reasons that Iranian immigrant women in all parts of the world tolerate challenges and difficulties in their host societies; they are not happy with the idea of going back to their county of origin (Hojati, 2011).

Because of these circumstances, some first-generation Iranian immigrant women with Iranian university degrees want to further their studies in Canada. Not only do they wish to develop their knowledge but also to live in a safe and respectful society that provides them with more rights. In the remainder of this article, I discuss how racialized women who are excluded and marginalized in graduate schools and workplaces can take a role of leadership in Canadian society. The aim of this article is to contextualize their voices in graduate school and workplaces.
Marginalization and Leadership

Theory and Methodology of the Research

Global social, political, and economic insecurity, and the War on Terror, have stimulated a global immigration movement. Neo-liberalism is a framework that supports globalization, and new foreign policies resulting from global insecurity that affect local people as well as racialized immigrants. Because Iranian people are known as Middle Eastern people, Orientalism, as defined by Said, is, therefore, an appropriate theoretical perspective from which to investigate the way these people have been presented in the Western knowledge, literature, and institutions (Said, 1979, 2003, Yegenoglu, 1998). According to Said (1979, 2003) the roots of Orientalism are colonialism and racism – the superiority of the west over the east. In my research, I also adopted an integrative anti-racist feminist perspective to examine the integration of race and gender with religion, ethnicity, and nationality, and etc. in one’s identity (Dei, 2005; Ng, 2005; Wane, 2004). Using this framework, I will examine the interconnection of such factors in the marginalization and exclusion of Iranian immigrant women and their resistance to and engagement with their host society, Canada.

I utilized standpoint theory as my methodology of research, which is a critical feminist approach used to validate marginalized and ignored women’s voices advocated by Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, Alison Jaggar, Sandra Harding, and bell hooks (Harding, 1995, p. 103; Thomas-Long, 2006, p. 68). This methodology addresses the issues of whose questions are being asked and whose problems have been resolved. Dorothy Smith, in 1987, and bell hooks, in 1990, started from the local and everyday experiences of their subjects (Thomas-Long, 2006, p. 69). In 1995, to this practice Dua (2003) brought Bannerji’s idea that in standpoint theory we have to go beyond women’s inclusion. Bannerji claims that, in order to know the culture of advanced capitalism, we have to start from ourselves: “Once again I must begin from myself. From my body as a political signifier” (Dua, 2003, p. 18). Moreover, in this methodology the integration of experience and knowledge is a key concept that can lead to women’s liberation (Harding, 1995).

I conducted interviews in the summer of 2008 with eleven first-generation Iranian immigrant women graduate students who had already earned a degree from an Iranian university. Because of cultural limitations among Iranians (where Iranians are reluctant to talk with each other about the oppression in their lives), a focus group could not be used as a method of data collection. All eleven participants were students in six different graduate schools in Ontario. To avoid compromising anonymity, I prefer to not mention the name of their schools. Seven of them studied in master’s programs, and four of them studied in doctoral programs. Their respective programs of study were varied (science, health, engineering, education, and humanities). Their marital statuses and family lives were diverse, from single to divorced to remarried, with and without children. Their ages varied between 26 and 55 years, and at the time of the interviews, they had been present in Canada from one to 30 years. What unites this diverse group of women is their experiences of marginalization and exclusion in the classroom and workplace.

The Promise and the Reality of the Land of Opportunity

In this section, I introduce the participants’ voices regarding their experiences in Canadian graduate schools and workplaces. In general, all of the participants were hoping to achieve what they had not achieved back home, justice and freedom in society. These individuals wished to be
included in a cohesive social group. They hoped that their previous education and experience would help them integrate into Canadian society and enhance their contribution to Canadian social development. They brought their past expertise to their present circumstances, which they hoped would help them adapt easily to their new country. They expected that this connection would balance their minds and spirits and that they would be happier people. They entered graduate school in order to achieve this connection and integration. One student, Hoda, speaks to this topic:

I think in Iran we knew how to proceed in school. I was familiar with the educational system, but here I am like a stranger and do not know what to do. Besides stressing about proving myself, I also want to show that I am like others. I have tried to get good marks, have perfect presentations. It took me a long time to adapt with the new educational system and do well. Gradually, I became “normal”...I am not different. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

According to Said (1979, 2003) all Middle Eastern people, who he refers to as Oriental people, are known mainly as Muslims and Arabs. Although the historical and cultural background of Iranians goes back to the Persian Empire and the formation of the Farsi language, according to Said’s Orientalism thesis, Middle Eastern people are still stigmatized as Arabs and Muslims who are backward, oppressive and male-dominated. Middle Eastern women are represented negatively. Said elaborates:

The association of the West with modernity, progress, development, and freedom and the East with the opposites of these features is indeed a phallocentric gesture, which associates the Orient with negativity, simultaneously construes it as that which is Other than the established norm. (as quoted by Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 104)

With the above concept in mind, Yegenoglu (1998) points to women as the essence of Orientalism. Since the 18th century, the West has sought to discover this creature, and, even in the 21st century, “women’s freedom” was one of the motivating justifications for the occupation of Afghanistan in 2001. As a result of the negative image of Iranian and other Middle Eastern women, understood through the Orientalist perspective, Hoda feels she is different from white Canadian students. As a Muslim woman who practises hijab (where a woman covers her hair in observance of Islam), her body is thus racialized and this compels her to put in the effort and work harder at school in order to show that Middle Eastern women are like everyone else; like western women, they can succeed in academia. Some white Canadian students consider the hijab to be abnormal (Hojati, 2011), which causes Iranian women to feel more pressure over their racialized bodies. These women need to prove to themselves that they are not different from others – that they can study and get good marks.

In another interview, we find that another student, Negar, believes that the tragedy of September 11, 2001, caused a dramatic change in her personal and educational life. She states:

September 11 brought me to a Ph.D. program. Society changed a lot after that accident [sic]. I thought I wouldn’t be affected by such tragedy because I was completely involved with and familiar with Western system and culture. I never considered myself as an immigrant. I grew up in this society. After 9/11 I witnessed how others’ views and values changed, and how they expressed their attitude towards Others. Simultaneously, in the past two years of my work, I commuted to U.S.A, and after
9/11 my commute got worse because of my nationality. I got tired of this travelling and also the way the U.S.A. treated Middle Eastern people. *My view towards society changed in the same way society's view changed about people like me.* (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

Local people are affected by state policies. Cainkar (2004) states that foreign policy impacts the domestic sphere and causes violence towards local people. The way the United States treated Middle Eastern countries and counted Iran, Syria, and Iraq as an “Axis of Evil” created a harsh environment for Iranian women in Canada. Negar commuted to the United States for many years without any problems, but after 9/11 in 2001, the scenario changed and Iranian people were treated as potential terrorists. The foreign policy between Iran and the United States worsened, and Canadian immigration and foreign policies continued its pressure on Iranian women in and out of Canada. One consequence of this negative relationship between the foreign policy of Canada and Iran was the halting of their diplomatic relations after the death of Iranian-Canadian woman journalist Zahra Kazemi in Iran in 2003 (Kazemi, 2007). Moreover, Citizenship and Immigration officers impeded the ease of entry of Iranian immigrants’ families hoping to visit their relatives in Canada (Shahrvand, 2008). In April 2012, the Canadian embassy in Iran transferred the visa section from Tehran, Iran, to Ankara, Turkey. Since May 2012, Toronto Dominion (TD) bank in Toronto/Canada has been closing the accounts of some Iranian-Canadian citizens without explanation. The Iranian community weekly news, Salam Toronto, started to bring attention to this racist behavior and now it is broadcasted widely in Canadian media (Salam Toronto, 2012). Moreover, more than one Apple employee refused to sell products to Farsi speakers in a misinterpretation of the sanctions against Iran (Moradi, 2012). I can analyze these restrictions in the light of neo-liberalism and racism, which stimulate global war and insecurity for southern countries and people. I argue that the foreign policy affects local people when it creates a harsh environment for immigrant Iranian women, in turn causing a fragmentation of their identity: Are they Canadian/American Iranian? Are they welcome in the host society? The challenge of connecting their past to the present turns into a serious inquiry.

Leila is another student affected by the negative image of Iran in the world, and it dramatically affected her school and personal lives. Leila states:

> Being an Iranian woman creates two sorts of conflict for me. I have to fight what Iran offers me personally, as a liberal woman, as well as how Iran is portrayed in the world, so both personal and political challenges. Iranian president! I hate to be realized as a defender of Ahmadinejad, as a supporter of nuclear power. Being accused of spying by a young man, all pierced and tattooed whose smell of beer and smoke early in the day and in a computer lab, was obvious from a long distance ended in a bitter laugh for me, but my other experience broke my heart. One day when one of my friends and I were walking by the riverside, two gentlemen offered to let us fish. The man beside me asked me where my accent belonged to. “Iran,” I said and smiled, still impressed by his generous offer and his teaching me fishing. “I don’t like my kids being bombed while they are going to school!” His naive and innocent look while he was almost asking me not to kill his kids made my eyes tearful. “I won’t kill your kids,” I handed back the fishing tools and walked away with a lump in my throat. I don’t like to be put down because of the president. “Should I deny my nationality?” I wondered. *But, I want and like to identify as a proud Iranian woman and break all the stereotypes.* (Interview, summer 2008; italics added).
Many Canadians, both in and out of school, stereotype Iranian women. These stereotypes are drawn from media representations. Iranian women are considered representative of Iranian policy, not as individuals trying to make their way in the world. The image of Leila as described by the white Canadian man is based on the Euro-American media and knowledge, which is a colonized knowledge. From a critical perspective, colonization goes beyond the occupation of land by means of physical domination; it is the global occupation of the mind, culture, and spirit by way of new technologies and new ideologies such as the neo-liberal perspective (Bakker, 1994; De Sousa Santos, 2006; Dwyer, 2006; Magnusson, 2005; Rhoades, & Slaugher, 2006). Leila is a woman who does not believe in Islam or the hijab, and politically she is against Iran’s state policy, but she is still regarded as “the Other.”

Being treated as the Other is not limited to Middle Eastern women; it also applies to anybody who does not fit in the mainstream in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on. The Other indicates an individual who is not “normal,” someone who is different. Ng (2005) articulates the marginalization of Indian and Chinese immigrants through the immigration process in Canada and the marginalization of Indigenous women through the colonization of Canada (Das Gupta, 1995; Murray, 2008). Murray (2008) researched the narratives of eight First Nations female educators in terms of their experiences as students and faculty members in order to ascertain how Euro-Western educational practices contributed to or interfered with their learning process and cultural beliefs. She discovered that the cultural misrepresentation and harmful stereotypes about First Nations people that permeate Euro-Western society contribute significantly to the marginalization and oppression of these women (Murray, 2008, p. ii). If you are Canadian but not of British decent then you are marginalized. According to Ng, those minorities suffer from being oppressed and are marginalized in favour of mainstream agenda. Integration into the white-dominated culture is problematic for their ethnic groups because the Eurocentrist perspective considers “immigrant women” as the “outsider” (Ng, 2005, p. 14). This linguistic structure is used even for Canadian-born women of colour (including First Nations women), women who do not speak English well, and immigrant women from the so-called Third World.

Leila continues:

My look and accent show I am a second-language speaker. In fact, Canadian people do not obviously express their hatred towards me. I remember one day in a computer lab one of the students, when he realized I am an Iranian student, asked me, “Are you a spy or a terrorist?” “Both,” I said. “You better watch out!” He said he is an —— Canadian and that his country is close to Iran, so Iran can send a bomb to his country easily now that he has recognized me. His absolute ignorance made me laugh at him. “I don’t care how idiots think of me,” I said. “Oh, I don’t think like that,” he said. “But I know most people sitting in this computer lab have this kind of image of you.” “Yeah, right!” I said. “You don’t think like that. Everyone else does!” That conversation happened one week after I entered Canada. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added).

According to the Orientalist understanding of Middle Eastern people, all Iranian women are generalized as hijab-wearing Muslims and, hence, that they are terrorists or spies. This Oriental image of Iranian women was incited after September 11, 2001, and as we can observe in the student’s statement above, and also in general in my entire research findings, all the interviewees...
claim they had negative experiences that lead them to believe most North Americans have a negative image of Iranians.

As Leila’s voice shows, the negative image of Iranian women was not limited to only one person in her school. According to her interlocutor, “most people” in that institute shared this image as a result of discussions about Iranians on the university campus. The way those Canadian students construct their knowledge is not free from bias; their knowledge is colonized/occupied by Euro-American education and media. Clearly, this negative image is more pervasive than Leila’s white-dominated graduate school; it might be in the larger community as well. I analyze this negative image in the light of the influence of the media: television, newspapers, radio, and books on average people. According to Said (1979), Western institutions produce the image of Middle Eastern people as inferior. It is important to note that Leila does not wear a hijab, so her clothing does not identify her as a Muslim woman, but her accent indicates that she is not Canadian born and that she is “the Other.” The accent barrier to integration in a larger community is also evidenced in Samuel’s research (2005) of South Asian students in Canadian higher education. Samuel’s finding demonstrated that a lack of proficiency in the English language and a ‘foreign’ accent contributed to student’s difficulty. A student mentioned that because of that, “I felt alone and stupid at times, not being able to join with the others and have fun” (Samuel, 2005, p. 57). Another participant in Samuel’s research claims that even though “I could speak English, it was my accent that may have contributed to this exclusion. The feeling of seclusion can be very disturbing and inhibiting” (Samuel, 2005, p. 57). So, I realized that one’s accent is not depoliticized in his/her representation of a nation. I will elaborate this notion in later pages.

The stigma of racialization that marks Middle Eastern women’s bodies is a structural effect of Canadian higher education; it cannot be individualized. To address students’ requests, challenges, and needs, most Canadian universities have a graduate students’ centre that provides financial and emotional support. Shaad, in her talk regarding the effectiveness of one such office, says:

Yes we have a counselor to address our issues, but if I complain, the counsellor tells me, “Don’t say anything, only study and finish your school; you cannot change anything.” Even the good professor only listens to you but doesn’t do anything for you and says she is sorry to hear that. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

The counselor confesses that minority women do not have any agency to effect change and to achieve justice and comes to the conclusion that the best policy would be to ignore discrimination and stay silent. Even a sympathetic professor only listens to the student but cannot support change or justice. I noticed the same experience in Samuel’s (2005) research among South Asian students. She states that “the human coordinator on campus, who liaised between students and instructors and who was constantly alert, felt that many students were afraid to lodge complaints of any kind. Through her interaction with students on campus she realized some instructors were mean and treated minority students shabbily but most of the students did not want to complain, they just bore it silently because they belonged to the minority group” (p. 89). Thus the school’s structure contributes to the perpetuation of discrimination. There are counselors to solve and mediate challenges between faculty and students, so why do they encourage students to be silent and obedient? As a result of democratic racism, which is the conflict between social rights constitutions about people of colour and their daily experiences of racism and discrimination (Henry & Tator, 1994), capitalist higher education inherently practises patriarchy and racism towards its racialized
students. This negative image exists at an individual, organizational, and systemic level (Henry & Tator, 1994, p. 2). Leila also explains:

The school has a “Students’ Counseling Service,” where I was referred to [when I was] disappointed by my grades. The counselor was more like an indifferent listener, well not even a listener. I felt I was talking to a wall. The only sentence she spoke was when she looked at her watch and told me I have only a few more minutes! If school cannot provide me with a counselor, a listener, they definitely do not care about bigger issues such as the financial ones. All they know is to have a certain number of international students to make money and make their profile look good. There’s absolutely no academic support. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

There are two main points in Leila’s experience. One is the nature of Canadian higher education, which, according to Magnusson (2000, 2005), Shahjahan (2004), and others, is moving from being student-centred to profit-centred. Secondly, her experience is of a racialized international woman who is discriminated against based on her identity, nationality, religion, language, and accent.

Canada is largely publicized as a multicultural welfare society and is proud of this distinguished image (Galabuzi, 2005; Hojati, 2006). Gradually, as a result of following the neoliberalism that focuses on the marketization of society, including higher education, Canada has moved away from the policies of the welfare state image. This agenda manifests itself in the reduction of healthcare benefits, increasing higher education tuition, and the cutting of student services in universities as these increasingly became part of the industrial centre that is embroiled in capital accumulation (Itwaru, 2008; Lee, 2004; Magnusson, 2000; Shahjahan, 2004). What then is the social, cultural and economic benefit of higher education for racialized women?

Leila explains that she also has a position in the department as a graduate assistant (GA) as well as a scholarship, but the income from these goes towards her tuition fees. She has to struggle to meet the cost of her living expenses. Interestingly, her GA position is at a writing development centre, where she edits English-speaking students’ papers. If she is knowledgeable and skilful enough to work in student services helping native speakers’ academic writing, why can she not get a good mark in her graduate class? Do other factors such as nationality, ethnicity, accent, and religion intersect in the evaluation of her work? Braden (2000) expresses her experience that in Canadian graduate school, “language is a strong barrier for silencing students” (p. 51). Leila’s situation conveys the idea of inclusion and exclusion as a social-political reality, as well as a personal ambiguity of her inclusion in a Canadian school and society. Ultimately, Leila’s work is discriminated against because she is “the Other.”

Speaking on the topic of teacher-student relationships, Maryam explains that she has two supervisors because of the nature of her thesis. She explains her relationship with them as follows:

My supervisors do not know how to guide and direct their students. They don’t know how much time must be spent for work, so their expectation is not realistic. They are from other ethnic groups and came from the U.S.A to Canada. Both are so young and dictatorial. We could not understand each other, and maybe the problem is because of a language barrier as they are not native too. It also refers to their personality, age, and culture. They can’t define the relationship between students and themselves. A democratic definition does not have any meaning for them, they say, “It is only my
word. I don’t care about your idea. It is only my call.” So I can’t explore my idea through my words. Believe me, putting all these professors together is killing me. Sometimes I don’t want to see them. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

Androcentric universities privilege men’s interests. According to my research, professors who follow this patriarchal perspective could not tolerate a democratic atmosphere. According to Maryam, “we suppose Canadian graduate school is prepared for hearing graduate students’ voices, especially when it is about academic work” (Interview, summer 2008). Willie et al. (1991) researched the role of race in American graduate schools among 147 black scholars in 1977–1985. The findings of this research illustrate that “the success of students in graduate level was mainly because of a strong relationship between the individual and faculty members, mentors, or supervisors and fellow students” (p. 79). Once a graduate student has a supportive and understanding supervisor, I argue, school becomes a pleasant place where s/he is more likely to succeed. But in Maryam’s scenario, supervisors have their own cultural values that conflict with the democratic climate. They can misuse their power and authority to compel students to accept their ideas. Subsequently, when students complain to student services, the response is similar to those of Leila’s and Shad’s. It is hard to believe that this patriarchal behaviour happens in a Canadian graduate school. I suppose, based on the Oriental image of Middle Eastern people, that many people expect this kind of patriarchal behaviour to exist in the Middle East, but not in North America. Based on my findings I can claim that patriarchy and domination are universal, yet manifest themselves in different individuals and are not exclusive to people from the Middle East. It is about power and privilege. In Shad’s case her professors also have to adopt an inclusive teaching pedagogy that takes into consideration Shad’s interests, thoughts, life, and knowledge regarding her work. As the professors do not integrate this into their teaching method, they contribute to the fragmentation of the students’ identity, mind, and spirit.

Maheen also shares her experiences with a professor in the classroom:

“You are from a country whose experience is not related to here and our subject” [these words were from a professor in Maheen’s class and were directed at her]. However, I knew my knowledge and experience are completely related, but the professor wanted to ignore it, and even my classmates were surprised and upset at the professor’s behaviour. And they told me, “she wants to put you down.” Why the professor did so to me? [She asked the question in a sad tone.] (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

Nationality, religion, body, language, and accent are thus factors for rejecting one’s experience. According to Mohanty (1994), the politicization of gender and race in class often involves the “authorization” of marginal experiences and the creation of spaces for multiple, dissenting voices in the classroom. The authorization of experiences is thus a crucial form of student empowerment—a way for them to enter the classroom as speaking subjects. However, this focus on the centrality of experience can also lead to exclusion. It often silences those whose experiences are deemed “Other” (Mohanty, 1994, p. 153). I argue that the politicization of gender and race is integrated with ethnicity, religion, nationality, and so on, as everyone has his or her own individuality and identity. An appreciation of difference is the main core of an integrative, antiracist, feminist perspective. Therefore, every student has a right to a forum for active and meaningful dialogue that produces and accepts diverse knowledge. While Maheen is deprived of such an opportunity, she is aware of her situation and questions the power and authority of her
professor. Maheen’s marginalization is similar to the exclusion of Maryam in the sense that they feel a fragmentation of self and identity.

In another interview, Shaad, who wears a hijab, experiences intolerance at her workplace. She states:

To me, *multiculturalism is a racist concept*. At my work, some colleagues are biased and preoccupied, and because of my language and my accent, they push me and manipulate my thoughts and my words. For example, one of my colleagues pushed me and even changed my words to the manager, and when I noticed and revealed his tendency, he told me, “I can put a ring around your neck and kill you.” I laughed and told him, “You can do it, but then you won’t have a team leader.” (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

Shaad realized from her experience that multiculturalism inherently is a concept that intertwines with racism and discrimination. The concept of democratic racism that Henry and Tator (1994) elaborate in their work in order to argue that racialized people’s experiences do not fit with established rules in a multicultural neo-liberal society. In a multicultural environment, there is always a dominant culture and “Other” cultures that, according to Ng (2005), are ethnic groups. Thus, “the Other” is inherently structured in a multicultural society. Henry Giroux in 1988 (as cited in Rezai-Rashti, 1995) states that “multiculturalism should mean analyzing not just stereotypes but also how institutions produce racism and other forms of discrimination” (p. 88). Hutt (2000) and Braden (2000) analyzed the marginalization of black people who suffered from the paraphrasing/censoring of their thoughts in a graduate school dominated by racist white students. An inclusive society requires self-articulating racialized voices in mainstream culture. But the question is, how can a multicultural capitalist/neo-liberalist and racist society structure itself to include diverse people?

Returning to Shaad’s interview, we find that language and accent are related to the first-generation immigrants who came to Canada as adults. The mainstream image of these immigrants relates directly to the negative political image of their first country. Do French, British, German, or Italian accents incite the same hatred in mainstream society as Iranian, Chinese, or Indian accents? Is it because the reputation of political Iran is not like that of France or Italy? Shaad is a professional and a team leader, yet she is threatened with murder in her professional environment. How can Shaad feel secure and safe in such a situation? And how can she engage her body, mind, and spirit in her workplace?

Following the pattern of Shaad’s exclusion in her workplace, Maheen states the following:

At my workplace, they stared at me, “Are you are in the master’s program?” And I said, “Yes, I am.” They can’t believe it and said, “Oh, oh … YOU, YOU!” [with a surprised tone] “Are you in master’s program?” And I said, “Yes, I am.” *And they said it was impossible*. In other words, I am a source of encouragement for them. When they see a second-language Muslim woman is in a master’s program, some of them started to continue their study. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

In this scenario, Maheen is marginalized based on the stereotype that a Muslim woman cannot be a master’s student. To my understanding, this kind of conversation is dehumanizing to a person, it is
Marginalization and Leadership • 53

an emotional assault (Hoda, Zeeba, and Shaad encountered the same stigma). In Maheen’s story, the mainstream could not accept her as an educated woman, and perhaps her colleagues are hesitant to have a racialized body as a leader. According to Maheen, her presence in graduate school encourages white colleagues to continue their studies in graduate school so as not to be left behind by a racialized body. However, the unanswered question remains: Why, at the workplace, do people feel at liberty to act in racist ways towards Maheen? Is it the result of racist and capitalist education that is imposed in Euro-American society? It has become evident that while we are living, studying, and working in a so-called multicultural society, racist behaviour is still prominent in our daily lives, and according to Bannarji (2000), it is a very common behaviour that most people are not aware of. In other words, democratic racism exists as a result of multiculturalism in a racist society, and it manifests itself in various sectors (Henry & Tator, 1994).

Zeeba also shares her experience in the workplace:

In my work I have also experienced being put down. In my recent work I felt someone wanted to interfere with my work … his purpose was taking away my tasks and my position to show the supervisor that my work is devalued and he is an expert and is faster than me. So it was a challenge for me to prove again my work and ability. I had to convince my supervisor that I could do my work and my colleague intentionally took it over. My supervisor told me, “I am worried about those employees who can’t work together”… This taught me to stop complaining. If my supervisor wanted to choose one of us, for sure he would choose that person because he is a Canadian white man with English as his first language, and he has more experience in that company than I did … My supervisor asked me, “Why did that person interfere with your work, and not someone else’s?” So it was my feeling that when we complain, it is not just the subject that is under review but it is other issues as well, everything comes under judgment, maybe my religion, hijab, nationality, and language. Huge issues came to my mind as maybe my supervisor thinks I am different from others and cannot culturally match them. Or, maybe my supervisor thinks it is only me who complains and others don’t do that and for my case it goes back to my culture and other factors. Finally, my supervisor accepted my rationality, but that person again interfered in my work and always professionally bothered me, but I cannot complain again … so now I got a lesson, never complain in Canada. (Interview, summer 2008; italics added)

Zeeba was ultimately the winner in the above challenge in that she successfully proved her abilities to her supervisor, but she learned a lesson: Don’t complain in Canadian society. This happened to her because in a neo-liberal society the product is more important than people, and people’s relationships are treated as industry tools and they are considered unimportant. In the philosophy of neo-liberalism, all human and social life is the product of conformity to market forces. So, there is no distinction between a market economy and a market society. There is only the market, market society, market culture, market values, and market persons marketing themselves to other market persons (Treanor, 2005, p. 11). Following the above statement, I can argue that in the white, male-dominated workplace, racialized minority women do not have the agency and privilege necessary to break the discrimination and marginalization. Thus, the question arises, if racialized immigrant minority women have to be silent and obedient, how will social justice apply in Canadian schools and society? How can social and institutional change happen if we have to apply “no complaining” rules in our workplaces or schools?
Discussion and Conclusion

Although my interviewees encountered marginalization and racism, due to Iran’s social-political and cultural climate they preferred to stay in Canada. Compared to life in Iran and even with all pain and suffering they encounter in their graduate school and workplaces here, staying in Canada made them happier. They adopted strategies for overcoming the barriers and also they empowered themselves by connecting to their self and identity. The intersection of their nationality, culture, ethnicity, even language and accent, and (for some) religion, connects to their identity: who they are and what they want to be are sources of internal strength. In other words, external factors such as an instructor’s behaviour in the classroom, a thesis supervisor’s role, student services, or indifferent or hostile colleagues at work did not cause my participants to internalize their marginalization. This is because, in general, their past education and experience in Iran made them strong and knowledgeable people who have life goals; they immigrated to Canada for a better education and life and for justice and equality. They have very resilient personalities, which permit them to pursue their goals as well as the passion to pursue their education, and these factors enable them to tolerate discrimination in school and society. Moreover, the current situation in Iran contributes further to their willingness to tolerate their struggles in Canada. Thus instability around the globe can benefit developed countries like Canada. Canada’s immigration laws have become increasingly restrictive to professionals from unstable places, and so, Canada can select the “best” of the world.

Participants in this research adopted different strategies for empowering themselves. For example, they worked hard, tried to ignored racism/oppression/marginalization, practiced patience, increased their spirituality, shared their stories with sympathetic people, and employed different forms of therapy, such as biking, walking, and writing. None of them mentioned that the university student services helped them to cope or to follow up on the racist behavior; instead, they connected with their inner strength. These factors are also connected to their nationality, culture, family support, identity, and pride for their Iranian heritage. For some, though not all, the Islamic religion inspired them to actively participate in the social and economic development of Canadian society by not internalizing oppression and marginalization. They tried to connect themselves to their faith and to overcome barriers. In general, by applying a strategy of resistance, they hope to achieve leadership positions in their jobs and to inspire change and justice.

At the time of writing this article, I can report that two participants are still in graduate school, two are hunting for employment, one continues her education as a post-doctoral student, and the remaining six are employed professionals. Needless to say, there are many successful female Iranian Immigrants in the Canadian academy and workforce, but there is no academic research about them. In the future, we can extend our research to professionals of Iranian descent in order to elaborate their strategies for success in the Canadian context. Regarding the limitations of this research, I am aware that this research did not cover male Iranian immigrant students or second-generation Iranians. Such research would enable us to analyze gender differences and the impact of cultural adaptation in one’s inclusion in or exclusion from Canadian higher education.

Following my research, I would recommend that the same research be conducted for other racialized bodies in Canadian higher education context. We need to have a community of knowers, so it is worthwhile to contextualize their voices in order to have a more productive and inclusive Canadian citizenry.
Solutions for Engagement in Graduate Schools

"[T]he university is a place in the world and the world is in it"
(Brecht, cited in Bannerji, 2000, p.114)

Academia is the state apparatus for shaping society and educating specific nations and citizenship; it is the state’s ideology in an intelligent structure. Higher education trains people, the market determines what kind of people the state needs in terms of education, skills and attitude, and then the power behind the market sets the curriculum. It follows a neo-liberal agenda. Thus, I argue that dramatic changes should be applied to universities, and that, across the early and higher educational spectrum, inclusive, anti-racist education must be adopted. Education systems are complicit in continuing racism and discrimination. Schools should be decolonized and made to be inclusive; the content and methodology of teaching should be directed towards having bias-free people in order to have healthy and happy citizens. To achieve this goal, I recommend the following:

1. Decolonize teaching methodology. Graduate school needs critical pedagogy not only in its content, but also in the method. A critical (feminist) approach allows diverse students to contribute their history, knowledge, and experience to others’ knowledge production. And this process of decolonization facilitates change in the academic environment.

2. Create a strong, active, and meaningful connection between faculty and graduate students; engage them in social and cultural activities.

3. Employ self-evaluation by faculties, effective evaluation of faculties and student services employees.

4. Encourage an antiracist perspective among institutions at all levels; organize workshops, field trips, and teamwork events.

5. Don’t interfere in foreign policy that affects the people in those countries.

Workplace Engagement for Social Change

Education has a critical role to play in shaping people’s behaviour, knowledge, and beliefs. We also have to consider that our identities are multilayered, shaped by race, gender, culture, religion, nationality, and so on. The attempt to integrate the above factors in the workplace can be a source of racism when the power hierarchy imposes its customs on others. Integrative anti-racist education provides us with the motivation and methodology to examine these power relationships and to pursue the question of injustice. This is why the educational system has a tremendous role to play in people’s knowledge construction. I offer suggestions for extending this to the workplace:

1. Encourage an anti-racist perspective in the workplace through workshops, field trips, and teamwork events.
2. Encourage people to report racist and discriminating behaviour. This encouragement can be through giving a prize and/or writing a note of appreciation in the employee’s file.

3. Invite anti-racist scholars to present their relevant works in different workplaces and engage employees in discussion about their own experiences.

4. Encourage dialogue among employees. Sometimes people are not aware of the effect of their behaviour on others. I believe that conversation is the best solution for removing conflict.
References


Appendix

Interview Guide

Part One: Iranian Women Graduate Students’ Education and Experience

1. What was your educational background in Iran?
2. What was your work experience in Iran?
3. What was your main reason for coming to Canada?
4. What is your main reason for continuing your study?
5. What are your challenges in Canadian academia in terms of choosing courses, having a supervisor, connecting with other students and faculty members, and regarding the general atmosphere of your school?
6. What kind of support do you get in academia in terms of financial, emotional, and intellectual? And in what ways?
7. What has been the impact of Iranian education and experience on your success in Canadian school and society? Explain.
8. What is the family support for your study?
9. Do you have any connection with the Iranian community? In what ways?
10. What is your experience as an Iranian woman in Canadian society?
11. Do you feel any pressure in school, family, Iranian community, and society as a whole? If so, what kind of strategy do you use for coping with?
12. How do you define yourself as an Iranian woman? Do you have a sense of “belonging” to the academia and society? Explain.

Part Two: Participant’s Information

1. What is your name?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your relationship status? What is your partner’s occupation/education?
5. Do you have children? If so, how many and what are their ages?
6. What university did you attend in Iran?
7. What program did you study in Iran?
8. What degree did you receive in Iran?
9. What year did you come to Canada?
10. What year did you start your Canadian graduate school?
11. What is the name of the school and program?
12. What degree will you have earned?