

LEARNINING AND ACTIVISM: IRANIAN WOMEN IN DIASPORA

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study looks at the learning that takes place during activism. Throughout this work, learning is conceptualized as the ongoing formation of critical consciousness rather than the acquisition of skills for the purpose of securing menial employment.

Furthermore, critical consciousness is seen to develop through the non-linear interplay of thoughts and actions. This investigation uses the life history method to explore the learning of five Iranian women throughout decades of struggle against repressive social structures. It focuses on questions of motivation for activism, formation of critical consciousness, and activism in diaspora. At the theoretical level, this study criticizes current learning theories while its educational implications place critical consciousness as the goal of radical adult education. On a practical level, this investigation records successful political study groups and suggests such groups as models for sites of radical adult education.

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There is an old Persian saying, “This is how it’s been since the beginning of time”; meaning, *why bother trying to change anything*. This study allowed me to admire the women who have turned these ‘common sense’ thoughts on their heads. I thank Goli, Mehri, Nooshin, Shirin, and Ava for not only letting me inside their lives but also for questioning and changing what others thought could not be changed.

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Dedication

To Khashayar, Morvarid, and Yasamin.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This study is about learning in social action. Throughout this research, “social action” is used and refers to struggle against repressive social structures such as patriarchy, monarchy, and state fundamentalism. I believe that the goal of critical adult education is to generate critical consciousness which leads to progressive change in material social conditions; thus, the point of departure for inquiry is actual, sensuous human activity. This human activity is relational; meaning it is either part of or the result of a relation. The framework which I employ to understand learning in social action is one anchored in dialectical social relations, meaning I look closely at the relationship between thought and action (parts of a relationship) and I view learning as the ongoing formation of one’s consciousness (result). In other words, I believe in the cyclical (non-linear) interplay of thoughts and action and, thus, pay close attention to the theory of praxis. The approach which I take to understand learning in social action is one which is rooted in the development of critical consciousness throughout decades of struggle of Iranian women.

In order to understand the social phenomenon of learning in social action, I have looked at the learning of several Iranian women who were politically active

in opposing first the monarchy prior to the 1979 revolution, then against the post-revolutionary regime, and later in diaspora. Many Iranian women have immigrated abroad after the 1979 revolution. Some of these women were active in opposing state-defined social, cultural, and political norms in Iran and were involved in struggle against social and political repression. After the revolution, these women continued their activity and effort for fighting for social justice until the new regime forced them into exile. Some of the women, now in the diaspora, are still involved in struggle for social justice and have brought with them a wealth of knowledge and experience in exercising and demanding their democratic rights. It is crucial for this knowledge to be brought into the open for other activists to learn from. It is also important to make this knowledge known in order to contribute to the exchange of ideas between progressive activists and to contribute to the diversity of such ideas. These women have organized, formed study groups, written and dispersed political leaflets, broadcasted subversive ideas, taken up arms in guerilla warfare, lived in mountain military bases, taught literacy in poor neighbourhoods, and conducted consciousness-raising campaigns throughout cities. The consciousness formed through these experiences dwarfs any knowledge gained through formal schooling. Although they have acquired activist skills (skills to organize, mobilize, and agitate), these skills stem from a critical understanding of their surroundings. It is the informal learning of these women and the formation of their critical consciousness throughout decades of struggle which I explore in this study.

Personal Attachment to Study

My interest in this research topic starts at a time when I had no aspirations of pursuing another master's degree. In fact, it starts from a day in 1999 when I took a taxi to downtown Tehran to pick up my Certificate of Completion of a Master's of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language. As I approached the university, I was dumbfounded by what I saw: crowds of students chanting anti-government slogans in the street. As a daughter of a former political prisoner, I was well aware of the dangers of engaging in subversive activity in Iran from my father's narratives and later from written texts (Ardavan, 2007; Agah, Parsi & Mehr, 2007). As I looked on, I was amazed at the courage I saw around me but especially the courage shown by young women. The compulsory scarves were now being used to cover parts of their faces. They marched chanting slogans, making demands, fists in the air. One young girl, who is etched in my memory, stood in the middle of the road looking up at the apartments around her shouting, "Women, come out of your homes. These are your children that are being beaten; these are your children that are being killed."

I stood intoxicated by the energy in the air but at the same time in fear for my safety. Then suddenly I heard helicopters overhead and an explosion. The crowd started running, many still shouting, and some stayed to confront the troops. I, needless to say, ran. I could hear screams, sirens, and the thumps of batons hitting flesh. I kept running until suddenly I had to stop. I could see an army bus parked ten meters in front of me. Guards were throwing anyone they could get their hands on into the bus.

Nine years have passed since that day. I managed to get home and a week later left for Canada. However, I often think about the girls on that bus. What happened to them? Where were they taken? Did any of them get back home?

Although these questions will never be answered, they gave way to some of the questions that guide my research. These questions are: What motivates such courage (What are the catalysts)? What understanding gives way to such action and as a result of the action, how does one's consciousness alter? How does this revolutionary consciousness develop and form? At what point do these young people decide to "make their own history"?

What are the Catalysts?

To understand what motivates a person to risk her life to influence social change, I set out to read the literature which explained such phenomenon. When I began this research, I was very much influenced by Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and Social Movement Theory (SMT). Being the dominant theories which explain the motivation behind activism, these theories have influenced adult education literature greatly. Thus, throughout my interviews, I repeatedly insisted on inquiring about a catalytic moment, as suggested by TLT and SMT, in the lives of my participants. However, I soon realized that such a moment did not exist in the lives of these Iranian women. From their social location, contradictions were always visible. There was never a time in their lives when they were not aware of the existence of oppression; they did not have an awakening due to a shocking dilemma. Rather when they witnessed such dilemmas, they only served to substantiate what they already knew. Thus, their

consciousness grew and was reaffirmed. In this section, I will explain the basic assumptions of Transformative Learning Theory and Social Movement Theory and I will end with the shortcomings of these theories to explain the reality of non-white, non-Western women.

Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow (1991) states that we hold various worldviews or *meaning perspectives* as they relate to personal and social issues, such as democracy and freedom and we can transform these perspectives in a safe environment where reflection through dialogue with other group members who challenge our previously held views occurs. Conflict or “disorienting dilemmas” are necessary requirements to challenge previously held assumptions “that have dulled our senses and become like old shoes, comfortable but not particularly meaningful anymore” (Scott, 1998). Critical reflection is “the process of unveiling the social, economic, and political dynamics of oppressions that are embedded in everyday situations and practices and of becoming aware of the socially constructed nature of our beliefs, values, ideas and tastes” (Schugurensky, 2002:61). Also, one becomes aware that the newly held perspectives have more value. The catalyst for critical reflection, according to Mezirow, is a *disorienting dilemma*. When confronted with a situation that does not fit in with one’s existing meaning perspective, disequilibrium occurs. Transformative experiences are those which challenge our expectations and serve to enlighten the lifeworld thus defying the collective discourse (Mezirow, 1997; Habermas, 1996). To resolve this

disorientation, one critically examines one's assumptions, beliefs, and values. The resulting pressure from this uncomfortable dilemma may lead one to seek a new meaning perspective. The next step in the transformation process is *perspective taking*. This means seeking the perspective of others who also have developed a more critical awareness. This step is of importance in looking at a social movement where the influence of other critical thinkers within a movement does to some level shape one's thinking. While in touch with other critical thinkers, one becomes aware of alternative perspectives and the possibility of change becomes a reality. Here one must decide whether or not to embrace the new perspective and take the actions it requires. In this final step, the support of others with the same perspective may be necessary. As the person experiences cycles of perspective transformation, *maturation* occurs. That is, old, local, uncritical meaning perspectives give way to more discriminating, inclusive perspectives consciously adopted. One must then act according to these new perspectives.

Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory (SMT) seeks to explain the reasons for mobilization, the forms which action for social change takes, and the political and social consequences of it. The functionalist social account that claims that system equilibrium is a natural societal condition has had a great influence of Social Movement Theory. For functionalists, external structural strains produce grievances and create a pathological dysfunction that can cause political

instability. The result then becomes social frustration and political disorder (Huntington, 1968; Faksh, 1997). This model claims a linear casual relationship in which structural strains cause psychological discomfort which in turn causes collective action. Therefore, movements are seen as escape mechanisms through which individuals regain a sense of belonging and empowerment. Middle Eastern social movements have been explained using this framework.

For many scholars (Waltz, 1986; Dekmejian, 1995; Hoffman, 1995; Faksh, 1997) this socio-psychological approach speaks to Middle Eastern activism. They claim that at the height of developmentalism in the Middle East, many countries adopted Western modernization models which echoed in the education system, clothing styles, secularization, and languages and that this transformation of values along with the devastating defeat in the 1967 war with Israel served as stimuli for social frustration.

Aside from the socio-psychological understanding, some scholars argue that socioeconomic factors are the essential cause of activism in the Middle East (Ibrahim, 1980; Ansari, 1984; Munson, 1986; Waltz, 1986). These scholars believe that socioeconomic factors are the main cause and tend to study the socioeconomic status of activists. Ibrahim (1996) shows that recruits are being motivated by socioeconomic pressures. There is also the argument of ‘response to cultural imperialism’ as catalysts. These scholars use Huntington’s (1996) language of “clash of civilizations” as their starting point and view mobilization as a response to Western desire to undermine Islamic culture (Burgat & Dowell, 1993; Wiktorowicz & Taji-Farouki, 2000).

Some scholars (Dekmejian, 1995; Esposito, 1992) apply the social strain argument to predicting the level of activism. These scholars claim that the shape of the activism correlates with the degree of the crisis. Dekmejian argues, “The scope and intensity of the fundamentalist reaction, ranging from spiritual awakening to revolutionary violence, depends on the depth and pervasiveness of the crisis environment” (1995:6). Esposito (1992) also believes that increased strain elicits increased response.

The structural strain and resulting discontent approach to understanding social movements has faced strong criticism for being overly simplistic and unrealistic. In fact, my research does not support notions of “disorienting dilemmas” and “reactions to strains.” The structural strains approach disregards the deliberate, political, organized dimension of movements. If strains and discomfort and dilemmas are the alleged catalysts, then movements are reduced to coping mechanisms and activists are mere dysfunctional beings. I have found that the activists whom I interviewed are politically conscious, aware, rational members of society who have focused their attention purposefully upon political activism. Social action that is the result of complex thought and critical reading, analysis, and debate is action that has a deliberate ideological position.

Social Movements and Adult Education

To critical adult educators, the source of knowledge and its purpose is important. Knowledge gained through action for social justice has great significance for critical adult educators. The goal of critical adult education

should be to develop critical consciousness which may be used to change actual social conditions. However, with the explosion of Human Capital Theory onto the education scene in the 1990s, learning in all its forms has been individualized and commodified (Gorman, 2002). Human Capital Theory posits that people's learning capacities can be tapped into just as any natural resource and if correctly extracted, the results can be profitable both for the enterprise and for society as a whole (Livingstone, 1997). Many adult educators (Livingstone, 1997; Livingstone, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 2001) have attempted to revise Human Capital Theory along "more inclusive and equitable lines" by recognizing new forms of learning. These 'critics' do not question the basic fundamentals of an individualized and commodified notion of education, rather they argue for more inclusiveness. They believe that underemployment and under-education can be combated by recognizing and credentializing informal learning in order to include marginalized groups into jobs. This alleviates the state of much responsibility to educate its citizenry and oppressive relations of race, gender, and class which are imbricated within the capitalist system and are a necessary part are left unchallenged. At a time when governments were cutting public spending on education, Human Capital Theory helped to find new and unfunded areas where learning occurs. It was in this climate that notions of informal learning including learning through social action gained currency in adult education literature.

The 90's saw a new discourse emerging in the adult education research community. Social movements exploded into the scene of adult education with articles by Finger (1989), Hart (1990), Quigley (1991), Cunningham (1992),

Welton (1993), and Holford (1995). These articles were enthusiastically introducing social movements as a site not yet “tapped into” by adult education. Also, papers questioning the professionalization of adult education were seen in journals (Alexander, 1991; Welton 1991; Finger, 1991). Holst even claims that “social movement and civil society politics is the dominant paradigm in radical adult education today and will define the theory and practice of this area of the field in the near future” (2002:7). The reason behind this emergence, Holst explains, is “the crisis of Marxism” which emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century with capitalism’s continued ability to heal economic crisis, doubts over the possibility of revolution, and an attack on theory (Eagleton, 2003).

However, this new paradigm is not without its critics. Some theorists (Holst, 2002) doubt that the temporary, middle class nature of the new social movements could be anything but reformist and thus easily co-opted. This perspective is largely skeptical of the radical pluralists (also called post-Marxists or radical democrats) who claim social movements to be authentic sites of social transformation.

Holst (2002) posits two major approaches to adult learning within social movements which he names the socialist approach and the radical pluralist approach. The socialist approach incorporates a perspective which asserts that there is a material dialectic of class struggle underlying all social movements. The radical pluralist perspective takes a post-Marxist approach turning to Habermas and Gramsci for inspiration. The radical pluralist perspective of learning within social movements draws on notions of hegemony and civil society

and positions new social movements (NSMs) in opposition to the state and economy to create a civil society (Welton 1993, 2001, 2002). These theorists see NSMs as sites of informal and nonformal adult learning which serves to democratize civil society which in turn promotes deliberative democracy and opposes the ‘colonization of the lifeworld’ (Welton, 1993). Here, social movements are not only sites of adult learning (Kilgore, 1999) but also those of “cognitive praxis” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1999) and knowledge production (Welton, 1993). They open up new spaces for thought as well as individual and collective transformation where the lifeworld is protected against ‘system intrusion’.

Both the socialist and post-Marxist perspectives of learning and participating within social movements are problematic. The theorizing of the radical pluralists fails to adequately problematize the role of the state in hidden oppression and manufacturing consent. At the root lies a lack of understanding of the nature of the state and how in representative democracies, our political activity is alienated from us and divested in others. Within a representative democracy, civil society and the state became conceptualized as separate arenas of human activity. Thus, political struggle that is outside of the framework of government, although tolerated as long as it does not attempt to change roots of a problem, is not considered authentic politics. Firstly, the role of overt state repression is not acknowledged or naively dealt with. For example, Welton (2001) states that the experience of state repression will serve to strengthen the spirit of resistance and he romantically goes on to assert that “the human spirit will triumph in the end.”

Obviously, he is not familiar with the torture techniques employed by some states. Furthermore, other theorists see resistance as a 'battle of ideas' (Mayo, 2005) such as counter-hegemonic alternatives versus neo-liberal ideology. However, ideological understandings of the world only lead to a battle over ideas and not material social relations. To conceptualize resistance as a battle of ideas completely ignores the fact that in many countries state ideology is often accompanied with violent state repression. Thus, resistance becomes more than just a war over ideas; it eventually turns to a physical battle with real material consequences. To me, as already mentioned, these claims all point to the fact that theorizing about adult learning within social movements is limited to liberal democracies and lack a broader understanding that would include the global south with less advanced levels of capitalism.

Furthermore, as Holst rightly claims, the radical pluralists who are theorizing learning within social movements have completely misunderstood Gramsci's notions of hegemony and civil society.

...radical adult educators who privilege new social movements are taking a theoretical construct - Gramsci's specific usage of civil society - from a socialist political strategy and attempting to use it to explain what in essence is a social democratic or radical pluralist strategy. (2002:7)

Holst also argues that Gramsci saw civil society as yet another area in which the elite exert their control (2002: 12). It is not the glorified space that these liberal theorists claim it to be. Rather civil society works as a part of the state apparatus of domination. In attempting to explain why the proletarian revolutions had not overtaken the West, Gramsci concluded that revolution in the West has two phases (Allman, 1999) and must take place in two arenas. He explains that in

Western democracies, power is exercised and consent generated not only by the state but also through various civil society organizations.

To assume the pursuit of one's class interest as motivation for action and participation, as what Holst calls the socialist approach does, limits one's political analysis by not incorporating actions that come from a concern for the collective good. This analysis does not include the many activists who have, as Foley (1999) finds, committed "class suicide". Amilcar Cabral's theory of class suicide refers to the revolutionary petty-bourgeois leadership "committing class suicide" rather than acting on its immediate class interest in the post-revolutionary era. Moreover, Nancy Naples in her excellent book *Grassroots Warriors* describes activists who developed practices and analyses as "a dialectic between ongoing personal and collective experiences of injustice" (1998:179). Naples's activists distinguished between two types of political participation: the *dominant*, activities associated with traditional political parties, electoral campaigns, and self-promoting interest groups; and the *radical*, activities associated with organizing demonstrations and protests. Briefly, many of the women interviewed distinguished forms of protest from traditional politics on the basis of differentiating between collective versus self-interested actions. "The women community workers interviewed for Naples's book view citizenship as something achieved in community and for the benefit of the collective rather than as an individual possession. Their position reflects the Civil Rights Movement's admonition that "none of us is free until all of us are free" (1998:3).

Aside from current studies not taking violent state repression into account, another limitation of current literature is that studies have privileged analyses of institutions and particular movements in isolated episodes. Broadly speaking, scholars of social movements have had the “from the outside in” (Meyer, 2002) approach. That is, those who look at large scale patterns of contention across borders and movements (Tarrow, 1989; Tilly, 1995), or those who study organizational politics and decision making (Rupp and Taylor, 1987; Whittier, 1995). Several scholars (Walter, 2007; Hall, 2004) have studied a particular movement in isolation while reporting on techniques used by ‘movement intellectuals’ to attract and sustain recruits. This “outside in” approach loses the important intermingling of the individual’s background and her social action in different ranges of activism within various community contexts and removes the activist from her social relations. In order to theorize social action and learning, we need to understand how social location guides social action, and the learning that is attached to it. In other words, our understanding of learning in social action must be anchored in a dialectical understanding of thought and action which forms one’s consciousness. Social movement learning theory must include descriptions of the different social barriers that differently located people face and the different solutions that people have found in order to organize.

What motivates and sustains activism at the individual level is missing from current studies. How one’s individual interests give way to collective interests is missing. “Political activism is influenced by the dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and political culture that can only be understood through an

embedded analysis that foregrounds local practices and individual perspectives” (Naples, 1998:9). Similarly, David S. Meyer concurs that “looking at multiple movements in different contexts, we can discern the factors that matter across cases, as well as case-specific, contingencies” (2002:2).

Informal Learning, Social Movements and Adult Education

Several scholars theorize informal learning (Schugurensky, 2000; Livingstone, 1999; Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2003). Some scholars discuss informal learning in contrast to formal and non-formal learning (Livingstone, 2007; Coombs, 1976). Although some educators believe that identifying forms of learning is arbitrary and there is interplay and overlap between all forms of learning (Colley et al, 2003), several basic forms of learning may be distinguished based on the significance or presence of a teacher, the organization of the body of knowledge, the conscious or unconscious nature of the acquisition of knowledge, and the recognition or certification of the knowledge acquired. Learning is formal when a teacher with authority to direct designated learners to learn a curriculum taken from a pre-established body of knowledge (Coombs, 1976; Livingstone, 2007). When learners choose to study voluntarily with a teacher who assists the learner’s self-determined interests to acquire further knowledge beyond schooling, the form of learning is further education (Livingstone, 2007). Furthermore, when mentors facilitate “novices” in spontaneous learning situations without reference to a specific body of knowledge, the form of learning is believed to be informal education (Livingstone, 2007). Finally, all other forms of learning which we

engage in either intentionally, individually, or collectively without reliance on a teacher, mentor, or facilitator or dependence on any predetermined curriculum can be termed informal learning (Livingstone, 2007). The focus of this study is what I call political informal learning. It is the informal political learning of several women who have consciously focused their attention on the political arena in order to bring about progressive social change.

Currently informal learning is being scrutinized by adult educators within two parameters. One embraces the tenets of human capital theory by justifying informal learning in economic terms while the other posits the credentialization of informal learning as a way to democratize society. The first recognizes the importance of informal learning as a way to make the workplace more efficient. For example, Solomon et al. look at the importance of “everyday talking practices at work” in a study where a local government council in a large Australian city has imposed “mandatory tea time” for its employees. Field workers are ‘encouraged’ to network with employees from other departments. This is to “value-add to the costs of formal training. First, the workers who might have learned from their everyday experiences are required to share their learning with co-workers. Next, workers who have attended formal ‘expensive’ courses must share their learning by ‘reporting back’” (2008:480).

The second purpose of research in informal learning is to record and value the experience of individuals. This second purpose has gained much currency in the past years with studies on activists and their learning and processes of social movement learning (Foley, 1999) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997).

For example, Livingstone suggests that recognizing the invisible knowledge and skills used in activism “could lead to the closing of the education-jobs gap as well as a plausible revision of human capital theory along more inclusive and equitable lines” (1997:12). Namely, the second purpose does not criticize human capital theory, but argues for more inclusiveness of this theory.

Current notions of informal learning are problematic in several ways. One is that the individualized conceptualization of informal learning fragments knowledge gained through political activity removes it from its social relations and social location, insinuates that social exclusion is the result of individual deficit. The learner is conceptualized as an individual equally competing in the market for better paying jobs. Thus, the responsibility for securing employment and the blame for unemployment is put on the individual learner. This conceptualization assumes that social exclusion and underemployment are the results of lack of credentials and relations of race, gender, and class are left unchallenged. The emerging understanding within the literature of informal learning leads one to wrongly assume that contradictions within the capitalist system may be resolved by workplace democratization, redistribution of current paid work, and most importantly recognition of new forms of work and knowledge (Livingstone, 1997).

A second problem is, to recognize new and unfunded sites of learning relieves the state of its responsibility to educate its citizens and allows the employer to enjoy the benefits of knowledge acquired by the worker during unpaid time. To further explain this phenomenon, I must first explain the nature

of paid and unpaid labour within capitalism. The rate of surplus value within capitalism depends on increasing the ratio between paid and unpaid labour in favour of unpaid labour. Paid labour is responsible for sustaining and reproducing itself (i.e. the working class). At times of crisis, the state ("the welfare state") subsidizes this reproduction by providing education and healthcare for the labour force while at other times, the labour force has provided massive savings for the state by sustaining and reproducing itself.

Informal learning within current adult education literature is linked to methods of extracting surplus value. Profit comes from surplus value of labour which is labour spent beyond the time to cover the worker's wage. *Absolute surplus value* is "extracted by extending the length of the working time by some duration that was in surplus of the time required to recoup the workers' wages, while *relative surplus value* is obtained by increasing the ratio between paid and unpaid labour in favour of the latter" (Allman 1999). Unpaid time spent on work-related learning is seen as ways of extracting relative surplus value. And unemployed or contract workers who spend unpaid time to acquire skills which will later be used when they find employment is absolute surplus value enjoyed by the employer.

Finally, in order to individualize and credentialize informal learning, knowledge gained through political activity must be broken down into separate skills and marketed. Livingstone suggests that recognizing the invisible knowledge and skills used in activism "could lead to the closing of the education-jobs gap as well as a plausible revision of human capital theory along more

inclusive and equitable lines" (1997:12). However, from my interviews, I learned that selling one's knowledge which was gained through political activity, imprisonment, consciousness-raising in order to be more marketable within the job market can alienate.

My understanding of *alienation* is inspired by Bertell Ollman's (1971) interpretation of Marx. Marx theorizes that alienation results in not having control over the work one produces, and being separated from fellow human beings through competition. The devastating effect of capitalist production on human's physical and mental states has been brought about by a separation human beings from their active, conscious existence; "a separation which is only fully completed in the relation between wage-labour and capital" (Marx cited in Ollman, 1971). The women whom I interviewed were very happy to have their actions and ideas recognized for the advancement of their politics; however, although one woman was in desperate need of finding a job, she never wanted to use her history of struggle to find employment because she felt it was completely unrelated to her politics.

Life History as Method of Investigation

The qualitative methodology that is employed in this research will be informed by feminist scholarship which among other things is interested in looking at gender as a category of social experience through documenting and observing women's experiences. The method to be used will be life history interviews. The oral historical approach offers a context in which one can

examine the development of political and social consciousness throughout a life as well as an opportunity to explore changes in each woman's social and political analysis, practice, and visions for the future. Social movement theories have typically favoured institutional analyses which look at one particular movement as an isolated historical episode. However, the oral historical approach allows an analysis of activism and mobilization across different movements. Furthermore, it permits an analysis of the development of social and political consciousness throughout a life.

However, this approach is not without complications. The use of oral history as a way of recording “what happened” has been challenged by historians (Scott, 1992). Also, Naples (1998) recounts how divergent accounts of the same story appeared when a participant was interviewed in the mid 1980s and again in 1995. My solution to this methodological challenge, as is also Naples’ solution, is to analyze the data not so much for “what happened” but for “why” or “how” things happened. The Personal Narratives Group asserts:

The act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did. The why and how – the interpretive acts that shape a life narrative – need to take a high place on the feminist agenda as the recording of women’s experiences (1989:4).

As the focus of this study is the development of critical consciousness, then “how” this consciousness formed and developed is the focal point of my inquiry rather than specific events.

The data most appropriate for this study are the accounts of the actual experiences of the women activists as told by the women themselves. By going to

the women for their knowledge, I am making the epistemological stand that knowledge lies with people and people construct their knowledge based on their experiences. And the method most appropriate for generating this data is life history method. “It (life history method) is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (Cole & Knowles, 2001:27). Thus, people and their stories are not only windows into those people’s own personal development but also they shed light on cultural and social phenomena.

Therefore, one epistemological assumption behind using life history method is the basic assumption that in order to understand the general, you must understand the particular. Cole & Knowles (2001) cite the Personal Narrative Group which claims that when life history accounts are well interpreted, “they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of system-level constraints within which those courses evolve” (1989:21).

By looking at the particular, I understand the social world. Thus, it is very necessary to avoid approaching each interview transcript as an individual story of learning. To do so, will lead to an individualized theory of learning which is exactly the focus of my critique. Therefore, I took the utmost care to avoid treating each interview transcript as an isolated life story of an individual woman; my attempt throughout this study was to connect the women’s experiences with

historical events and to use the interview transcripts to uncover the contradictions within the adult education literature on learning theories.

Furthermore, to understand what others have done in situations where they have had to challenge dominant political, social, and cultural norms will shed insight on successful defiance. This study is meant as an expression of values rather than providing a prototype. One research participant, Shirin, speaks to this when I asked her how learning about struggle in one part of the world can help in struggle in another context. She says:

I can't even compare the struggle of women in the two countries. In Iran, women are struggling to be human. They are not struggling for equal wages; they are struggling for the right to travel, the right to see their children after divorce, the right to demand monogamy from their husbands. I can't compare these two locations but I can say to the Iranian woman that it is not impossible to achieve those rights. It has been done. Some women in one part of the world have been able to get those rights and you can too.

To assume that such a prototype exists thwarts the intervention of creative human beings and is hypocritical (Allman, 1999). Thus, it is important for these stories to be told and recorded. Here, I am not advocating an essentialist claim that to understand one is to understand all. I am suggesting that analyzing several lives in context “brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities” (Cole & Knowles, 1989:11). By recording the life histories of five women activists of Iran, their individual stories shed light on the obstacles that each faced when challenging the status quo. However, their individual experiences, even when taken separately, are evidence of social relations imbricated with structures of patriarchy, nationalism, and classism.

The data is produced through open-ended semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews have generated a focused life-history of key events through a reconstruction of childhood events, early family, adulthood, political and social activism, immigration abroad, activism in diaspora, and other significant events. The following areas of investigation guided the interviews: the development of a biography of the activist woman's personal history, an exploration of her activism and her social and political analysis in Iran, changes to her social and political analysis after immigration abroad, personal and political visions for her future.

Data Analysis: Uncovering Social Relations of Learning in Activism

Each woman was given a choice of conducting the interview in Farsi or English. Two of the women chose English and three chose Farsi. I translated the interviews which were conducted in Farsi into English. The data was transcribed and coded. These data were then thematically interpreted and considered in relation to theory. As data was being collected, ongoing and simultaneous data analysis was taking place. The data was inductively analyzed to identify recurring themes and common patterns that cut across the data.

The lived experiences of these Iranian women activists had several purposes. First, it is necessary to rupture the hegemonic portrayal of the submissive Middle-Eastern woman in public consciousness. The current political climate has rendered the Middle Eastern woman helpless and in need of liberation. It is important for this myth to be disrupted with stories of women who have

questioned what others have accepted as natural or inevitable and have acted for their own liberation and that of others.

Secondly, it is important to radical adult education to conceptualize learning in activism as the ongoing formation of our consciousness. To do this, we must situate such learning within its social relations because what impacts consciousness the most is the social relations in which people engage in to produce their material world; our consciousness is formed through our sensuous activity within our social relations. The term “social relations” is used to describe the social world with its complex human activity. These social relations exist dialectically; meaning it is either part of, or the result of, a relation. Furthermore, people only engage in the social relations into which they were born and their thoughts and actions may be uncritical and serve to reproduce those relations. Therefore, it is essential to include the experience of women in different contexts than those in advanced capitalist democracies as the majority of the theorizing of informal learning and social movement learning has been done within these contexts.

Furthermore, I advocate a conceptualization of learning which is rooted in the development of critical consciousness. Thus, in order to explore the continuum of the formation of critical consciousness, it is essential to ground our theory in the actual lived experiences of humans as becoming fully human involves engaging in self and social transformation. Throughout this study, I attempt to use the women’s experiences to uncover the contradictions within the literature of learning.

Summary and Structure

This chapter introduced the context of this research study. It also provided an overview of the current debates regarding learning within social movements and the catalysts of social action.

In Chapter II, I will narrate the life story of each woman. Through the life stories, the reader will grasp a brief history of domination, oppression, and resistance in Iran. At a time when the media, and popular culture are portraying Middle Eastern women as a homogenized group who are oppressed, submissive, and in need of liberation, it is important to falsify this notion by revealing stories of women who have not only fought for their own freedom and rights but those of others. It is important for these stories to be told and recorded in order to rupture and question the dominant, hegemonic portrayal of women of the Middle East in public consciousness.

In chapter III, I will explore the lives of the five women in relation to theory. I look closely at Marx's theory of consciousness and I gain insight from Freire's explanation of Critical/Revolutionary Praxis. I will unravel the gendered social relations within which they took part in social action. I will also examine the changes in their social action once their social relations changed after immigration. I will also look closely into what motivated them to take action and how that motivation has changed.

Finally, in Chapter IV, I will make my contribution to the field of adult education, more specifically within one of its most recent central themes, informal learning. I urge adult educators to move away from conceptualizing learning as skill acquisition. I advocate a theory of informal learning anchored in the theorization of critical consciousness formed through the dialectical relationship of thought and action.

CHAPTER II: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The purpose of this research is to examine the learning of women in activism. To do this, the individual should be located within the social. Therefore, this chapter introduces the life of each woman who participated in my research while at the same time shedding light on the social relations which the woman is implicated in. Here I have written the life histories of five women, Goli, Mehri, Nooshin, Shirin, and Ava as best as I have understood them from my interviews.

Goli

Goli is from a wealthy, aristocratic family and the oldest among my research participants. Both her parents had died by the time she and her sister were seven years old and she was raised by nannies, aunts, and uncles. After her high school diploma, Goli went to the United States to pursue further education.

As a child, she was a self-proclaimed trouble maker. “I was a straightforward, aggressive kid. I wasn’t shy to ask questions or give my opinion”. There was a beloved, female cousin who would visit their house and talk politics with her father. Once Goli interrupted their conversation and told them, “You say there is poverty and unemployment but we’ve been looking for a cook for six weeks so why hasn’t anyone come to be our cook”? The adults around her were

very gentle and patient; her cousin put her on her lap and explained to her the fact that they are so rich that they are hiring someone to cook for them while others have no food to eat is precisely the problem. Later on, this cousin and her husband were arrested and sent into exile by the SAVAK¹ and their children had to be raised by their grandmother, Goli's aunt. Being witness to these hardships for this family whom she had tremendous respect for was unacceptable to Goli and it infuriated her. She started to express her dismay in various ways; she took part in demonstrations against the increase of bus fare in Tehran. "I didn't even take the bus" she says. When she was in grade ten, she organized and demonstrated against the raising of the pass mark from 7/20 to 12/20.

In 1964, Goli went to Berkley which she calls, "the birthplace of activism" for her undergraduate studies. There, she was greatly influenced by the free speech movement, the Vietnam War protests, the Black Panther movement, the Cuban revolution, and the Guevarist line. It was there that she first heard of the Confederation of Iranian Students² (CIS). "As soon as I heard there is such an organization as the Confederation for Iranian Students, I said 'yeah, sign me up'. I was a natural for them".

In the years at Berkley, Goli read a lot of literature on Iranian history, political parties, and socialism. She took part in demonstrations against the

¹ SAVAK (*Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, National Intelligence and Security Organization) was the domestic security and intelligence agency from 1957 to 1979. It has been described as Iran's "most hated and feared institution" prior to revolution of 1979, for its association with the foreign CIA intelligence organization, and its torture and execution of regime opponents. At its peak, the organization had as many as 60,000 agents serving in its ranks.

² The Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad (CIS) was the most active organized opposition to the Shah's regime during the two decades prior to the 1978-79 revolution. It was a politically autonomous organization with factions outside of Iran. For further reading on CIS read Afshin Matinasghar's dissertation.

Vietnam War and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. She was arrested, beaten by police several times but she continued to fight against repression in Iran and in the U.S. At first, she was a participant but later she recruited participants and organized protests. “I had become a full-fledged activist”. She was active in many anti-imperialist causes, such as CIA involvement in Latin America, but interestingly always linked her analysis to Iran. “The final analysis, everything we were doing, we were doing it with an eye on Iran”.

Goli was one of the first female members of the Confederation. She recalls the few women who would come and sit in the corner and remain silent. This saddened her because she was very active and outspoken and wished other women were more demanding and vocal about their rights and thoughts. She tried to recruit more women to join the Confederation but was mainly disappointed when they declined blaming the patriarchal organization of the Confederation. She would remind them that “they [the male members of CIS] are not going to accept us; they are arrogant”.

In fact, Goli was the only female member of a radical group of the Confederation who believed in armed struggle against the regime. She recalls with laughter that they used to go into the outskirts of Berkley and practice guerrilla warfare because they were planning for armed struggle in Iran. As soon as she finished her undergraduate studies, Goli went to Iran to join the guerrilla forces in Iran. She laughs at her naiveté when she says, “I thought they were right there and I could say hey, here I am”. When she went to Iran, she realized that

her ideas were not feasible and could not become reality because of the degree of repression everywhere.

While in Iran, she refused to see many of her relatives because she could no longer tolerate their decadence and their plans of marriage for her. SAVAK interrogated her many times during this visit and prevented her from leaving Iran for one year. When she finally went back to the United States for her graduate studies, she met her old radical friends. They told her that they too no longer had their previous views of militancy and they were more involved with Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Tse Tung thoughts. They told her, “we have learned a lot, and we want you to learn the things that we learned. So I started reading again and got involved in the CIS and non-Iranian stuff”.

Goli spent the pre-revolutionary years in the U.S. and didn't go back to Iran until a few months before the revolution of 1979³. She, like thousands of others, marched in the streets day and night until the Shah left and the monarchy fell. It was not until the Islamic regime had taken over that Goli took part in exclusively women's struggle “because there was so much more reason after the *mullas* took over to do something for women.” She was one of the founding members of a radical feminist magazine called *Zan-e-Mobarez* (The Militant Woman). For the first few years after the revolution, she contributed to this magazine; she recruited, organized, trained and educated women. Later during her imprisonment, she recalls her interrogator bringing one of those women to her and told her to look into her eyes; “See. You did this to her”.

³ The Iranian Revolution was the revolution that transformed Iran from a monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic. It has been called "the third great revolution in history," following the French and Bolshevik revolutions.

For the first two years after the revolution, there was freedom of speech and publication. Goli, like many others, were actively campaigning for women's rights. However, as the regime gained more political stability, repression started. Iraq's 1980 attack on Iran was the perfect excuse to silence the opposition. Goli like thousands of others were arrested as "anti-revolutionaries". Goli was imprisoned for three and a half years.

Even after her release, she was constantly watched and felt repressed. She stayed in Iran for seven more years but finally immigrated to Canada because she felt she "couldn't do anything". Here in Canada, since 1996, Goli has been active in human rights issue. She has given presentations in schools, gives lectures at cultural events, and does freelance writing.

She regrets the years she spent in prison and later in the larger prison of Iran. She feels she has lost her career because of that. When she came to Canada, although she had a Ph.D., no one would hire her. Employers would want to know what she has done after the Ph.D. "I couldn't exactly say I was in jail and I was doing other things. So my career was lost".

Goli has very clear advice for young activists: "stay independent, don't follow groups or leaders". If I had followed leaders, I would be dead. I always asked questions and said no to things I didn't agree with. Think independently and make your own decisions. Then, if something happens to you because of your decisions, take it. It was the same with me. I don't blame anybody". She adamantly says to the youth to arm themselves with information, diversify their knowledge by reading even their adversaries, and then make decisions. She also

positively believes, and repeats this several times: “Know your history”. She regrets that she only studied Iranian history after she came out of prison. To the activists of Canada, she says to know the history of other countries but know it from the perspective of the people who are suffering within that country.

Mehri

Mehri comes from a middle-class background. Her father was a knowledgeable and politically active accountant. Ongoing debates, newspapers, and political discussions were the backdrop of her household. As a child, she never participated in the discussions but was witness to them. Both her parents were closely connected with the Pishvari Movement⁴ of Azarbaijan⁵.

In grade eleven, she was chosen to go to one of the Shah’s cultural celebrations in Shiraz as an outstanding student. Her mother put her foot down and forbade her to go. “It was actually a breakthrough for both of us to communicate and for me to find out about her political side”. For her refusal, Mehri was interrogated by SAVAK for several hours. This little brush with the system served as awareness building for her and it substantiated much of the discussions which she was witness to in her home.

After high school, Mehri came to Canada for her university education as her other siblings had done. There she saw the organized Iranian student movement (CIS) and was drawn to their literature. “It wasn’t a foreign literature. It was

⁴ In 1945, the Azerbaijani Democratic Party, led by Jafar Pishvari, a long-time revolutionary leader, declared itself to be in control of the Iranian Azerbaijan, promised liberal democratic reforms, and disbanded the local branch of Tudeh Party.

⁵ Azerbaijan or Azarbaijan is a region in northwestern Iran.

what I had heard about throughout my growing up”. During this time, she was given literature on poverty in Iran, how the royal family were monopolizing the wealth of Iran, the nationalization of oil⁶, and the disempowerment of Prime Minister Mossadeq⁷. The Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad had organized study groups where a lot of historical analysis took place following the readings. Also, cultural events such as Iranian New Year celebrations turned into awareness-building campaigns. Their meetings, although always very down-to-earth, all had a political intonation. Also, they built alliances with other radical groups such as French Canadian and Latin American groups. “I have not to this day seen such an active, organized and cohesively strategized movement as the CIS”. One life-altering experience for Mehri was participating in a student march organized by the CIS to CIA headquarters during one of the Shah’s visits to the U.S. “A bunch of foreign kids rumbling the streets of America and making a point there, and making a point back home too because every piece of news leaked back home and was then reflected back abroad”.

Mehri mentions that CIS did not uphold one specific ideology; their common link was opposition to the Shah and his connections to the United States. “They were intertwined: the opposition to the Shah and his connections to the U.S. were hand in hand. Then as the struggles became sharper inside the country, the

⁶ Prior to 1951, the British government received more revenue from taxing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company than the Iranian government received in royalties. On March 15, 1951, the Iranian parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry. In September 1951, Britain froze Iran’s sterling assets and banned all exports to Iran. Britain challenged the legality of Iran’s declaration of oil nationalization and took its case to the International Court of Justice at the Hague. The court ruled in favour of Iran.

⁷ Mohammad Mosaddeq was a major figure in modern Iranian history who served as the Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953 when he was removed from power by a CIA-led *coup d'état*. He is most famous as the architect of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had been under British control.

analytical aspects were clearer. The link, for example, between the green revolution⁸ in other parts of the world to the white revolution⁹ in Iran, and how it was masterminded and where it was orchestrated, was central to our analysis". Although the CIS was a democratic organization which opposed the monarchy, as "things got very heated" and the revolution looked inevitable, left, right, and religious factions became more visible. Mehri herself opposed imperialism and saw the Shah as an imperialist puppet in the region of the Middle East. In other words, her opposition to the Shah was within an anti-imperialist framework.

Mehri's activism became more strengthened and pivotal when she met her husband. "He was more aware, more active and older so he had more life experience in the opposition movement than me". She stood up to her family's requests of finishing her education and getting married and settling down to have kids. "We just wanted to explore and do things in our own terms".

This was the time of the Vietnam War which helped to strengthen their awareness and bring together a bigger congregation of progressive people. Interestingly, her first protest wasn't against the Iranian government; it was against the U.S. government's occupation of Vietnam. From there it evolved to incorporate the struggle of Palestinian people. Decades later, she still recalls,

⁸ The Green Revolution refers to the transformation of agriculture that began in 1945 at the request of the Mexican government to establish an agricultural research station to develop more varieties of wheat that could be used to feed the rapidly growing population of the country. The term "Green Revolution" was first used in 1968 by former USAID director William Gaud, who noted the spread of the new technologies and said, "These and other developments in the field of agriculture contain the makings of a new revolution. It is not a violent Red Revolution like that of the Soviets, nor is it a White Revolution like that of the Shah of Iran. I call it the Green Revolution."

⁹ The white revolution was a far reaching series of reforms launched in 1963 by the Shah. The Shah had intended it to be a non-violent regeneration of Iranian society through economic and social reforms, with the ultimate long-term aim of transforming Iran into a global economic and industrial power

“what really shaped my commitment to activism was my involvement in the anti-war movement of the 60’s”. Her focus was on Iran all the time; however, the linkage to what was happening in Iran was becoming clearer for Mehri as well as a lot of people. Mehri states of herself and a large politically conscious population that “a global vision was developing”. Also, she admits that she could only join and explore what was already out there.

On a trip back to Iran to visit her family, Mehri got arrested at the airport. Her passport was taken away and she was taken for interrogation several times. She eventually managed to get her passport back after a few months but remembers this prolonged trip as a turning point in her life. “It was alarming to see that even the little things we were doing was very significant, enough to be watched and reported”. After this personal experience, she and her group became more strategic by not revealing any unnecessary information to each other.

When the Shah’s regime fell, Mehri and her husband went to Kurdistan¹⁰. This was the “peak of freedom that the country had ever experienced”. Mehri and several other women occupied a vacant house and used the space to organize a women’s group called *Jameeyat-e-Zanan* (Women’s Society). Their daily routine at the Women’s Society was to read, discuss, and analyze newsletters of other parties, put literature on display for people to browse through, and debate and review the events of the day. Where the new regime took actions which were against the interest of the people, their women’s group became vocal and organized protests at the city square. Once the regime imprisoned several progressive Kurdish activists in Marivan, a city 200 km from Sanandaj, thousands

¹⁰ Kurdistan is one of the thirty provinces of Iran with Sanandaj as its capital.

of people marched from Sanandaj to Marivan in one of the largest on foot resistant movements in the history of Iran. The Women's Society was one of the many political organizations of that march which forced the officials to reverse their strategy and release the activists. The Society was a democratic women's organization where diverse political views were represented and feminist tendencies was one of them. When I asked Mehri why they had not clearly voiced a feminist agenda, she replied, "I don't think there was enough awareness to bring it up as a platform and present it at that time".

At times Mehri and several other women went to villages in Kurdistan to speak with women in what is now called a needs assessment program. They sat with the women of the villages and discussed the day's events and if it was possible, leave some literature behind for them to read. After each visit, they would come back to the rest of the group and discuss what they had learned. An experience which Mehri calls pivotal in her political life was when an older woman in one of the villages they were visiting one day asked them if they were communists. In the first few years of the revolution, groups were not revealing their ideological affiliations; thus, Mehri hesitantly replied that they were not communists. The old woman then became very angry and raised her voice at Mehri lecturing her that she should say if she is in fact a communist because there is nothing wrong with being a communist and there is no reason to dissociate her with communism. Mehri recalls this experience as an important political lesson which has always stayed with her and which she took back to her group that day. "There are the masses telling us that we need to have a clear message for them

and not hide behind the niceties of social exchanges. If you think that your message is right and just, try to bring people on board. It was a wake up call for me”. Later, Mehri mentions, “towards the end, we could debate Maoism against Stalinism. We were that comfortable and influential that we wouldn’t scare people”.

In the first few years after the revolution, Mehri’s organization, in cooperation with other organizations provided a drop-in center for women. In the night, as the city was guarded by Peshmarge¹¹, the organization provided food and a rest station. “There was a little bit of sisterly, motherly home front and a little bit of political activism”.

The Islamic Republic Army attacked Kurdistan as soon it came into power in March 1979. “They targeted people, killing them, kidnapping them”. During this six-month long armed struggle, Mehri’s organization turned into a make-shift hospital and care center until the city was occupied and the army moved in. Mehri was out of commission with an “at risk” pregnancy during this time but news of public executions in city squares and mass arrests still reached her.

Mehri, her husband and their two babies fled Iran for Turkey. There they approached the Canadian embassy which Mehri recalls with fondness. “They worked very closely and kindly with us.” The Canadian officials did not ask too many questions from them; they asked enough to know that they were not safe to stay in Turkey. They eventually got their papers and came to Canada.

The period when she had initially arrived in Canada is best described in

¹¹ Peshmerga, Peshmerga or Peshmerge is the term used by Kurds to refer to armed Kurdish fighters. The literal meaning is “those who face death” (*Pesh* front + *marg* death).

Mehri's own words. "Obviously there is a period of depression and mourning; a sense of loss. There was long period of really trying to sort out what had happened. For a period of, I would say one year, there was confusion and loss and just not belonging anywhere. But eventually we pulled our strength together and the regularities of life were taking shape too. The fact that the four of us were together was a big strength for us; along the way, we had seen so many people who had lost their partners".

Mehri volunteered at her son's kindergarten in Toronto to become familiar with what was happening in the community through the school. By chance, the principal of Mehri's son's school was a UNICEF director. This principal played a pivotal role in familiarizing Mehri with how groups and organizations operate within the context of Toronto. Mehri then organized an ethnic home and school association in her school which allowed parents to participate with translators and discussed matters specific to those ethnic groups. This association proved to be "a learning experience for the school board and the system". Mehri also organized a group in her building for women to exchange babysitting which proved to be so successful that they eventually got the support of the school and moved their facility to the school. Her activism in Canada expanded from there and she "remained on the scene from then on". Mehri went back to school in Toronto and studied Family and Youth Counselling.

When I pointed out how her style of activism and causes that Mehri had gotten involved in were so different in Canada compared to what they were in Iran, Mehri states "When I was younger, it was pointed toward overthrowing the

regime of Iran; it was more militant. But as I have grown older, I don't necessarily have those views of militancy".

Mehri has very clear ideas about how social change can come about. She believes strongly in building alliances, and gaining more exposure for one's cause. "By building alliances, your enemy becomes exposed because you have all these venues around you". Mehri strongly believes in having the masses participate to make change. She says academia alone is not enough to make social change happen. "Of course there will always be universities that give you a platform, and of course there will be captive audiences on campuses but that doesn't cause social change". She advises young activists to keep their eyes open to reality and bring internationalism to their work.

Mehri's regret about her own activities in Iran is that she overlooked the grassroots. She urges new activists to be part of the community that they are living in and regrets that in her political life she went "through an ideological funnel". Therefore, she is now taking a different approach. "I swallow my pride and alter my style of work" which is to join a common front with people to reach a common goal. "Not everyone can focus on the change of a regime but focus on demolishing hunger, and ignorance and many other things".

Nooshin

Nooshin grew up in a secular, non-traditional family. Her father worked for the Iranian Oil Company and she lived in oil-rich areas of Iran. She had four siblings and calls them "a very loud bunch". The five of them always had the

courage to assert themselves in school and with teachers and friends. “We had been raised with the mentality that we could speak up”. For this she grudgingly gives credit to her father because she now recalls that had her mother been given the chance, she too could have been a stronger, more positive influence. However, in her childhood home, her father commanded and her mother obeyed and “played a very passive role”.

Nooshin’s father took his five children to museums and artistic and cultural events and Nooshin, interestingly, believes that the reason that she grew up in such a cultivated environment and so much care was taken in her upbringing was because her father had sympathy for the Tudeh Party.

Political discussion was common in Nooshin’s home and children were encouraged to join. However, “now that I am older and more aware, I realize that in those discussions, there was an agenda; we were being directed to think the way my father did”. Although Nooshin’s father played a fundamental role in shaping Nooshin’s political views, he later regretted it because “in his eyes, we took it too far” and he feared for his children’s safety.

Nooshin went to university in the South of Iran. While in university, Nooshin was involved in several acts against the repression of the Shah’s regime. She participated in study circles where they got together and read and discussed various political parties’ underground newsletters. She also participated in the national Student’s Day¹². For this, she was interrogated by SAVAK several times.

¹² The Students Day was established in 1953 on December 6 after riots broke out between police of the shah's regime and students opposing a scheduled visit by then US vice president Richard Nixon. Several students were killed in the clashes. This is still a significant date for student protest.

“SAVAK would take us and interrogate us, threaten us, beat us – anything to break the alliance between the students”. She recalls her activism during the four years she spent in university as not focused. “Back then, I was not very strategic or organized. Because I had a radical personality, wherever there was a political movement, I was attracted to it”. She endured much sexism during her early political activity. Her program in her university, because it was mostly women, was called “university of dairy”.

Nooshin’s serious acts of opposition did not occur until the first few years after the revolution when she was a high school teacher in a small town. When a student asked Nooshin in class whether she prayed or not, Nooshin quickly answered that she did not and had no such beliefs. This in the early years of the revolution was directly an act of opposition to the state which was attempting to enforce religious rules in schools and caused uproar in her small town as there was support and disapproval of her comment. One day Nooshin woke up to find that someone had painted profanities about her on their front door. Nooshin and her husband were both very popular with the students and as protest to such an act and in support of Nooshin, the high school students boycotted the school and refused to take their final exams. Senior officials from the Ministry of Education assured Nooshin that they would find the culprit if she would just ask the students to end their boycott. Nooshin did exactly that and as soon as the exams were done, Nooshin and her husband were transferred to Bandar Abbas¹³.

During the first year that Nooshin was in Bandar Abbas, the high school

¹³ Bandar Abbas is a port city in the South of Iran with very hot and humid climate. Nooshin calls it “a radical, leftist city”.

students' protests began. The students had a number of demands such as prolonging of library hours, and changing of school hours; however, behind it was a political agenda. "The religious sect wanted to impose its rule by having students do religious activities and students were against these things; their demands were really just a cloak for their opposition to the regime". The students boycott basically shut down the city; "even the bakeries stopped baking bread".

Nooshin and several other teachers signed the students' petition and for their support, they were imprisoned and sentenced to death. In prison, the female teachers were kept with prostitutes who treated them very badly. However, within days the teachers made rules and put different committees in charge of different things in the prison and went to the prison warden with their demands for better conditions in the prison. At one point, they also organized an eight-day hunger strike in prison. There were demonstrations in the city everyday where demonstrators took Nooshin's baby around and shouted that this baby needs her mother's milk but the mother is imprisoned. This infuriated more people and gained more support for the prisoners. Several times prison officials told Nooshin that they would release her to go to her child but she refused to go without the others. Finally, the teachers were released after writing a repentance letter. Nooshin wrote that she did not know why she was imprisoned but wanted to be released. The city went back to its normal state, but immediately after the students took their final exams, Nooshin and her husband were fired from the Ministry of Education.

Nooshin and her family came to Tehran where she got a job in a daycare.

For a while she kept ties with some study groups but by around 1982, it became too difficult and dangerous to continue. “The city had a police-like state. It was there that I stopped my relations with all organizations”.

Nooshin and her family left Iran but her husband got to Canada two years before Nooshin and her two children were able to get their papers. For two years, Nooshin was in Europe with her two young children awaiting her refugee papers for Canada. At one point, she was so poor that she scouted a train station for a place where she and her children could sleep. Eventually, she managed to take charge of her life. She joined and became active in a group that supported immigrants who were in a similar situation – people from Iran who had no support. Their group brought a piece by Brecht on stage. “The mayor came to watch; it was serious art”.

When Nooshin arrived in Toronto, her husband had already started the publication of an Iranian newspaper. Nooshin had serious concerns about the content of the publication so she got actively involved. During this time, Nooshin worked in a doughnut shop, took care of her two children, cooked and cleaned and played hostess to the writers and artists who filled her home/office while at the same time doing the typing for the publication. However, during our interview, Nooshin grudgingly says several times that she did all this work “as if it was very natural” and despite the various roles she played in her family, she was not taken seriously, nor did she take herself seriously.

Now in Toronto, Nooshin believes that her publication can be a space for democratic dialogue. “And when I speak of democracy, I don’t necessarily mean

Western democracy. I mean a democracy where you can have left, right, religious, secular views all represented in one place”. She believes that she is sacrificing a lot for her publication and not receiving the credit that she deserves. She states “I had to choose between my publication and myself, and I chose my publication.”

When I asked Nooshin what she had learned from these past decades of activism, she responded “to never put an end to learning”. She believes that learning is continuous and ongoing. To younger activists, she says “don’t enter anything instinctively”. She asserts that anyone entering political activity must know his/her resources and how to use them effectively and never join a movement which is not organized with a well-laid out plan. She sums up her advice to the younger generation of activists as such: “Plan, learn, and know exactly what you are getting into”. And to young women in particular she advises, “Don’t view life in a linear fashion of going to school and getting married and having children”. Nooshin believes that we all have a responsibility to create progressive social change and we should all play a role. She sums up, “I don’t believe in heroes; we all have a role to play”.

Shirin

Shirin comes from “a very middle-class family” in Kurdistan. Her father was an unlicensed dentist and her mother was “almost illiterate.” Her father was very religious but had no influence over his seven children. Shirin credits the fact that she did not follow the traditional route of getting married young and having children to the fact that she is a Kurd where children stay in their parents’ home

for many years.

Shirin names her younger brother as the person who most influenced her politically at a young age. That is because he was a boy, and had more freedom to stay out more and meet more people. Her brother, calculatingly, would invite activists to their home to talk to his siblings and influence them politically. However, Shirin did not become radicalized until she became a teacher in a junior high school in a very poor neighbourhood in the South of Tehran¹⁴ during the Shah's regime.

In this school, students regularly fainted of hunger in class; they had no shoes, or writing utensils. One time she approached one of her students to ask why she was not paying attention and the girl cried saying her parents were marrying her off to a seventy-year-old man. Shirin asked to meet with the girl's mother in order to somehow dissuade her from doing this. When the mother finally did come to the school to meet Shirin and found out why in fact she had been summoned, she uncontrollably shouted at Shirin telling her "You think I don't know that I shouldn't be doing this; I have to sacrifice this child to save my other six children from hunger". The mother continued to yell that of course she did not want her daughter to have the same life as her, but her husband had already made the decision and it will be done.

Events such as these had a profound affect on Shirin during the two years that she taught in this school. When she came back to Kurdistan, she decided to strategically get close to students. "I was in a better position than others; also the students had a thirst for knowledge". She did not want to join any of the political

¹⁴ The South of Tehran has some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Tehran.

organizations until she learned more about all of them; therefore, she worked individually with students and at home her brothers and sisters had a study circle where they read Marx, Engels, the history of Kurdistan, and the history of struggle in Iran.

This continued until the fall of the monarchy. When the revolution occurred, the first thing that all political organizations did was to establish their own societies with their particular platform. “I was a teacher, so I started from the Revolutionary Teacher’s Group. Even the students had organized their own society, so we thought why not us. But I must say that the students were more progressive than us”.

It was not until after the revolution that Shirin became exclusively involved with women’s rights as patriarchal relations were becoming more visible and strengthened. Shirin was one of the few women who attended political meetings. However, “the men didn’t like us there. Some were shy to speak to a woman other than their mother or sister. We too were shy to speak up and we felt inferior in theory and political thoughts. We mostly listened and didn’t talk”.

As the number of women grew, they decided to form their own group. This had several advantages. One was that many families would not allow their wives or daughters to attend meetings with men, whereas they would not oppose their attendance at all women’s meeting. Another advantage according to Shirin was that it had become clear that structures of repression were very specific to women. “In general, there was repression and lack of freedom, but in the case of women it is incomparable”. Also, women themselves would openly declare their demands

if they were in an all woman's group. "The men would come and loudly express their concerns but the women would put on their *chadors* and sit at the back and listen. I was one of them; when I wanted to talk in front of the men, I'd get nervous. So we thought first we need to have our own group and organization because we have more specific issues. We need to raise our consciousness and gain intellectual independence". It was then that Shirin along with a group of other women founded the Women's Society in order to make demands specific to women.

When they first started the Women's Society, it was made up of a group of women "who were already politically aware". However, their goal was to communicate with all groups of women especially working class women. "We thought it's no use to just sit around and talk amongst ourselves; we needed to get other women too". In order to attract more women, they held political meetings and classes on military conflict and Shirin used her position as teacher to promote the venues.

Shirin praises Komele¹⁵ for encouraging women to organize independently. Men affiliated with Komele helped the Women's Society in various ways. The men helped in occupying an abandoned building and providing space for the Women's Society. Also, because military conflict was anticipated, the men set up classes for women to teach them to work with guns, self-defence using weapons, how to react in cases of fire and how to discard of explosives or Molotov

¹⁵ The Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komele is the short form in Kurdish) is a leftist Kurdish opposition group. This group in recent years has been split into many different factions. Komele was trying to create the conditions favourable for bringing about radical changes in peoples' lives, and to end the national oppression of the Kurds.

Cocktails if they were thrown in their homes.

Although the numbers at their meetings and classes were growing, Shirin was still dissatisfied. “We realized that we have only attracted women activists who are already conscious. They are themselves coming with their own agendas. So we decided that if marginalized poor can’t come to us, we’ll go to them”. Their Society took an alternate route after this. They set their goals to do literacy promotion and political consciousness-raising. Also, they proclaimed their Society a non-partisan group which women could join and did not adhere to any particular party’s views.

With this clear agenda, Shirin and her fellow Society members set out to visit marginalized neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. In the neighbourhood which was assigned to Shirin, she saw poverty that she had only heard existed. “I saw a sixteen-year-old girl who was one-metre tall from malnutrition. Another girl whose fingers were completely swollen from carpet knitting and her parents couldn’t take her to the hospital. There was a seventeen-year-old girl who had chronic lung disease from breathing the dust of carpets while knitting”.

In order to gain access to the women in those neighbourhoods, Shirin went there at the end of the work day when it was customary for women to stand in front of their homes and chat while their children ran around. She would stand with them and start a conversation. “It was important that we find more open-minded women among them. If we found those ones, things got easy and that person would influence the others”.

Shirin and her comrades opened a small library in one of the neighbourhoods. They invited women to come and sit around while Shirin read to them. “I didn’t read anything too complicated. Samad Behrangi’s¹⁶ work. You can’t tell them of Marx and Engels. I read stories that showed how some people are extremely poor while others are very rich”. They also held a sewing class where women could use their sewing material. However, “this was an excuse to get them there. I am not saying that this was the right thing to do but once they sat there sewing, we’d tell them the news of the day and what is happening in the city”. Shirin also used these opportunities to ask very basic questions about the women’s poverty, such as lack of health care, poverty-related illness, lack of facilities for their children and they would tell the women that it is the state’s responsibility to provide these amenities for them. Shirin would also tell them of extreme wealth and decadence that existed in some of the homes in the city.

This approach proved to be very successful and it would have been more effective had they had more time; however, Shirin regrets that it came to an abrupt end only after nine months when Kurdistan was attacked by the regime. The Pasdars¹⁷ declared jihad¹⁸ on Kurdistan. The Peshmarge(s) had already occupied the military bases in the region and taken all the weapons and given them to the people”. When the war on Kurdistan started, all the Societies, including Shirin’s, which were doing consciousness-raising work, were forced to alter their role.

“When the city got attacked, the groups took a different shape. We made shelters.

¹⁶ Samad Behrangi (June 24, 1939 - August 31, 1967) was an Iranian socialist and writer. He is famous for his book for children, *The Little Black Fish*. Behrangi died in a suspicious swimming accident which is understood to have been the act of SAVAK.

¹⁷ Pasdar is a soldier of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Plural form is Pasdars).

¹⁸ A holy war undertaken as the sacred duty of Muslims.

We cared for the wounded. We took weapons for the Peshmarges”.

The city endured 28 days of bombing. Many civilians were killed. “The Kurdish military decided that they no longer wanted people to get hurt so they left the city” and the army moved in. Shirin along with the other Peshmarges retreated to villages outside of the cities. The people of the villages accepted them well and wherever they could stay for a long time, they opened schools and conducted classes for the villagers. However, as the regime became more established, the Peshmarges were forced to leave the villages and retreat more until they reached the border of Iran and Iraq. “There, neither side had much power. Because Saddam was at war with the Islamic Republic, he supported us as the Islamic Republic’s opposition. We had a base; we had some facilities, and we were able to be in touch with the villages because we had a radio station.” However, when Halabja¹⁹ was bombed by Saddam Hossein’s army, Shirin lost 70 of her comrades.

Shirin covertly went to the city four times after their retreat but realized that she was too well-known and if she continued she would surely be identified and executed. Thus, she laments that she has not been to Kurdistan for almost 28 years.

In the border military base, women were organized in radio broadcasting and newsletter publication in the beginning. As their numbers grew, they demanded military training. Shirin proudly says, “Komele took this big step for women by arming them and breaking the taboo of women in the military”.

Shirin was eventually forced to leave the military base although she didn’t

¹⁹ Halabja is a small city in Iraq which was attacked by chemical bombs by the Iraqi regime in 19

want to. “I didn’t want to leave the Peshmarge environment but the invalids were forced to come out. Also some leaders came out to establish contacts with other regions”. Because Shirin had lost part of her hearing in the war, she left for Europe to seek medical care.

Her hearing never completely recovered, and in diaspora, she initially remained active with Komele. However, she later altered her approach. “I came to an understanding that I should focus my actions. I thought of non-Komele activity, solely democratic activity”. She then founded a group which worked with immigrant women. “We have several goals: consciousness-raising for immigrant women, notifying them of their rights as a woman in Europe, encouraging them to be financially independent, and advising women on how to raise children abroad with Iranian and European culture”. Interestingly, although such an organization already exists for newcomers organized by the host country, Shirin felt it necessary to have a separate organization for Kurdish women, run by themselves.

Shirin’s organization has recently received some funding from the government of the host country. Their organization needed money for radio broadcasting, space, and telephone bills. For the eight years which they had to raise money on their own, they held cultural events of song and dance and charged entrance fees. “Our aim was to secure funds but at the same time, we would create relationships and alliances too”. However, now that they have been allotted some money, Shirin feels that she has more free time which she can spend on the immigrant women and other activities. However, when I questioned her

about whether their direction has changed since they have received government funding, she replied, “They don’t limit us, but we have to abide by a protocol. We have to let them know what it is we are doing and based on that they give us money. I can’t say that the government sees our work as completely positive, but we have found a way to navigate the system. They (the government officials) told us they won’t give money for political activity; they only give money for cultural activity. So starting a dance class will get funding but consciousness-raising won’t”.

During this portion of our interview, Shirin repeated several times that “I have no intention of becoming an employee of the government”. When newcomers come to her, she is adamant on notifying them of the routes which they can pursue their rights within the state’s laws. “We don’t want to take over the duties of the government so that the government can avoid its responsibility. No. The government wouldn’t mind that. But that’s not right. We have to enlighten the women of their rights and let them know how they can demand those rights.”

One of the most interesting threads of this interview which was consistent throughout was that for Shirin, every encounter that she experienced (a party, a chance meeting, a telephone conversation), she viewed it as an opportunity – a chance to build relationships and alliances. About the future, she states, “I have to find other activists who will follow my way and build relationships with them”.

When I questioned Shirin about regrets and things she would have done differently, she was at first hesitant to criticize Komele. However, of her own

political activity, she is now very opposed to populism and regrets that, for example, she wore Islamic hijab to appeal to common people so that they would not think she was not a practicing Muslim woman. “The Party believed that we should be after what people said; if people are backward, we should be the same so that they accept us. Now I have completely changed my mind on this”. Also, Shirin regrets that not enough was recorded of the time of struggle in Kurdistan. “We should’ve written everything; we should have left our impression in the region. It would have helped in spreading our ideas. It would’ve been a good tactic”.

The advice that Shirin has for new activists is “read history; know your environment”. She goes on to explain that young activists must know their society and completely understand the change which they want to make. They must know their rights and find where those rights are being overlooked, how, and by whom; then, fight those elements. She also asserts, “Try to organize; individual work wastes a lot of energy and you can’t do much. Build alliances with people who accept your ideas more readily”. Also, Shirin warns young activists that social change is a lengthy process and they must not expect to reap the fruits of their struggle themselves. “For example, I shouldn’t expect to see the next revolution just because I have been active against this regime for 28 years”. From the complete interview, I understand that Shirin feels that converting those who have absolutely no familiarity with our views should not be our first steps, but rather building alliances with those who are open, willing, and ready for our ideas will save much energy.

When I asked Shirin about lessons she has learned from living in diaspora, she immediately linked her thoughts to Iran and transnational feminism. She spoke of the many rights that Western women have according to law which Iranian women do not. “I can’t compare these two locations. But I can say to the Iranian woman that it is not impossible to have sex before marriage. She can have children whose father is unknown and still enjoy the same social benefits. Some women in different parts of the world have been able to get those rights and she can too but she has to learn how to get those rights. She has to struggle; she has to sacrifice”.

Shirin is very hopeful about the future. She owes that to her dialectical materialist view of change. She attends a research conference every year, where Iranian youth present their research, with one goal in mind: to meet the young women who are representative of one part of Iranian society. She describes the women whom she met in 2000 as “unaware, scared, and conservative” while “last year, the girls were conscious, cultivated, brave, and progressive”. “This shows to me that time doesn’t stand still. People change; they learn new things. I may not see the results of my actions but this falls in the cycle of events and struggle and it will eventually leave its mark. Our young activists must learn this materialist and realist view that change is occurring”.

Shirin is currently active in the Iranian Women’s Organization in diaspora and broadcasts a weekly Kurdish radio program to the world.

Ava

Ava comes from a middle class background with both parents as teachers. She grew up in the South of Iran in an environment where “asking questions and not just accepting everything as it is” was encouraged. The two people who had the most influence on Ava’s early political thought were her father, who was a supporter of Prime Minister Mosadeq, and her aunt’s husband who was a member of the Tudeh Party and one of the leaders of the worker’s movement of Abadan²⁰. She mentions that her aunt’s husband had an influence on a great many young people of her city because he was a high school teacher, and he used his position to invite students to his house to borrow books and have discussions with him.

Ava mentions that when she was in high school, she and a friend posted a wall newspaper in her school with pictures of Mao Tse Tung who had recently died. For that she was taken to the principal’s office and threatened that she would be taken to SAVAK headquarters. She mentioned this event as one of particular importance because prior to this incidence, although she was conscious and sensitive to social issues, she felt herself weak. However, this incident served to deflate the enormity of the regime. “I thought, I am threatening the regime. I realized how afraid they are of me. How strong I am. After that, they seemed really weak to me”.

Another significant event during her adolescence was when her cousin returned home after studying in the U.S. He was from a wealthy family and he had returned very humble and simple. He had smuggled with him many leftist pamphlets which Ava and her friends gained access to. She also found his

²⁰Abadan is a city in the Khuzestan province in southwestern Iran.

temperament and outlook very interesting. “I used to bring tea around for everybody and he would get up and take the tea from me and say ‘why are you serving tea? I’ll do it’. These were all very interesting acts for me”.

These events all served to add to her restlessness and helped shape her consciousness. “It created a transformation in me. I was at a critical age and I was discontented with what I saw around me”. Ava makes it very clear that she was not the only person who was going through this transformation; it seemed that a large, aware, conscious population was perturbed. “It wasn’t just me; it was my whole generation. That’s what I want to tell you. There was a whole generation who was conscious and critiqued their environment. It was the atmosphere of the time. It started in 1973”.

After high school, Ava was sent to the U.S. to pursue further education. Of studying abroad, Ava mentioned, “In the 1970’s the Shah’s policy was in such a way that he would send the youth abroad, preferably to the U.S., to get educated and come back and play a role in building Iran’s society. He opened the doors which allowed many people, even ordinary employees, to send their kids abroad for education”. However, because these privileges were given in an atmosphere of repression and coercion, the beneficiaries of these policies remained not only unappreciative and discontent, but also, once abroad many joined The Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) which would eventually play an important role in the revolution. Prior to these policies, only the rich could send their children to foreign universities. The new, diverse group of students who arrived in the United States had a profound affect on the radicalization and

improvement of the student movement abroad. “Those of us who had come as new blood saw some of their [older members of the CIS] actions as conservative. We thought they could do more and be more radical”.

Ava’s serious political activism started during the period she spent in the United States. She became a full-time, active member of the CIS and stopped attending classes. She recalls participating in the 1977 march in Washington against Shah’s visit as significant. The wind took the tear gas intended for the activists toward the Shah and President Carter and there is a famous picture of the two of them with tear running down their faces. Ava is very proud that she brought tears to the eyes of the Shah whom she saw as a puppet of U.S. imperialism.

Ava came to Iran for a short visit in 1977. She smuggled in selected works of Lenin, Marx, the Shah’s military contracts with the U.S., and statistics on numbers of political prisoners in Iran. Once in Iran, she was very happy to see that her mother was the head of a school for the workers of the Oil Company. “I wanted very much to make contact with workers and realized what a crucial job my mother had”. On that visit, she was in Iran long enough to disseminate her leaflets and make contact with progressive students and teachers.

One of the biggest attractions of the student movement in the United States for Ava was that she felt equal to men; “they looked at me as a human not a fair-skinned and sexual being”. Of patriarchal structures of oppression, Ava clearly explained, “Where there was more equality, I would forget that I was a woman. Anywhere that oppression was more, I realized more that I was a woman. In Iran,

because of how others treated me, I was reminded that I was a woman. In prison, I realized that I am very much a woman”.

When I asked Ava what she had learned from the two years she spent in the student movement abroad prior to the revolution, she answered that those years taught her that “people learn their mannerisms (femininity and frailty) from the environment around them; they behave as they are expected to behave. Otherwise they can be someone else”. Also, the study groups she attended were transformative. Three aspects of the study groups were pivotal. The content which she was reading was empowering. “When I read dialectical materialism and the philosophy of Marxism, I realized how strong I am. I could see the future with this science. It shed light on darkness”. Also, the discussions which took place in the study group were enlightening. They discussed that as academics, they should not merely explain the world; they should transform it. They also discussed at whose disposal their knowledge should be; they felt they owed everything to people who work and produce the things others use. Although Ava was mainly silent during the discussions, she recalls, with a gleam in her eyes, the renaissance which she was going through. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the study groups were the intellectuals who conducted them. In the small groups of approximately six people, one would be more advanced and that person was the facilitator of the discussion. Ava particularly states the attractive personalities that these facilitators had. “They were so unaffected and lived such simple lives. They weren’t authoritarian”.

Ava returned to Iran permanently in 1978. On the airplane back to Tehran,

there were mostly CIS members. “The whole way we were singing revolutionary songs and were so happy. We thought we are going back to this country that is now free and we are going to help build”. A few days after Ava’s return she heard that the new regime had been alluding to the enforcement of the *hijab*. This brought thousands of people on the streets in protest. On March 8, 1979, on International Women’s Day, the streets of Tehran saw one of the biggest post-revolution demonstrations. Ava was invited up to the platform and given a microphone. She asserted anti gender-segregation and anti-*hijab* claims. “I went up on the platform and said, ‘There is no way they can put the chador on our heads; we won’t allow it”. Ava was later one of the three women who went to speak to the internal minister of the time and was told that there was no way that veiling would become compulsory.

Ava describes the early revolutionary years, when all organizations were overtly active, as “too optimistic.” As various organizations were engaged in affecting social change, Ava planned for her and a friend to go to the slums of Ahvaz²¹ where they taught the poor. “We read to them [residents of the poor neighbourhood] from morning to night. This was the height of my learning. My main concern was to influence social change; all I thought about was how we could influence these people”. Ava did not tell them that they are affiliated with any particular group or party; they were active as two students teaching literacy to children. Thus, they easily gained access to the homes and were able to exchange books and “help them grow politically”.

Ava’s political organization believed in bottom up, council governance.

²¹ The city of Ahvaz or Ahwaz is the capital of the Iranian province of Khūzestān.

They believed that if a city had various neighbourhood councils, then these councils could affect the government at the top. Therefore, Ava went from house to house giving pamphlets to invite people to the city square for a public meeting. During the meeting, six representatives would be elected with one person from each organization among them to “control things from the inside”. Each of the six elected representatives would be the head of a committee which was responsible for one community service, for example education. The responsibility of the neighbourhood residents did not end with voting for the representatives. The residents of each neighbourhood were divided into the various committees to provide service for themselves and neighbours.

Ava’s activities during this period were very successful. Some of the workers were becoming politically conscious. However, “it was too short. There wasn’t a lot of time until the suppression started.” Ava believes that the regime had to act quickly to end the revolutionary atmosphere as it was deepening at a fast pace. “It wasn’t just the organizations anymore. The masses were involved in the movements. The economy was slow; the factories were slow. They wanted everyone to go back to their home.”

Ava was forced to flee Ahvaz to escape execution in 1981. She went to Tehran under cover and posed as a war-stricken janitor in a factory childcare facility in desperate need of a job to support her family. For Ava, workers and the working class were glorified. She recalls with laughter when a taxi driver who was making advances at her asked her what she did for a living. She replied with great pride “I am a worker” and she couldn’t understand why he wasn’t as

impressed and was in fact trying to console her for being a mere worker. “It was my dream to be with workers and to work with them in factories”. When the female factory workers came to the daycare to feed their children, Ava was very alert and attempted to make contact with them. She could tell which ones were more conscious because while breastfeeding, they were reading or whispering to each other. Ava continued her work in the factory for two more years but when one of her comrades was arrested, it was too dangerous to continue. She was on the run for a short period until she was arrested in 1983.

Ava was in prison for eight years. Upon her release in 1991, she was shocked to find how deteriorated women’s situation had become and how easily they had accepted it. “When I went to prison, they had forced the hijab on us; now the women themselves were careful that their scarf didn’t fall off.” She was also enraged at how she was treated in society. Patriarchal traditions had returned with intensity. As someone who had been able to endure imprisonment and show resistance during interrogation, she was outraged at how society was censoring her and “belittling” her. As a single woman, she could not travel alone, or be out alone, and was constantly propositioned by old men. Most frustrating, was how easily everyone else was accepting this situation. “We had tasted freedom before and I could not believe that it was lost so easily”.

For the next ten years, Ava’s only political activity was to be part of the semi-clandestine women’s movement. This was the only active women’s movement and at the time was mainly made up of literary and political intellectuals. The group would plan out of town excursions and have

philosophical and literary discussions. Political activity was channelled through cultural and social activity. “Protest around women’s issues and feminist arguments were slowly being shaped”.

Ava was married for a second time during this period and gave birth to a girl. She divorced her husband and later left Iran in 2001 for Turkey. In Turkey, Ava waited for two years for her refugee status to be approved. There, she saw brutal poverty among the Iranian refugee community. There was a large population of Iranian families who had fled Iran for political and economic reasons to come to Turkey in order to apply for refugee status to other countries. Some had been rejected but could not go back. Others, while waiting for their papers, had turned into bitter alcoholics. “Poverty was rampant. Families were demolished; the men were alcoholics; the women were distraught. In many families, the kids didn’t go to school; they were the main breadwinners. The refugee’s lives there were barbaric”.

Ava once again became very active during this period. Similar to Ahvaz, Ava again gave out leaflets at doors, only this time non-political writing. She invited the Iranian residents of the city in Turkey to public meetings. She and several others created a refugee council. They divided the council into various committees: legal, housing, and employment. Each committee had a representative who reported back to the council. The legal committee wrote cases for refugees and had a forceful campaign to put pressure on the United Nations and many cases were approved during that time. Also, the refugee council was able to create a food bank with funding from the city hall. “My home was open

house. People would come and go with their cases or they would come with their legal problems because I was their representative. My daughter was then six-months old. She grew up in the arms of these people”.

Of her own personal life in Turkey, Ava said, “It was like purgatory. You can’t go back and you can’t go forward”. However, she says that the key is to take advantage of the circumstances, how ever small, around you. “You have to find the positive and then use it”.

When I asked Ava about her purpose and rationale during the period in Turkey, she said, “We have to learn how to unite and organize. Only when we are united, we can do things. As intellectuals, we have to unite people, organize them so that they can solve their own problems and be responsible. It is in this process that people grow”. Ava was very proud of her achievements in Turkey but laments that the councils stopped after she left Turkey in 2003.

In Canada, Ava is still struggling with improving her English and securing stable employment. She received a diploma in social work. She is involved with several activities in Canada despite having the full-time job of looking for a job. One is the March 8th Women’s Group which is a democratic organization where participants read and discuss issues related to women’s rights and feminism. Also, they organize demonstrations and raise awareness about women’s stoning in Iran.

Ava has extensive critique of her past activities. She is very quick to point out her own mistakes and the problems with her organization when she was in Iran. She said that reading to workers at revolutionary times when they were already amidst struggle was unnecessary. “During times that society is silent or

revolution is cold, yes you should do those things but during revolutionary times, your methods should be different”. Instead, she believes that all efforts should have been concentrated on free zones (regions that the regime did not have influence), such as Kurdistan, and kept them as military bases. And then, “we could have shown a glimpse of popular government with neighbourhood and city councils there”. She believes that they should have created services for the people in those areas to show them that “once we are in power, this is what we’ll do for them”. To Ava, it is necessary to gain the sympathy and support of the people, first by providing for them, and then raise their consciousness. Ava is writing her memoirs and wanted to include her detailed critique in her memoir rather than our interview.

At the end of our interview, I asked Ava what advice she had for new activists and she replied, “Know your history; know the history of the struggle. This is the responsibility of those who stayed alive”.

CHAPTER III: THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND RADICAL ADULT EDUCATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I narrated the life histories of five women who had been activists for several decades. The women I have interviewed have all been involved in organized resistance movements both within Iran and in the diaspora. These women have organized political campaigns, formed study groups, written and dispersed political leaflets, broadcasted subversive ideas, taken up arms in guerilla warfare, lived in mountain military bases, taught literacy in poor neighbourhoods, and conducted consciousness-raising campaigns throughout cities. The political consciousness formed through these experiences dwarfs any knowledge gained through formal schooling. Their stories provided insight into how one's consciousness forms and matures, how one's analysis gives way to action and as a cycle, that action leads to further and more complex analysis, and so on.

In this chapter, I will use the women's experience as the frame of analysis for understanding learning theories within the field of adult education. First, I will explain my theoretical framework to explain the connection between activism and learning; I will explain theories of consciousness and praxis and the connection between the two. I will then explore the educational implications of these theories on radical adult education. I use Marx's analysis as interpreted by Paula Allman to express a theory of consciousness/praxis and I look to Freire for the educational implications of Marx's thought.

Using Marxist theory, I will advocate a reading of learning within social movements which is anchored in an understanding of human consciousness and a conceptualization of informal education as a means of critical consciousness-raising for social change. I support an understanding of the formation of consciousness, which is continually shaped through the dialectical relationship of thought and action.

Currently within the literature, adult educators have argued that learning occurs in the home, at the workplace, and in everyday life. This *is* a significant observation. However, in order to make the learner marketable, some adult educators advocate the breaking down of knowledge into separate skills. This is the final step to the commodification of knowledge; once knowledge has been turned into a set of skills, it is commodified and can have an exchange-value. Thus by focusing on various locations in which knowledge may be acquired, we are merely expanding the locations in which the knowledge commodity can be consumed.

I advocate a conceptualization of informal learning which moves away from seeing learning as the accumulation of skills for the purpose of securing employment and toward an understanding of learning as the formation of critical consciousness through our thought and action as mediated by our social relations. This requires a shift in the purpose of adult education. The goal of critical adult education must be to promote progressive social change. This goal cannot be achieved with the conceptualization of learning as a linear acquisition of skills to make oneself marketable. It can be achieved by making connections between

experience and social relations and linking the particular to the general and then taking action to transform and build new and humanized relations.

A Portrait of a Critical Activist

The lives of five distinct women inform this study. They are from different cities and different backgrounds. Their educational levels are different. Three of the women are married, one is divorced, and another one never married. Their occupations are different: two were teachers, one a researcher, one a newspaper editor, another woman a social worker, and another still struggling to find suitable employment in Canada. They also come from different social classes. While four of them are from middle-class families with parents who were teachers or government employees, one is from a very well-to-do aristocratic family. Although these five women do not know each other, their lives overlap and at times are quite identical.

What they all have in common is that they are secular women who have envisioned an alternate future and have purposefully focused their attention and actions to gain that future. All women have been active in democratic causes for three decades. Critical thinking and questioning has always been a part of these women's lives and was encouraged from an early age. Even in the harshest circumstances, they have organized and have planned for social change. Now living in diaspora, they are very experienced community organizers who are using their knowledge in different ways.

Indeed another common aspect in their lives is their opposition to social

norms from an early age. All have been critical of their surrounding from childhood. Not only were they “uneasy children” but they were encouraged to be so by their elders. Nooshin’s father took them to museums, and recited poetry to them, and encouraged the children to associate with the artistic crowd rather than participating in sports. Shirin’s brother, who had more freedom to meet new people “because he was a boy”, would invite activists to their home with a preconceived agenda to speak to the other siblings. Ava mentions, “There was a culture of asking questions and not just accepting everything as natural in our home from my childhood. We had active minds...This applied to all aspects of life, not just political issues.”

The role of early family and political socialization at an early age is an interesting area which merits more research. Braungart (1971) has studied the link between family politics and student politics of 1, 246 college students in the U.S. He found that the strongest predictor of student politics with offspring following the political views of their parents.

Indeed the participants of this study did not divert from their revered family member’s views. The women’s parents or relatives were involved in progressive movements of the time. Critical debate was the backdrop in their homes. Mehri says, “I wasn’t one of the participants in the discussions. I was just a witness to them.” However, Goli, a self-proclaimed troublemaker, would interrupt the adults to voice her opinion. They were taken seriously from an early age and were allowed to walk around the house and listen and listen and listen.

Each remembers one person distinctly, their father, a cousin, an uncle, who

they recall with great reverence as having enormous influence on them in shaping their views. It is this person who indirectly links learning with experience for them. That person provides them with a vision of a life which is oppositional to specific social structures thus, contributes to their questioning of all social norms. These revered family members had “very attractive personalities” and they took the time to speak and engage with the young child. When the state imprisoned and shattered the lives of these beloved relatives, it not only further herocized that person but also further vilified the state for the young child. Goli speaks of her admired cousin, “I saw a lot of hardships for that family because of their political persuasions. And that was unacceptable to me because I really liked her. She was a very, very nice woman. I looked at her like a mentor”. Also, in Ava’s case, after her cousin was arrested by SAVAK during the time of his visit from the United States, “he then *really* became a hero for me”.

The 1970’s were a time when a large portion of the population was politically conscious. Ava expresses this phenomenon clearly, “Something was happening. I was discontented with what I saw around me. The conscious youth critiqued what was going on during the Shah’s time. It wasn’t just me; it was my whole generation. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. There was a whole generation who was conscious and critiqued their environment. It was the atmosphere of the time. It started from 1973”. This critically conscious population could no longer uncritically accept many repressive social structures such as the brutal secret police (SAVAK), an unelected leader (Shah), obsolete family laws. Thus, unrest continued and this clarifies for me the shortcomings of

transformative learning theories which posit disorienting dilemmas as the motivators of unrest.

The economic prosperity afforded to the Shah's regime by having ties with the United States and Israel enabled the regime to grant some privileges to some of its citizens. Three of the women had taken advantage of these privileges and had gotten scholarships to go abroad for their post-secondary education. These privileges were given in an atmosphere of coercion and limitation and were critiqued by, as already mentioned, a politically-conscious population. While abroad (mostly in the U.S.), the women joined with no persuasion a democratic, anti-monarchy organization called the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad (CIS) (See p. 74).

All five women, whether in Iran or abroad sought out other politically-conscious students but could only join what was already available in terms of resistance movements. They were very active in these movements and endured much punishment as Nooshin mentions, "SAVAK would take us and interrogate us, threaten us, beat us – anything to break the alliance between the students". However, at the same time all women spoke of the experience of sexism within these movements. Nooshin recalls her section of political activity in her university was called "the dairy section" because it was mainly made up of women.

When the monarchy fell, they all returned to Iran from various parts of the world, and got involved, often heading up organizations. They all spent of the first years of the revolution in different regions of Iran and were involved in

various democratic causes. Two of the women were founders of a women's group in Kurdistan; one woman used her social location as a high school teacher in the South of Iran to impact social change; another woman headed community organizing and consciousness-raising campaigns in a very poor area of Tehran; another woman published a feminist newspaper.

For the first three years after the revolution, all five women were actively organizing each in their own way. The educational component of social change was clear to the women because although they were each organizing in different areas, each woman's activity had a radical education element. Whether it was setting up neighbourhood councils in poor areas, getting people together to elect representatives, taking their demands to more liberal members of government, setting up literacy classes in poor neighbourhoods, giving out leaflets that educated the masses in very simplified language, they all did their part to effect and educate the masses.

However, Ava has extensive critique of her activities as an educator of the masses. She says, "All groups were busy giving out leaflets, getting together in the universities, debating in the universities. At the same time, the regime was busy planning their suppression while we were busy discussing. We had no plan. They were identifying everyone for a wide-scale repression while we were talking. We were too optimistic". Ava had believed that it was time for action and not for discussion.

Shirin stayed in the mountain base for several years before leaving Iran. She spoke of the role of women during those years. "At the beginning the women

were organized in the bases, in the radio and publications work. Their numbers were growing, so the women requested weapons too. First, they [male leaders of the military bases] put women in a separate group to break the taboo of women in the military... Then they decided that it's nonsense to have a separate armed women's group... After our criticism, women got military education just like men".

All of the women eventually left Iran through arduous routes which in some instances took several years. During the years that these women were in displacement in different parts of the world while awaiting their final status, they took part in community organizing. By that time they had become very accomplished activists. Ava used the experience from her community organizing in the poor neighbourhoods of Tehran to gather the refugees of her city in Turkey and created a refugee council which was then divided into various committees dealing with different issues, such as the legal committee, the housing committee, and the employment committee. Each committee has one representative who is under the umbrella of the council. "In a strong way, we put pressure on the UN. We were able to get approvals for man.." She and a few others also created a food bank with some money from City Hall. Once again, only this time in exile, she gives out leaflets. "We invited them [the refugees] to public meetings, elected representatives, talked, discussed. They weren't even political. They had learned to critically look at the system. They had grown conscious". Similarly, Nooshin awaited her approval for two years in a European country. She too spent those years actively working in a group that supported immigrants and refugees. She

also got involved in cultural activities on significant Iranian dates. “When I think about it now, I laugh that I was actually able to direct a play. We brought a piece of Brecht on the stage. The mayor came to watch. It was serious art”.

Now abroad, they are still active for democratic and social causes. Whereas prior to immigrating all women were involved in anti-government activities, with the exception of one woman who is still looking for stable employment, all women are working within the state or state-funded agencies to bring about social change. Goli is involved with a non-profit organization and Nooshin is running a newspaper. Mehri first got involved through her son’s mainly ethnic school in the home and school association. She then organized a mothers group in her apartment building which exchanged babysitting. With Mehri’s insistence, this group moved to the school and became a drop-in centre for newcomers with young children.

In the midst of the tumultuous events of their stories, including the execution of one woman’s husband, the loss of hearing from bombings, depression during early stages of displacement, there were also many joys that the women spoke of. Between the five of them, these women bore and raised six children. These children have been a source of hope to them. Since immigrating all of the women have new and more moderate views of social change.

Consciousness, Critical/Revolutionary Praxis, and Radical Adult Education

Merleau-Ponty (1996) stated decades ago that “Marxism needs a theory of consciousness” in order to refute reductionist interpretations made by vulgar

Marxists. Several theorists have since addressed this call and of these, I find Paula Allman's writing the most comprehensive.

Consciousness and Praxis

Although other theorists have written about the theory of praxis (Kolb, 1975), they often use praxis to refer to the application of theory to practice and vice versa. Marx's theory of praxis is unique in that it dialectically relates all thought with practice. Marx's theory of consciousness posits the inseparable unity of active existence with thought; thus, Allman (1999) believes that "he had created a theory of praxis (rather than simply one of consciousness) that linked thought and action" (Allman, 1999: 20).

Our consciousness is made up of thoughts, ideas, and concepts. Moreover, concepts lay the foundation of ideas and thoughts. However, what contrasts Marx from other theorists who write on consciousness is Marx's assertion that ideas and beliefs arise from relations between people and from relations between people and their material world. That is, our consciousness and the real world (the material world created by human beings and the natural world together) are not separate "things"; they should be understood as a relation. We experience these relations in daily life; thus, our consciousness is actively produced within our historically specific experience of our social, material, and natural existence. Therefore, according to Marx the key to understanding people's consciousness at any given time is to study real people and their activity, but especially the activity which produced and reproduced their material existence. "As individuals express their

life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce” (Marx & Engels, 1846:37). For example, the relations of feudalism and capitalism are the actual lived relations within which people produce and reproduce their material existence. According to Marx, so far people had not chosen and planned these relations but had accepted as natural and inevitable those relations which they had been born into. This is a revolutionary vision of human society; it is revolutionary because every major work by Marx deals with how human conscious activity has become ‘unfree’ (Marx, 1963, Part III; 1867; Marx and Engels, 1846 cited in Allman, 1999). Nooshin speaks of a time in her life when “I did everything thinking it was all very natural and normal and inevitable. Despite my various roles and activities, I was not taken seriously [by my family and colleagues] nor did I take myself seriously”. The same woman now believes that “there is nothing that is not political. Any activity that is not planned and organized is a waste of time and will lead to failure and hopelessness”. Nooshin now believes that without a clear and planned vision of the future, one that has been consciously planned and analyzed, one should never act.

It is clear that Marx’s theory of consciousness posits the inseparable unity of active existence with thought. Meaning there is no separation between consciousness and reality/practice. Thus, many theorists (Kosik, 1976; Allman, 1999, 2007) believe Marx’s theory of consciousness to be actually a theory of praxis. That is, a theory of the inseparable unity (dialectically related) of thought and practice rather than a sequential (linear) theory of praxis with thought-action-

thought-action and so on. “Action and reflection occur simultaneously ... Critical reflection is also action” (Freire, 1972: 99). Praxis unites thought and action; the separation of these leads either to “empty theorizing or to mindless activism” (Youngman, 1986). Freire best explains praxis as conscious action in the following:

The act of knowing involves a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action. For the learner to know what he did not know before, he must engage in an authentic process of abstraction by means of which he can reflect on the action-object whole, or, more generally, on forms of orientation in the world (Freire, 1972: 31).

Paula Allman further develops Marx’s theory of praxis to distinguish between limited/reproductive praxis and critical/revolutionary praxis. When people unquestioningly accept and engage with already existing social relations, they are involved in limited/reproductive praxis. Alternately, when people question and criticize and attempt to transform existing social relations of a particular context, they are engaged in critical/revolutionary praxis.

One of the problems with bourgeois thought (the consciousness within capitalist social formation) is to focus on the result of a relation rather than on the relation itself. Because we experience the components of that which is inter-related in a different time and a different space within capitalism, Marx believed that there is a tendency within capitalism toward ideological thinking processes such as abstraction, separation, and partial focusing. That is we tend to think that objects have intrinsic attributes and our consciousness relates between things that in reality only results from a relation between people. The praxis which is associated with such consciousness is what Allman refers to as

limited/reproductive praxis. “Energy is directed at defeating the symptoms while leaving the causes intact” (Allman, 1999: 50).

This critique of bourgeois thought is stated in relation to informal learning in Chapter I. To reiterate, current informal learning theory insinuates that social exclusion, lack of credentials, and underemployment are results of individual deficit. The emerging understanding is that these contradictions within the system can be corrected by recognizing new forms knowledge and new sites of learning. However, social exclusion, lack of credentials, and underemployment are results. What we must focus on are the relations that have given rise to these results.

Focusing on the result of a relation rather than the relation itself leads to fragmented or partial consciousness which is fertile ground for ideological thinking and practice prevalent in capitalist social formation. This fragmented, partial consciousness prevents people from understanding their true reality and in turn makes them unable to transform that reality. One of Marx’s crucial claims is that we live an existence that masks our social relations and our inter-relatedness. This inter-relation, once recognized, holds enormous potential for uniting human beings and it can only be recognized through critical/revolutionary praxis (Allman, 1999).

When people only act in the social relations into which they were born and never critically question those relations, assuming that these relations are natural and inevitable, they will continuously reproduce those same relations. This sort of engagement within social relations is what Allman calls limited/reproductive praxis and many activists are even engaged in such praxis. Although the praxis of

these activists could offer a temporary and superficial resolution, in the end will only serve to support and facilitate the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

However, critical/revolutionary praxis occurs when people critically question the existing social relations and take measures to change or destroy those relations and aim at creating humanizing relations. Critical/revolutionary praxis is the pre-requisite of authentic revolution i.e. self and social transformation. And it can begin in a social movement, a political party, a trade union, a classroom, or a political study group. All five research participants introduced in the previous chapter were actively engaged in critical/revolutionary praxis. Individuals who critically question what others have taken for granted as natural are key and merit our attention. Clearly the implications of critical/revolutionary praxis are enormous for radical adult education and in the next section, I will discuss the significance of Marx's thought in relation to education and learning.

Radical Adult Education

Authentic social transformation presumes an understanding and analysis of the relations that need to be transformed. Otherwise, struggle will be reformist at best. That is, merely the result of a relation will be focused on and dealt with and not the relation itself. There is a fundamental difference between reform and transformation. Often reforms do not delve deeply into a problem to destroy the oppressive relations which give rise to the problem. Activists involved in reformist struggle base their campaigns on fighting for access of rights and privileges of others rather than critically understanding and transforming the root

cause of the problem²². For instance, to argue for supporting the credentialization of informal learning as a way to fight unemployment and under-education, as mentioned in chapter one, we are merely looking at the result of a relation – unemployment and under-education. Social relations of sexism, racism, and classism that brought about those results are left unchallenged.

Radical adult education must hold as its basic purpose the unmasking of social reality. Humans have produced a social reality which “in an inversion of praxis” has turned back and conditioned them (Freire, cited in Allman 1999). That is, the social reality has turned around and shaped their consciousness. Transforming that reality is a task for conscious human beings. Authentic social transformation and the making of our own history are necessary to become fully human. Furthermore, education is a necessary component of social transformation. Having said that, however, education alone “cannot lead immediately and directly to social transformation” (Allman, 1999). Although a critical perception of reality is necessary, it is not sufficient unless this critical consciousness engages humans in struggle. Thus, the role of education is crucial but cannot be divorced from action.

Therefore, one of the most basic tenets of radical adult education is the development of critical consciousness. Paulo Freire demonstrates the connection between levels of individual consciousness with levels of social organization (Elias & Merriam, 2005). For Freire, the lowest level of consciousness is *intransitive consciousness* where individuals are preoccupied with meeting their

²² For a very comprehensive example of such practice read Chapter 6 of *Revolutionary Social Transformation* by Paula Allman.

basic needs and have no historical consciousness of the oppressive elements that have shaped their lives. This level of consciousness is found in cultures of silence in peasant societies. The second level of consciousness is *semi-intransitivity* or *magical consciousness* where individuals have internalized the negative images that the dominant culture has associated with them. This level of consciousness is particular to emerging Third World nations. *Naïve-transitiveness* is Freire's third level of consciousness. Here individuals begin to experience reality as a problem and start to criticize and problematize their surrounding. At this level, individuals sense their own power although the dangers of co-option and being manipulated. According to Freire, the highest level of consciousness is *critical consciousness* which can be accomplished through the process of conscientization. Conscientization is a social activity in which through dialogue individuals communicate their experience of reality. Critical consciousness is characterized by a deep analysis of oppressive structures and a denunciation of those structures along with a commitment to creating a new reality. Here, individuals are confident in dialogue, as they are able to "scrutinize their own thoughts and recognize proper causal and circumstantial correlations" (Elias & Merriam, 2005: 157). Freire criticizes orthodox Marxism's tendency to view changes in consciousness as dependent on changes in the economic base and stresses that "Conscientizacao represents the development of the awakening of critical consciousness ... [It] must grow out of a critical educational effort, based on favourable historical conditions" (Freire, 1976:19).

It is necessary here to discuss the role of the facilitator of the learning because the adult educator too engages in the social relations, which he or she may assume natural and inevitable. Although educators have a “conceptual and analytical headstart”, they have a role to enable learners to critically think about their reality themselves. Freire clearly explains this role:

Although they [adult educators] may legitimately recognize themselves as having, due to their revolutionary consciousness, a level of revolutionary knowledge different from the level of empirical knowledge held by the people ... They cannot sloganize the people, but must enter into dialogue with them, so that the people’s empirical knowledge of reality nourished by the learners’ critical knowledge, gradually becomes transformed into knowledge of the causes of reality. (p. 104)

Paula Allman also stresses that the adult educator must show patience and humility. An atmosphere of trust is crucial in which all knowledge, including that of the educator, is questioned and evaluated. Learners may and will resist new knowledge and it is the adult educator’s role to exemplify an alternate vision of being within the learning environment. Throughout my interviews with my research participants, it was evident that the role of the educator in their political study circles was pivotal. The women were not only influenced by the knowledge of these intellectuals, they genuinely liked and sympathized with them and enjoyed the atmosphere of the study circles. Not only was the content of what was being read radical, but the atmosphere within the circles and the method of delivery was revolutionary as the facilitator personified a progressive, alternate future for the learners. Ava expresses very clearly her thoughts about the educators in the study circles:

Our educators themselves had very attractive personalities. They were so unaffected and lived very simple lives. They weren’t authoritarian. All

this was very attractive and interesting to us. They would tell us that we needed to learn this knowledge to change the world. They told us at whose disposal our knowledge should be. They explained to us that we owe the people who work and produce the things that we use.

The facilitators did not only transmit knowledge, they provided a glimpse of an alternate future which until then had not been a material reality for the learners. Their educators joined learning and experience in their everyday practice by criticizing social relations and confronting oppressive structures daily. In fact, other than the educators in her political study circles, there were others who had reached 'hero status' for her whom she learned from. They represented a new and exciting way of being. As a teenager, Ava was in awe of a male cousin who "although from a well-to-do family" wouldn't allow Ava to serve him tea. "He would get up and take the tea from me and say, 'why are you serving tea? I'll do it.' This was very interesting for me. He had become my role model". And when the same cousin was imprisoned for dispersing political pamphlets, then, "he really became a hero". It is clear that this cousin had allowed Ava to experience what is commonly a gendered social custom (serving tea) in a non-gendered way. This excited Ava because the seemingly mundane experience of serving tea had lead her to learn about and question gender roles. Other women too express admiration for individuals and educators who were theoretically more advanced. This admiration was not just in relation to their level of knowledge but for their overall attitude. "When my cousin came back from the U.S. with these thoughts and actions [humility and simplicity], it added to my own restlessness and helped shape my consciousness" Ava says.

Freire writes extensively on the topic of the teacher-learner relationship (1972). Freire's approach conceives of teaching and learning as two internally related processes within each person. Teachers continue being teachers but cease to be the sole teacher in the learning group. "They will need to relinquish authoritarianism but not authority" (Allman, 1999). Learners too continue being learners but join teachers in the process of teaching and learning. The transformation of the teacher-learner relationship is not a task which can be accomplished by the teacher alone. The teacher can challenge the learner to see the limitations of the existing relationship but it is only when the learner accepts the challenge that struggle for transformation begins. In the case of Ava, mentioned above, she and her fellow learners had accepted the challenge and were elated by the transformation.

Freire's theory of levels of consciousness is indeed useful. Through the analysis of data produced by my research participants, I did indeed view some correlation with Freire's process of conscientization. Several participants expressed a realization of their own power after the first time they were interrogated by SAVAK which led to the prolonged sustenance of their activism. Ava expresses her delight when she was threatened by her high school's authorities to be taken to the intelligence agency. "I thought, 'I am threatening this regime. How strong I am!' After that they seemed really weak to me." The process of conscientization was clearly under way when Ava speaks of her "restlessness" during her youth as she questioned her reality. It seemed that a large population of the youth of that time was going through this process. "It

wasn't just me; it was my whole generation. That's what I want to tell you.

There was a whole generation who was conscious and critiqued their surroundings.

It was the atmosphere of the time". The Shah had opened doors for people from

average income families to send their children abroad, especially the United

States. However, once they reached the United States they joined the

Confederation of Iranian Students (see p. 74) that would eventually play an

important role in toppling his regime. In fact, this new arrivals of youth from

lower and middle-income families served to radicalize the student movement.

Ava explains this phenomenon very clearly:

Before us only the rich could send their kids abroad and this affected the structure and framework of the Confederation. But around 1976 and 1978, the more new groups from different social classes went to the U.S., the more change they created in the Confederation's structure. They critiqued the old students and their ways.

Goli also speaks of the dialectical interplay of her praxis as her reflection and action shaped her consciousness. She expresses how she was outraged by the immorality of the Vietnam War. "I felt I had to do something about this but it [my analysis] was at the emotional stage. After that, I looked for a theory that described my emotions, so I kept reading ... because I needed to justify what I was doing with theory". As participants stay on the path of praxis, it is obvious that their depth of interpretation and analysis grows; their receptiveness to opposing ideas and quality of discourse and organizing expands. Once participants of movements, they later become recruiters and organizers. The once "emotional stage" gives way to a deep critical consciousness as participants form study groups where they discuss and debate. Ava says, "Towards the end, we

could debate Maoism against Stalinism. That's how comfortable and influential we had become".

However, Freire seems to assume a transcendent view of reality by linear movement through levels of consciousness which leads to enlightenment. This almost spiritual view lacks an understanding of opportunities to act and personal interests. There were times that personal interests shaped the participants' consciousness and they actually went to earlier levels of consciousness and their activism became less radical accordingly. Other times the degree of repression and lack of opportunity to act shaped their consciousness. Once militant and radical views aimed directly at changing the state structure gave way to more moderate ones aimed at reforming the existing order as participants immigrated to the West. Although still activists, struggle has taken a different shape. Now, all participants are involved in social and cultural causes. Mehri exemplifies a shift in activism before and after immigration. She is still very active in Canada but she regrets that the grassroots was overlooked in her political experience. She says, "of course there will always be groups of intellectuals and universities that will give you a platform but this won't cause social change". She has distinctively changed her style and has taken "a different route." "Not everyone can focus on the change of a regime but you can focus on demolishing hunger and ignorance... One of the beauties of working in a Western country is that you can shake hands [with your adversaries] and work on a common front. Part of our upbringing and culture [Persian] does not allow for that to happen and it should." Goli also expresses how the degree of repression when she went back to Iran in

late 1970's shaped her consciousness. "I went back to join the guerrilla forces but I saw, wow, repression everywhere. I couldn't talk. I was harassed all the time by SAVAK. They kept interrogating me for seven, ten hours at a time. They were watching my every move". After spending one year in this condition, she questioned the feasibility of her previously held militant views and altered her perception and her actions. "Then [after one year] I thought, I guess I don't know everything. I must go out again, go back to school, read more and learn more because obviously, I don't have all the answers". When she returned abroad, she met members of her old group who had interestingly too changed their militant views and guerrilla style. Therefore, the cycle continues as they all start reading and learning together again.

Political informal learning must entail an understanding of opportunities and barriers. Differently located people face different social barriers and have different degrees of opportunity to organize and act. In other words, once one's social relations change, so too does one's activism and consciousness. This is exemplified by the change in the research participants' activism within Iran, then later when awaiting refugee status in Turkey, and finally in the West. As a result of the change in their social relations, their method of activism and their entire consciousness around social and political activity have changed.

Connecting personal experience to larger relations of oppression is the work of radical education. Three of the research participants went to the United States on government scholarships during the 1960's. As part of the Shah's policy to westernize the nation, youth from various social classes were granted scholarships

to the United States and other European countries for post-secondary education in order to help in progress when they returned. Not only did this not occur, but also many of these ‘beneficiaries’ who were already politically conscious, joined the organized anti-regime movement, the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad²³ (CIS), once they reached the United States. They were drawn to the social movements of the 1960’s in the United States. However, the connection between the United States context and their local contexts was clear. As Mehri asserts: “What really shaped my commitment to activism was my involvement in the anti-war movement of Vietnam and Cambodia ... There was a visible linkage to what was happening in the U.S. and what was happening in Iran. A global vision was being developed”. Goli was also able to connect what was happening in her immediate surrounding to her analysis of Iran. She mentions engaging with the Black Panthers, demonstrating against the Vietnam War, and positioning herself during the Arab-Israeli conflict while at the same time making a connection to the oppression within Iran. “We were Iranian so the final analysis, everything we were doing, we were doing with an eye on Iran.” The CIS formed study circles where the group read literature and philosophy and with the aid of facilitator who was “more advanced” than the others, engaged in dialogue²⁴. Eventually and gradually, the participants became more complex in their readings and analyses. They were able to debate one philosophical school of thought against another.

²³ The Confederation of Iranian Students abroad (CIS) was the most active organized opposition to the Shah's regime during the two decades prior to the 1978-79 revolution. It was a politically autonomous organization with factions outside of Iran.

²⁴ The literature read in these study circles all had political and social undertones. Some examples of books and writers that were read were *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, literature of Latin America and French Canada, Fuerbach, Marx.

Several participants specifically point to feeling a “transformation” occurring in them. Mehri shared that “This knowledge shed light on darkness. Everything that I had accepted as inevitable and fate was gone. A large population of Iranian youth within the student movement abroad had reached a level of analysis that could link the local to the global”. She continued to explain that “Opposition to the Shah and his connections to the United States were intertwined. As struggle became sharper within Iran, the analytical aspects became clearer. The link between the Green Revolution in other parts of the world and the White Revolution in Iran became clear. How it was masterminded and where it was orchestrated became clear”.

Conscious human beings do make the connection between the particular and the general. Throughout their activism, participants experienced some form of sexism. However, instead of treating it as an isolated incidence, they were able to link the occurrence to a general structure of patriarchy which would later serve to ground their analysis within a feminist framework. “Anywhere that oppression was more, I was reminded that I was a woman,” Ava says. “Where there was more equality and equal treatment, I forgot that I was a woman. This was educational. I learned that people *learn* their behaviour [and act accordingly] from the environment they are in.”

The analysis of my research participants’ lives leads me to understand the fluid, dialectical relationship between analysis and action. There was an on-going relationship of analysis and action that formed and shaped their consciousness. There was no separation between analysis and action and they were not in any

particular order of thought-action-thought-action...with movement between the two in one direction. This is in direct contrast with Transformative Learning theories that posit “disorienting dilemmas” as catalysts to examination and planning of a course of action²⁵ (Mezirow, 1997). The women that I have interviewed have not been shocked into action. There was never a catalytic moment. From their social world, contradictions were visible. There was never a time in their lives even in childhood when they didn’t know that oppression existed. Nooshin very simply stated this when I asked her whether external pressures or disorienting dilemmas caused her to take action, “This pressure was always on me. My actions weren’t a reaction to something that had just recently happened.” Certain incidences, such as brushes with the system, did cause reflection but never served to shock them into action; those incidences merely substantiated what they already knew. When Mehri was threatened by SAVAK when she was in high school, she had what she calls “a reality check”. “I learned how all the conversations in the background [in our home] applied to me.” When eventually they did take action, it was a deliberate attempt of someone who had focused her attention on the political arena to bring about change.

Conclusion

Most people accept the social relations into which they are born. Even movement leaders and progressive educators are not immune from this. These

²⁵ For a thorough reading of the importance of “disorienting dilemmas” within Transformative Learning Theory read *Disorienting Dilemmas: Their Effects on Learners, Impact on Performance, and Implications for Adult Educators* by Nella Roberts.

social relations seem natural and inevitable and even the praxis of so-called ‘critics’ may support and facilitate the reproduction of the same social relations. However, there are people who critically question and engage in transforming existing social relations. Paula Allman calls such practice critical/ revolutionary praxis (Allman, 1999). Such praxis is only possible through a critical analysis of existing social relations and a desire to engage in transforming them. It is here that the role of education and the educator is pivotal. Critical/revolutionary praxis is a process which can begin at the workplace, in the family, and other informal settings, or the classroom. However, for it to remain critical, it must remain within the path of self and social transformation. There *are* people who have critically questioned existing relations and have taken action to transform those relations. This study’s participants are among those people and they provide inside information about the workings of critical/revolutionary praxis. From their successes and failures we can learn how to unify efforts and communicate between seemingly diverse contexts.

In this chapter, I have laid the theoretical foundation for reading my research participants’ lives. I introduced Marx’s theory of consciousness and Freire’s expansion of the theory of praxis as a framework to view learning. In the next chapter, I will offer my contribution to the field of adult education and stress the questions that remain unanswered and merit further research.

CHAPTER IV: RECURRENT THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION

Introduction

In this study I have challenged mainstream adult education claims that informal learning can be a way to democratize the workplace and fight unemployment and under- education within society (Livingstone, 1997). I support the conceptualization of learning as a social act and problematize personalized and individualized theories of learning which neglect to account for the social dimension of learning. I also support the conceptualization of informal learning as the formation of critical consciousness through our thoughts and actions within the material world.

In Chapter I, I laid out the current notions of adult education in regards to informal learning and learning within social movements. I also explain the personal purpose this study has for me. I am grateful that I have answers to some questions that have perplexed me for decades: What motivates people to revolt? What sustains rebellion despite the possibility of harsh repression?

Many of my previously held assumptions were shattered in the course of this study. I had held that intolerable circumstances give rise to sedition. However, there is now no doubt in my mind that the answer lies in people's consciousness as they act and reflect in their social world. In chapter one, I also provide a methodological explanation of this study. Through a social relations lens, I believe we must look at the actual life of individuals, not as they appear in other's

imagination but as they operate during their day-to-day lives. I used the participants' lives to problematize current individualized theories of learning.

Chapter II offers a narration of the women's life histories. I have, to the best of my ability, narrated the life history of each woman in the third person. This narration is to be used not only as a window into one woman's life but it is to be used to understand the social history of Iran in the period between early 1970's to the present. It also is to be used to connect personal experience with social structures and trace the formation of consciousness as each woman reflects and acts in her social world.

In Chapter III I advocate a Marxist reading of informal learning by laying out Marx's revolutionary theory of consciousness as interpreted by Paula Allman (1999, 2007). I explain that consciousness is formed through praxis and to change consciousness, people need both different ideas and different experience. That is, as the women's social relations changed, so too did their consciousness and analysis of the world around them.

In this chapter, I will express the implications that this study has for adult education in general and for informal learning theory in particular. I stress the role of the adult educator as one who facilitates the process of linking the specific to the general by penetrating the reality of society, therefore revealing its exploitative nature. I call on radical adult educators to connect theory with social experience to instigate collective action for progressive social change. I will end this chapter by listing emerging questions and suggestions for further research.

Implications for Adult Education and Informal Learning Theory

Currently within adult education literature, humanist themes, such as personal liberation and individual interest, are stressed. I advocate a critical approach to adult education which analyzes adult education within its economic and political context. Frank Youngman (1986) posits adult education within class struggle. The ruling class seeks to use adult education as a site to reproduce the status quo and meet the needs of capitalist labour market and legitimate the current, dominant social order. On the other hand, the working class can use the potential of adult education for social change to facilitate the formation of critical consciousness. Although alternative social organizations such as trade unions, worker's parties, political study groups are at the leading edge of radical adult education and better located to utilize this potential of adult education, efforts to practice radical adult education within state-funded sites are vital also. "Adult educators must not be immobilized but must start from wherever they are" (Youngman, 1986:40).

The ruling class attempts to justify its position through disseminating ideas through various social institutions in order to make its ideas seem 'natural' and reproduce the status quo by ingraining the inevitability of the current situation. However, this does not mean that the subordinated class is trapped within these ideas and cannot escape them. The very fact that we assert, "ideas serve class interest" means that the subordinated class may have ideas which serve *its* interests. There do exist individuals who become conscious of this class conflict

and decide to ‘fight it out’ or achieve critical distance from bourgeois ideology (Youngman, 1986). A perfect example of such individuals is my research participants who used adult education’s radical potential to form political study circles where they discussed and disseminated subversive and progressive ideas.

Adult educators must situate themselves within this class struggle. By choosing to serve the dominant group, we would produce workers in our learning institutions for the global economy and legitimize the notion that the labour of these workers must be at the service of capitalists. By attending to the latter group, we see teaching and learning moments as opportunities to form critical consciousness. Radical adult educators, by virtue of their “intellectual and theoretical head-start” (Freire, 1972), are able to penetrate the reality of capitalist society and give an analysis of its hidden exploitative nature. The role of radical adult education, thus, becomes to connect theory with social experience of individuals and fuse the two into collective action for social change. Informal learning, too, can be situated within the same dichotomy of class struggle.

Informal learning, which is learning that happens outside of educational institutions, must be analyzed within its economic and political context. Economic context of informal learning within the current adult education literature is linked to methods of extracting surplus value. Unpaid time spent on work-related learning is seen as ways of extracting relative surplus value. Moreover, unemployed or contract workers who spend unpaid time to acquire skills which will later be used when they find employment is absolute surplus value enjoyed by the employer.

After placing adult education within its economic and political context, i.e. class struggle, we need now a social conceptualization of learning. This conceptualization is developed from *The German Ideology* (Marx, 1846) which shows how thought arises from our active experience within our environment. In other words, consciousness is formed by our social and natural conditions and our activity involved in changing them; there is a dialectical relationship between thought and being, consciousness and reality, which is our praxis.

The theory of praxis is integral for understanding the social nature of learning. Briefly, praxis is social human activity through which people shape or are shaped by their social world. The endless cycle of practice, knowledge, again practice continues as the content of the practice and knowledge grows more complex (Mao, 1971). Therefore, learning is not the acquisition of specific skills which ends once those set of skills are internalized; learning is the base of new, purposive, conscious activity. Thus, learning is a dialectical cycle of perception, thought, and active application which unifies theory and practice (Youngman, 1986).

It is necessary here for me to distance myself from adult educators who advocate experiential learning, 'learning by doing', or 'discovery learning'. Although I agree on the primacy of experience in learning, as experience is an essential component in praxis, I depart from these educators in my understanding of the purpose of adult education and consequently my methodology. I advocate the primacy of experience only when it is linked to theory in order to shed light on the social relations of that particular experience. It is the dialectic of theory and

practice which I am interested in. Unfortunately, few adult educators in formal institutions theorize experience as such and thus abstract experience from theory and diminish its social dimension. No experience happens in a vacuum; it is linked to larger relations.

Recommendations to Adult Educators

As an adult educator of twenty years, I had reached a certain level of comfort in my practice and had not contemplated on my philosophy of education for some time prior to this research study. However, pursuing this Master's degree prompted me to reassess my practice, theory, and philosophy and question at whose service my abilities are. I embarked on a journey that was at times laboriously challenging and many times delightfully enlightening. It is an exciting intellectual journey which I strongly urge other adult educators to pursue. In this section, I will share the insight which I have gained through my contemplation. However, I do not believe that an activist blueprint is neither desirable nor feasible. A strategy must be worked out according to the specific context to which it is applied.

1. Have a clear philosophical position.

It has been my experience that even educators, who claim to not have a particular philosophical position, actually do have one. Educators embark on their task with certain previously held assumptions which comprise their philosophy of how humans learn. The authoritarian teacher has

certain presuppositions of people, how they learn, why they learn, and their relation to the knowledge that they are learning.

I advocate a philosophy of adult education which views learning as the formation of critical consciousness for the purpose of social transformation.

2. Link the specific to the general.

The task of radical adult education is to theorize experience. That is, we must use personal experience to uncover truths of social reality (exposing relations of exploitation and oppression). Experience is a valuable starting point; however, for it to be Transformative, personal experience must be penetrated theoretically to expose established appearances. Individual experiences of sexism, for example, must be linked to relations of patriarchy. One's encounter with police brutality during legal demonstration can shed light on the democratic system. Or in the case of the research participants introduced in the previous chapters, protesting against U.S. involvement in Vietnam can expose the illegitimacy of Iran's monarchy.

Many people take action against a single issue within a local context.

Unfortunately, many activists lack the understanding of the global significance of their local issue. Their failure to see the link between their local issue and the global context usually results in transferring the problem to another location or fizzling out once a local victory has been won.

As radical educators dedicated to humanized social transformation, we need to develop ourselves and aid others in developing a critical understanding of how issues are linked within a total structure of oppression.

3. Take sides.

We must view education as a political act. Gramsci has written “Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship” (1971:350). All adult education is political; neutrality is not possible. The adult educator either contributes to the creation or recreation of hegemony or to the establishment of counter-hegemony. Within this conflict we must choose which side we are on. There should not be dissonance between one’s political theory and one’s education practice. Too many adult educators in my opinion have created two separate categories in their minds and their practice for the two.

4. Do not fragment the learner; view the evolving consciousness of the learner.

By this I am not advocating liberal adult educators’ motto of ‘Teach the whole person’. By viewing the development of critical consciousness as the aim, educators may pay less attention upon the accuracy of content which is not meaningful to the learner. When critical consciousness is understood as our thoughts and actions as mediated by our social relations,

then every moment spent in the learning environment becomes an opportunity for this evolving consciousness.

5. Be patient. Trust is key.

By inviting learners to engage in critical/revolutionary praxis, radical educators must remember that there are aspects of dominant ideology entrenched deeply in the learners. Initially, they may refuse to accept an alternative view. It is extremely difficult and threatening to rid themselves of all that impedes their humanization. Authentic transformation cannot be imposed on people nor can people's consciousness be evolved by others. Patience is crucial.

The learning environment is as important as the content being discussed. The setting and relationships within that setting must mimic the social relations that we are aspiring for. An atmosphere of trust must be created in which educators as well as learners can express their thoughts demonstrating a willingness to question and scrutinize those thoughts in the learning group.

New Questions for Further Research

At the 2008 Canadian Association of the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) conference, I attended a workshop in which the presenter asked everyone to name the person who had influenced their consciousness the most. I went through a mental list of people whom I had met and read and admired but in order to authentically answer that question, I had to name an event not a person. The 1979

revolution of Iran was what most influenced my consciousness. Therefore, I suppose in order to answer *who* had influenced me the most, the answer would be the tens of thousands of people who marched the streets of Iran enduring severe brutality. I did not know this prior to this study but all my life I had wondered what causes such a mass movement. What prompts an ordinary man, woman, or child to march the streets demanding change? Could it be that life had suddenly become unbearable for everyone at the same time?

As an adult I witnessed the 1999 unrest in the streets of Tehran. And the same questions that had haunted me my whole life returned. I started this research study with the following questions: What are the catalysts for revolutionary action? What analysis gives way to such action and as a result of the action, how does one's analysis alter? How does this revolutionary consciousness develop and form? At what point do people decide to "make their own history"?

After spending countless hours scrutinizing the life histories of the women whom I interviewed, I am convinced that the answer lies in human consciousness intermingled with opportunities to act. It was not "psychological discomfort" or "disequilibrium" or "disorienting dilemmas" that brought those thousands of men and women into the streets. It was a level of consciousness developed through generations that brought out both those who benefited from the ruling order and those who were oppressed by the ruling order. The beneficiaries had reached an analysis of how exploitive their class was and the oppressed had seen how

exploited they had been. Both groups saw a window of opportunity and a vision of a future with new and alternate social relations and acted.

What the Future Holds?

My current context, as an ESL instructor in a community college in Toronto, gives rise to new questions. How is ESL being used currently to reproduce capitalist relations? How can the ESL classroom be a space of critical consciousness-raising? For my Ph.D. thesis, I would like to pursue my understanding of the theory of consciousness to develop the purpose and curriculum content of critical ESL.

Many Iranians have immigrated to Canada in the past three decades. Of these immigrants, some are women who were political and social activists. As these women start to resume their lives, many start from the ESL classroom. “Traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered to new immigrants are helpful in giving them basic language skills. However, the language learning often stops at a certain point as immigrants move into other aspects of settling, such as finding employment, in order to survive” (Osborne, 2009). For my Ph.D. thesis, I would like to look at a potentially new approach to second language teaching which meets the needs of political activists such as the research participants introduced in the study. It is an exciting endeavour to politicize the ESL classroom and curriculum in order to create an engaging learning space for activist women.

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