

Precarious Employment Experiences in Toronto: A Literature-Based Visual Ethnography of South Asian Women (SAW) in the Food Service Industry

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ABSTRACT: Immigrants are an important part of the global economy as more people leave their birth countries in search of better lives. In the global chain of labor and capitalist market systems, migration and precarious employment have become an inevitable outcome. However, research has shown that the experiences of migration do not always lead to positive outcomes for new immigrants in a new country. The present paper focuses on South Asian women (SAW) in Toronto to explore their experiences as immigrants in a developed country. The study employs literature-based ethnography as its method and a political ecology framework to understand the argument that precarious employment situations create an environment for SAW to become ethnic entrepreneurs, specifically food caterers, in their struggle for survival. The analysis reveals that the desire for freedom and alternative routes for survival after poor experiences in Canada's labor market is a key factor in SAW's development as ethnic entrepreneurs. These women weave a network of friends, family, customers, neighbors, emotions, and finances through their domestic skills of food preparation and entrepreneurship. This reveals the facts of an unequal system of aggregation in the city ecology of Toronto. Inspired by Andrew Causey's (2016) *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method*, this paper aims to capture the experience of a day in the life of a new immigrant family.

KEYWORDS: South Asian Immigrant Women, Toronto, Food Entrepreneurship, Political Ecology, Ethnography

Introduction

A family from Bangladesh has recently moved to Toronto. The wife has started working at a local food shop. The husband is still looking for a job that meets his expectations as he was a white-collar professional in his home country. Our story begins on a snowy, chilly winter's evening. He is exhausted after a long day of job hunting in the cold. He is frustrated that they have not been able to buy a car yet- this makes their transportation very difficult. He reminisces about his car and chauffeur back in Bangladesh. In this state of mind, he enters his accommodation, his rented one-bedroom apartment and looks for some cooked food in the kitchen but gets disappointed when he finds the pots empty.



Figure 1.1: Man arrives home and finds it empty. He heads to the kitchen in search of some food.



Figure 1.2: He eagerly looks into the pot on the stove, hoping to find some cooked rice and curry.

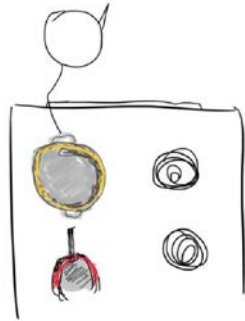


Figure 1.3: Finds pots empty. His exhaustion and disappointment bringing him to the verge of depression and anger.



Figure 1.4: With nothing else to eat, he makes himself some cereal.



Figure 1.5: His wife and three year-old son enter. She is returning from her entry-level job working in a restaurant.



Figure 1.6: "There is no food at home! You seem to be too busy to do any housework recently!" he says.



Figure 1.7: "Oh honey, this isn't Bangladesh! Do you know how my job is? Why can't you cook some food for us? And what about your job hunt?"



Figure 1.8: "Shut up! I'll go crazy! I didn't come to this country, abandoning my CEO position at the bank, and all my friends to work here at Tim Hortons! It's you who forced me to bring our family here and you want me to cook!!"



Figure 1.9: He can't take it anymore. He doesn't want to cause a scene in front of his son. He chooses to leave.



Figure 1.10: The door slams shut. The wife regrets what she said but doesn't know how to fix things.

This is not something that happens in every Bangladeshi family every day. But, there are many families that go through a similar experience. The cultural shock that immigrants face does not always propel them to do something violent but in some circumstances, it does create pent up anger. This can lead to depression and other forms of mental illness or well-being issues. Thus, there are serious issues deeply rooted in everyday experiences of cultural transitions in our society that need to be investigated and addressed. The series of images in this paper, based on anecdotes from the South Asian immigrant community in Toronto, were inspired by Andrew Causey's *A Review of Andrew Causey's Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method*. This visual storytelling depicts the importance of food, especially traditionally cooked food, in the South Asian family and community and their precocious ways of life or living which impacts their work and livelihood.

Immigrants usually move to developed countries from underdeveloped countries in search of new hopes, opportunities, and better lives, not only for themselves but for the next generations. However, reaching these countries, some of them fall into a miserable situation (Skenderovic, 2007). The reason for their miseries are basically the socio-economic barriers they face while they attempt to enter the job markets. These socio-economic barriers have been discussed from different dimensions by scholars (e.g., Ameeriar 2017, Ghosh 2019, Goldring and Landolt 2011, Maitra 2012, 2015, Ng, 2006, Vosko, MacDonald and Campbell 2009) in contemporary scholarships.

Canada has a more flexible immigration policy compared to other 1st world countries like the US, UK or Australia. The consequence is that immigrant populations are continuing to grow in Canada, and more than one in five Canadians are now foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2016). Among the total visible minority population in Toronto, South Asians are the largest (32%) group (Statistics Canada 2016). 41.9% of Canada's immigrant population from South Asian countries are female, and the number of South Asian immigrants is growing (Statistics Canada 2001, 2022, 2023). Therefore, it is my belief that this group of the population has an important contribution in the economic process and mapping of the North American economy. However, government policy analysis and research seldom address the negotiations these groups of women do regarding their skills, knowledge, and emotions while transforming into secondary professions, for example, becoming new entrepreneurs in their ethnic (refers to the traits of individuals, particularly groups sharing common, distinctive culture, language, and religion and belong to linguistic traditions of a particular country) enclaves (economy as involving "immigrant groups which concentrate in a distinct spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population." (Portes 1981, 291 cited in Maitra 2012, 123). Thus, it is not only a drastic divergence from the women's lifelong experiences and skills- skills which are devalued in their new country- but also the Canadian

economy is deprived of the maximum benefits it could earn from the educated group of women it welcomed.

The situation of these women in the Canadian labor market needs to be analyzed through an anthropological and political ecology framework as it constitutes a power relation between the immigrants and the State-led labor market. Anthropology is the discipline that takes bottom-up approaches in understanding different facets of the human experience, political and non-political (Huizer and Mannheim 1979), creating an ecology of everyday life recognized by power, politics intersecting and interlocking with the social identities of these immigrant women. As a transdisciplinary research field, political ecology addresses intricate nature-society interrelations, power imbalances, and social inequalities (Karlsson, 2015).

The paper analyzed the effects of employment precarity of educated and skilled SAW on creating an environment that encouraged them to become ethnic food entrepreneurs exploring social, cultural, economic, and political systems in urban ecology.

Objectives and Research Questions of the Study

The purpose and focus of our research were to understand and visually communicate some of the changes a new South Asian immigrant family undergoes during the process of attempting to assimilate into the culture of their new country. We examined how they faced barriers in employment during these transformations, their responses, and how they resisted those precarities and employed their knowledge and skills of food preparation to become a food entrepreneur in their new home. How does women's home catering entrepreneurship allow them to maintain their gendered role of food-maker in their own family home while using that same domestic skill of cooking to earn for that family? Therefore, food plays a significant role in exploring a social, cultural, economic, and political system through the intersections of gender, class, culture, race, memory, emotion, and different kinds of negotiations (e.g., professional, social).

Questions suggested by the formal analysis

1. What are the barriers SAW face when they attempt to enter the Canadian labor market that create the conditions for them to become ethnic entrepreneurs, specifically food caterers?
2. How could these women's relations with food explain an ever-shifting social, cultural, economic, and political system in which they must negotiate their hopes, dreams, and desires?

Method

We selected two highly relevant research papers from a wide range of policy documents for our ethnographic case studies: First, *The City of Toronto Report: Poverty and Employment in Southern Ontario (PEPSO 2014)* and second, Srabani Maitra's (2011) Ph.D. dissertation titled, *Redefining "Enterprising Selves": Exploring the "Negotiation" of South Asian Immigrant Women working as Home-Based Enclave Entrepreneurs* which I accessed through the Toronto University Library website.

The City of Toronto Report: Poverty and Employment in Southern Ontario (PEPSO 2014) was identified to provide an overview of the present precarious situation of employment in two particular parts of the city where some immigrants with similar socio-economic makeup of the South Asian immigrants reside. This report also uses the photovoice methodology which is a qualitative way to explore the respondents' employment precarity through the combination of photos and stories (Fumia, Galabuzi, Sidhu 2014, 7).



Figure 2: In [this] picture we see a stub of Ontario Works deposit and some of the main issues and worries that a person with a precarious job has in his mind (food, housing, school and children among others.) (Q1 A004)

Source: Fumia, Galabuzi, and Sidhu (2014, 8)

The second research paper, Maitra's (2011) Ph.D dissertation, was used to analyze ten cases of home caterers in Maitra's pseudonyms who had South Asian backgrounds (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka).

Theoretical Framework Used in the Research

We adopted the Feminist Political Ecology and Political Ecology of Food to analyze SAW's experiences in food entrepreneurship in Toronto.

Political Ecology (PE) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE)

Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) defined political ecology (PE) as the combination of ecological concerns and a broadly defined political economy. This succinct definition has left room for discussion around political ecology as a research agenda, an approach or a community of practice (Robbins 2012). It also fostered a number of modifiers such as the critical perspective advanced by Forsyth (2003), geographical perspective advanced by Zimmerer and Bassett (2003), urban perspective advanced by Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003), the feminist perspective advanced by Rocheleau et al (1996), post-structuralist perspective advanced by Escobar (1996), third world perspective advanced by Bryant and Bailey (1997) and first world perspectives advanced by Galt (2013) (cited in Morgues Faus, and Marsden 2017, 276).

Therefore, political ecology can have multiple disciplinary influences, most notably from geography, anthropology, sociology, environmental history, and ecological economics (Bryant and Bailey 1997). I used this inclusive approach to PE enriched from different disciplines with common philosophical and theoretical starting points that provide coherence but also leave room for difference, exploration, and debate, particularly in understanding food studies (Blaikie 2008, Neumann 2005) where women play a significant role in the survival strategies of political ecology.

Feminist political ecology (FPE), in our paper, is a critical intellectual-political site that gives people alternative thoughts to neoliberalism (Harris 2015, 162). While PE borrowed historical perspectives from Marxist political economy to critically examine the incorporation of locations and communities to the capitalist economy, and particularly the role of the state in supporting accumulation by dominant classes, FPE has modified political economy as a response to the absence of gender as a variable of analyzes in political ecology in considering how the field missed the importance of the gendered social identity (Neumann 2005). The

modified nature of the political economy that FPE presents is why it will be a useful resource for the present research. It will provide context in understanding the issues that the SAW face in Canada when it comes to accessing opportunities in the labor market.

Political Ecology of Food (PEF)

My central analysis comes from political ecologists of food anthropology, Jarvenpa (2008), who argues, drawing examples from historical experiences in procurement, processing, and presentation of food in Dene (Chipewyan) hunter-fishers in north-central Canada and subarctic farmers in northeastern Finland. He shows how food patterns and codes are part of social and symbolic means by which people negotiate tensions and contradictions between local ecology and supra-local political economy (15). He suggests that food culture may be an incredibly creative symbolic dimension of political ecology, which means its role in the political ecology of food deserves further exploration (2008, 20-23). He intertwined [Powers and Powers' 1984] the framework of "food systems symbolically mediate between subordinate and dominant" with Dove's (1999) ideas of "agronomy of memory" to conclude that the juxtaposition of historically familiar foods acts as a communication form and a means of inserting the past into social present's narrower vision (p. 20). The framework will also be useful to the research of interest since it will help in the identification of the reasons why SAW chose to take the home catering route as their solution to the challenges they faced in the Canadian labor market. It will help identify the key reasons behind their decision-making and how they feel about their venture despite the challenges of resource access and exploring a system in which they are devalued.

Literature Review

Ethnic Entrepreneurs in Ethnic Enclaves

Taking the lead from Maitra (2011), I assumed ethnic enclaves have two basic characteristics: first, concentration of co-ethnic residences, and enterprises whose owners and employees will mostly belong to the same co-ethnic groups (Portes and Bach 1985; Light, Sabagh, and Bozorgmehr 1994 cited in Maitra 2011). Although ethnic enclaves are not new in Canada (e.g., Bangla Town, Chinatown, Little India, or Little Italy), ethnic enclaves have only caught scholars' attention in recent times in the contexts of the disadvantages faced by immigrants of colour (Maitra 2011). Second, enclaves are the places where immigrants can absorb the economic negativities in the process of immigration and transformation when there is a lack of opportunities in the outside labor market (Murdie and Teixeira 2000 cited in Maitra 2011).

Maitra (2011) gives the reference of Qadeer and Kumar's (2006) calculation of the presence of various institutions like churches, temples, mosques, apartment complexes, restaurants and other business and cultural organizations that made South Asian enclaves successfully established in places like Mississauga, Brampton, northern Etobicoke, Flemingdon Park, Thorncliffe Park in East York or St. JamesTown in Toronto.

Historical and political facts of South Asian Women's inclusion in the Canadian economy

The transformation of traditional household dynamics in advanced industrial countries has left unresolved questions about domestic labor and caregiving (Giles and Arat-Koc 1994). Even prominent feminists struggled to address the "crisis of the domestic sphere" (Tong 1998; Arat-Koc 1999), with domestic labor historically intertwined with racism and immigration (Federici 2014; Arat-Koc 1999). Canadian immigration policy underwent significant shifts, particularly from the 1970s onward, moving from a focus on maintaining ethnic homogeneity to prioritizing skills and market demands (Fong 2006). This transformation dramatically altered the immigrant population's composition, with Toronto becoming a microcosm of these changes. In this connection, we can recall Ng's (2009) critical research on how employment agencies commodified immigrant women in the labor market, reproducing class relations. The 'family class' immigration policy strategically

positioned women as supportive entities, engaging them in precarious work rather than mainstream employment, exemplifying the intersectional dynamics of race, class, and gender.

Employment Precarity

The contemporary understanding of labor market dynamics reveals a complex landscape of marginalization, particularly for immigrant populations, through the theoretical lens of precarity. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels used the idea of precariousness to describe the labor condition of England which Marx later used in *Capital*, Vol.1. “In line with Marx’s conceptions of the floating, latent, stagnant, and pauperized populations constituting the industrial reserve army, Bourdieu associated precariousness particularly with what he called the ‘subproletariat’” (Jonna and Foster 2016, 1). Immigrant populations frequently encounter employment scenarios that lack traditional benefits, a situation social scientists term ‘precarity’ (Vosko, 2006). Goldring and Landolt (2011) further illuminate how immigration status—whether legal or illegal—creates long-term adverse employment consequences, demanding critical examination at individual, local, and national levels. This systemic exclusion is particularly pronounced for immigrant women, who often find themselves navigating complex intersections of race, gender, and economic marginalization. In recent years, debates grew when Standing (2011, 2014) termed the ‘precariat’ as a distinct class (see Breman 2013, Braga 2016, Wright 2016, Scully 2016, Paret 2016, Bhattacharya and Kesar 2020, Munck 2020, Wilson 2020) and argued that that the globalization chain of capitalism had brought the ‘precariat class’ into the forefront irrespective of different contexts (e.g., migrants, students, women, temporary care workers, agricultural laborers) (Standing 2011). However, a significant research gap exists in understanding immigrant women’s experiences, particularly in feminized sectors like food service and home catering. While Amerrier (2017) and Ghosh (2019) discuss employment barriers, they overlook the critical contributions of women working in restaurant kitchens and home-based catering—sectors often invisible in economic measurements like GDP. This invisibility represents a profound academic and economic oversight that minimizes the economic contributions of immigrant women.

Key Findings and Analysis

Based on key findings from *The City Report* (2014) and Maitra’s (2011) Ph.D dissertation, this research explores the complex intersections of employment, food ecology, and immigrant experiences, focusing on South Asian women (SAW) in Toronto who transform precarious employment conditions into entrepreneurial opportunities.

Toronto’s diverse urban landscape, comprising 140 neighborhoods reflecting various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, provides a critical context for understanding immigrant experiences (Fumia, Galabuzi, Sidhu 2014). The city’s poverty report (Fumia, Galabuzi, and Sidhu 2014) highlights that recent immigrants and racialized communities disproportionately experienced employment precarity and food insecurity. The research reveals that traditional solutions like food banks are inadequate, as accessing healthy food becomes increasingly difficult for those working irregular, part-time jobs. The following figures highlight the prevalence of food insecurity in the city, especially among immigrants in precarious employment. However, there is a gap in research investigating whether food insecurity leads immigrant women to become food entrepreneurs, which allows them to fulfill their domestic role while earning an income.



Figure 3: ... “most often I can’t get there when the food bank is open or I have to miss a day of work to go to only receive unhealthy or expired food. [...] I use the food bank every month and I find it helpful to offset what I can’t afford at the grocery store or risk shoplifting”.

Source: Fumia, Galabuzi, Sidhu (2014, 11)



Figure 4: “My cupboard [is...] basically empty because of my precarious job... more funding allocated to food banks, increase in work wages and more work opportunities – these are the resources that I need to get out of this situation.”

Source: Fumia, Galabuzi, Sidhu (2014, 12)



Figure 5: “The changes that I have noticed in my neighborhood are more drop-ins. When someone doesn’t eat well, they can be sparked easily. It doesn’t matter what you say or do, people need food. [...] When the city changed the structure of Regent Park, it put in new drop-ins. But there’s no food. The meals are very small. The food is expired. You must get to the food fast, because if you miss the time slot, you’re done. You must then wait until the next shift. If you missed the last call, your day is done.”

Source: Fumia, Galabuzi, Sidhu (2014, 19)

Even though we do not have literature that establishes a causal relation for whether some SAW become food entrepreneurs due to their food insecurity. However, there is existing literature on the fact that many SAW enter food entrepreneurship due to employment precarity (Maitra 2011). While these women attempt to get access to the professional career, they go through correctional processes in employment workshops. Maitra (2011) and Ameeriar (2017) describe these workshop centres as "shadow states" that attempt to reshape immigrant women's behaviors and communication styles. One respondent, Laxmi, shared her experience of being taught to sit straight, make eye contact, and speak without an accent—a process that fundamentally challenges their existing identities.

Ng's (1988) analysis of the term "immigrant woman" provides critical insight into these systemic challenges. The term inherently carries market-based assumptions about women from the Global South, positioning them as cheap, docile labor ready to work under exploitative conditions. This categorization establishes a predetermined class position that marginalises immigrant women before they even enter the workforce.

Despite these challenges, South Asian immigrant women remain critically aware and resilient. Using Jarvenpa's (2008) theory, we can relate SAW's negotiations of tensions and contradictions in the ecology of Toronto: how they try to preserve their culture through maintaining their food preparation, delivery, and consumption traditions in the face of pressures to assimilate. Maitra (2011) highlights how these women challenge implicit assumptions about their capabilities, questioning the Canadian labor market's racialized and gendered practices. The immigration process itself is rigorous, with immigrants like Leena describing extensive documentation requirements that paradoxically position them as "assets" while simultaneously rendering their existing skills invisible.

Maitra (2011) argues that countries like Canada are fundamentally dependent on immigrants for economic and demographic prosperity. Immigrants are attracted by material affluence and occupational opportunities, with women particularly motivated by desires to establish themselves and build better futures for their families. The process of becoming ethnic entrepreneurs emerges as a critical survival strategy for these women. When traditional employment routes are blocked, these women transform their domestic skills—particularly food preparation—into entrepreneurial opportunities.

The concept of "manipulation" offers another lens for understanding their agency. In Toronto, these women found opportunities to challenge rigid patriarchal structures from their home countries, negotiating new forms of independence and self-determination.

Ameeriar (2017) describes this process as "settling bodies"—a neoliberal approach where immigrants are encouraged to help themselves, effectively transforming them into self-governing entrepreneurial subjects. This process goes beyond mere survival, representing a profound act of resistance and creativity.

The overqualification phenomenon further illustrates these challenges. Saadiya's experience—having a master's degree but being unable to secure appropriate employment—demonstrates the systemic failure to evaluate and integrate immigrant skills consistently. Ultimately, home food catering becomes more than an economic strategy for these women; it represents a complex negotiation between traditional cultural values and modern capitalist economic structures. Food transforms from a domestic skill to a medium of cultural expression, economic survival, and personal empowerment.

The research reveals food entrepreneurship as a nuanced form of agency. These women are not merely passive victims of systemic marginalisation but active agents who creatively transform constraints into opportunities. They negotiate gender, culture, race, and economic structures through their culinary enterprises.

The research ultimately calls for more comprehensive, gender-sensitive approaches to immigrant integration, recognizing the diverse skills, experiences, and strategies that immigrants—particularly women—bring to their host countries.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the above secondary resources, I would like to draw attention to two aspects: In the Canadian labor market, SAW's ability to work is primarily determined by her race and attire (Western or Traditional to their own culture) and they must undergo formal assimilation (or "correctional") processes- ones that do not guarantee access to her desired labor market (Maitra 2011; Ng 1988). Canadian immigration policy demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding in addressing immigrant needs from the initial entry point (Fong 2006).

The precarious employment environment compels SAW to become ethnic entrepreneurs, particularly in food catering, as a survival strategy (Ameeriari 2017). Through entrepreneurship, these women creatively weave networks of family, community, and emotional resources, transforming domestic skills into economic opportunities. This process reveals the unequal systemic structures that marginalize immigrant women, suggesting the need for a political ecology of food framework to develop gender-sensitive employment policies in Toronto (Maitra 2011). Therefore, I suggest adopting a political ecology of food framework to develop a gender-based employment policy for the immigrant population in the city of Toronto.

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