



WORKING PAPER #8

**Social networks and socio-economic integration:
Immigrant experiences and approaches in Toronto**

Agnes Thomas

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The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project represents a partnership effort across several post-secondary institutions and a range of community-based groups in Toronto (Canada). This project was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under its Community University Research Alliance program (2009-2014). Drawing on carefully designed survey and case study methods as well as a participatory action research orientation - the aim of this research project has been to offer the most intensive study of activist learning and development in anti-poverty work in Canada.

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Social networks and socio-economic integration: Immigrant experiences and approaches in Toronto

Agnes Thomas

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

Abstract: This paper analyses the findings from the Anti Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) survey and case study done in one of the selected neighbourhood in Toronto. These findings will be examined from the context of social network theory. Based on these findings, this paper will attempt to answer the following questions: What role do social networks play in the lives of people who live in the margins of this city? What types of networks are functional in their lives and what integral roles do social networks play in organizing their work lives? What are some limitations the present social network analysis theory has in analysing these types of community networks and informal connections.

By exploring these questions, this analysis critically examines the themes established from the preliminary findings of the survey and case study in the context of social network. These four themes are i) immigrant women and their social organization in the community; ii) immigrants and issue of social mobility; iii) gendered division of labour in the informal sector through informal networks (mainly in the cash sector); and iv) activism carried out in informal networks to fight oppression and poverty. This paper also provides an overview of the social network theory and labour market trends of immigrant populations in Canada.

Keywords: Immigrants, social networks, community organizing and collective action

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION: IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES AND APPROACHES IN TORONTO

"Society is not merely an aggregate of individuals; it is the sum of the relations in which these individuals stand to one another" (Marx, 1857, in Breiger, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on the preliminary findings from the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) research project, a five-year SSHRC-fundedⁱ project focussing on activism and informal learningⁱⁱ in under-resourced neighbourhoods in Toronto. The main goal of this paper is to explore informal activities and learning that occurs through community organizing and networks. Furthermore, this paper will also examine the role social networks play in activating those activities among people living in marginalized communities. This paper analyses the findings from one of the selected neighbourhoods in Toronto where a majority of the population is new immigrants who came to Canada in the last two decades. The data was collected using a case study model of research over a period of 10-12 months. Drawing from the standpoint theory in institutional ethnographic frameworkⁱⁱⁱ, data was provided by individual interviews (12) among immigrant women actively involved in informal activities and community work; surveys from community members (72); and notes from participant observations of different community events and local neighbourhood gatherings.

The research questions that informed this case study are the following: how do women organize themselves in the communities to fight poverty and other forms of oppression? What are the motivating factors that lead them to work in the community and form groups? What role do social networks play in these communities and initiatives? What types of informal activities take place in a typical under-resourced neighbourhood when people are seeking alternatives to formal employment and social development opportunities? The women interviewed are from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Many are mothers who stay home to care for their children and manage their households. The majority of these women have a minimum of one university degree. Several of them had formal employment experiences and were part of the labour market prior to immigration to Canada, and most are from South Asia. The surveys were taken by adults (18 years +) from all age groups from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Participant observation^{iv} notes were taken from various women's group meetings, community celebrations, and bazaars run by local agencies or community members themselves. The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of few networks theory frameworks that is relevant to this paper. The second part of this paper contextualises immigrants in the city through a brief literature review and the key findings from the study with reference to networks. The third and fourth parts of this paper demonstrate collective action and organizing through networks, and informal learning and motivation. The final part is the conclusion and questions that indicate the need for further study.

SOCIAL NETWORK PERSPECTIVES AND THEMES

The essence of social network analysis is that it examines the world as a set of nodes and a set of ties that connect some or all of these nodes (Wellman, 1998). In this paper, the concept of a social network analysis is informed by Granovetter's activity-specific network theory analysis (1973), and Wellman's (1998) analysis of the privatization and domestication of community. Granovetter presents two aspects of network in his analysis that has relevance to this paper. The first is network in the context of employment opportunities. That is, how a potential employee collects information on available jobs or access to jobs through networks and this paper examines if this is

relevant for new immigrants who live in the margins of an urban neighbourhood. The second is the notion of 'weak ties'^v to explore if it is the weak ties that provide the support needed by people whose socio- economic and cultural backgrounds are altered due to transnational migration.

Wellman (1998) in his exploration of community and network illustrate the changing dynamics of community and network spatially and virtually. An important aspect of Wellman's work is the type of communities that are created and formed according to the changing needs of its members. Wellman discuss in detail about how most of the network analysis does not examine formal boundaries as social boundaries. In the context of this study the concept of social boundary is an important one to study to estimate if in fact informal networks formed within a particular neighbourhood or neighbourhoods in a city like Toronto have the capacity to go beyond the geographical and social boundaries of those neighbourhoods. The question is raised while acknowledging the fact that individuals are part of networks that are beyond their geographical boundaries. According to Wellman the complex and specialized nature of personal communities indicates fragmented networks as it provides only few aspects of social support. Does that mean the networks that are formed and stay with in a particular neighbourhood are fragmented in nature therefore affording no potential for expansion? In addition, what are those elements that are missing from the specialized personal networks that create boundaries for these networks? What is the implication of having a fragmented network vs. a loosely bounded and frequently changing network?

I will develop further on his analysis to show some key components of community that need to be analysed differently for people who are in specific geographical or economic situations implied by immigration. As social networks play a huge role in the way new immigrants navigate the city, from finding housing, to accessing services, to making and meeting new friends and neighbours, can this network provide upward mobility in terms of employment and economic opportunities?

The way Wellman (1998) describe complex and specific personalised communities fit in with Granovetter's (1973) explanation of strong ties^{vi}. Although contradictory in nature the functions of these types of network as described by Wellman as personalized ties serve the function of 'weak ties' especially in the case of women and elderly people who rely on community and neighbour support for childcare or other needs. Community members who are actively participating in these networks do not necessarily feel strong affinity with the group but because of their particular need they are active (Wellman, 1998). A number of papers reviewed on the topic of social networks (Ryan, 2007; Wellman, 1998; Granovetter, 1973; Brint, 2001; Vithessonthi, 2010; Breiger, 2010) reveal the complex nature of networks in the lives of people in a constantly changing political and socio economic landscape in a city like Toronto. For example, Brint (2001), in his critique of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* demonstrates the growing complexity of community that translate into networks as both share many similar characteristics. *Gemeinschaft* represents community that is made of strong ties and *Gesellschaft*, with more dispersed ties, represent society.

In the context of participants of this study, it is obvious that there is a merge of all these main characters of both community and society in today's urban networks whether their ties are strong or weak in nature. Yet, for a critical analysis of such networks and their function using a sociological lens in his work, Brint (2001) points out the *Disaggregated approach to community* by Durkheim (1897) that provides two sets of variables to understand and study community. The structural and cultural variable such as dense and demanding social ties; social attachments to and involvements in institutions; traditional occasions and small group size, perceptions of similarity and life style, historical similarities in experiences; common belief and idea systems, moral order and structure of the institution or group. This framework can provide insight to the way networks get formed, and their various functions and outcomes on immigrant population. However, it will be critical not to use typologies to understand the everyday life of an immigrant in the city as it will only show a limited or partial picture.

Transnational migration and a good majority of immigrants choosing to stay in the urban centers in Canada (HRSDC, 2011) make it an important group to study in the context of social network theory. However, to address the many layers and interconnectedness of themes there needs to be new approaches and research methodologies developed. This will allow network analysis to examine the role culture, ethnicity, gender and class play in the forming and running of a network among immigrant communities. As our compiled survey findings from the eight neighbourhoods suggest, new immigrants use networks to collect information and to get involved in community activities. The next section further explores the lives immigrants in the city and some of the issues faced by them within the realm of work and networks.

IMMIGRANTS IN THE CITY

Globalization has been enhanced by technology and has boosted immigration to countries such as Canada in the last few decades (Goliath, 2007). Thousands of people arrive each year on a regular basis through the immigration system in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, between 1991 and 2000, 2.2 million people arrived in Canada as immigrants (Chui, 2011). A majority of these immigrants came through the skilled category. In the last decade, immigrants to Canada have been from the developing nations; mainly China, India and the Philippines, and over half of them are women (CIC, 2009; Shan, 2009; Hou, 2007). The criteria by which skilled-category immigrants are selected indicate that they are highly educated and were part of a formal employment sector before coming to Canada^{vii}. In 2009 alone, Canada welcomed 77% of their immigrants through the economic category^{viii}. Out of these, 47.75% belong to the skilled category (CIC, 2009). Immigrants are identified as crucial for the socio-economic development of Canada (CCIRC, 2011; Chui, 2011; CIC, 2005). However, research on immigrants and their employment experiences reveals that the labour market is highly inaccessible for the immigrant population, especially female immigrants, regardless of their previous educational and employment achievements (Guo, 2010; Mirchandani, 2004; Mojab, 1999; Maitra, 2010; Ng, 1996; Vosko, 2009).

Attempts to find alternatives to formal employment and the need for economic survival situate immigrants in a difficult position. A review of relevant literature on immigrants (Ng, 1996; Maitra & Shan, 2007; Guo, 2009; Shan, 2005) identifies an enormous disparity in the job market between immigrant and non-immigrant populations, a reality especially in the case of racial minorities. In addition, several studies on immigration, the job market, and capitalism that have been done in this area have revealed that it is women who are the most vulnerable in this changing job market (Galabuzi, 2006; Guo, 2005; Mirchandani, 2004; Ng, 1996; Vosko, 2008).

According to Statistics Canada (Chui, 2012) immigrant women are most commonly involved in traditional female jobs with 64% of the immigrant women working part time, 10% working in self-employment with an average income of \$ 26,700, and with 11% of their total income coming from government transfers.. While the data does not elaborate on the type of work or localities it is evident from this report that the majority of the immigrant women are involved in some form of precarious work with a possibility of many working informally. Williams (2004) suggests the gender gap in the formal employment sector is indicative of the fact that women find it easier to work informally for cash than work in the formal sector. Comparing this data with the research on informal work and the type of work women do in the sector in countries like Canada indicates that cash work is prevalent among women and is one of their strategies to fight poverty while managing household and child care responsibilities. This resonates well with the study on home based workers and women in own- account self-employment in the low income brackets as they chose to do this work as a way to manage their household and childcare responsibilities while contributing to the family income (Luxton & Corman, 2001; Maitra, 2011; Phizacklea & Wolkowitz, 1995).

The interviews and participant observation from this particular neighbourhood also confirm these findings. Furthermore, the data from these interviews shed light on how and what specific work choices immigrant women make in these urban communities and the crucial role geographically bound social networks play in their lives in

coordinating activities and outcomes. The next section of this paper examines the role networks play in coordinating the everyday activities of immigrant women in Toronto.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN

In this study, it is not the virtual networks that were considered for analysis, but networks that are geographically and spatially bound by actual people coordinating in all kinds of situations within communities and neighbourhoods. As per the findings from this study in an immigrant woman's and her family's life, strong and weak ties have different functions. Although strong ties provide emotional and short term economic relief, it is not helping immigrants in their socio economic integration to the new country, as people who are part of their strong ties are also in most cases in similar situation. One of the study participants Kamala from Nepal illustrates this point well in her articulation of support from relatives and friends. In response to the question "who is in your immediate network and how do they help you in settling in Toronto?" she responds:

"I have few cousins and relatives living here, they helped us when we came and whenever there is stress we go to them, we celebrate all our religious holidays together, invite each other for family celebrations. Having extended family here makes you feel less homesick... but they are also in the same boat as we are, trying to find better employment and provide good life for their children so we can't go to them for asking help in such matters."

Questions related to strong ties mostly generated this type of answer from the participants, with two exceptions where strong ties are the only support and network these women have due to cultural and religious reasons. In addition to the strong personal ties a majority of the participants created or joined some informal connections in the community for various purposes.

It became apparent in the conversation that the notion of networking is not new to many of these women, as they are coming from communities that have strong interpersonal ties that extend to all areas of their lives. It is an everyday aspect of their social organization to have strong networks and support systems from extended family and neighbours. In their adopted country and community, this is difficult to create as social organization, and culture, is different. However, women create these networks through culturally and socially acquired ways: what Granovetter (1973) calls the weak ties. Exploring it through the structural and cultural variables provided in Brint's (2001) work, what became clear is the important role weak ties play among the new immigrant population, especially women.

Thirty-six survey participants who identify themselves as current participants of some community activity said they got involved through a friend (61%) or from the school or community centre in community initiatives. All the interview participants said they did not have any friends in this specific community prior to their arrival but people they knew or met through a mutual acquaintance shared information with them and got them involved in informal work. Probing further on who is considered a friend, it became clear people called all their social connections in the community as friends. Yet, when asked about what is the type of activities they did with these connections, a majority mentioned they see each other in programs or share information on community activity, but never invite or visit these friends to or in their homes. Most of their meetings were in the open places in the community like school parenting centre, gym, and community centre and at local agencies, which once again fit with the description of 'weak ties'.

Wellman (1998) in his analysis of community identifies this trend and suggests it is sign of community life. Space plays a huge role in coordination and activating of these networks in the lives of immigrant women living in an urban centre far away from their home country, which indicates the importance of geographically bound communities for people who are in the margins and are placed in a new cultural and social setup. One aspect of these networks that is not discussed in much of the literature reviewed is the ethnic, race and gender relations that influence who is in whose networks and what kind

of relationship is carried on with each other based on one's ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This is an important theme to explore further and to include in the discussion of the development of methodologies for community groups and minority individuals in the context of network, and social capital.

Questions related to employment in the context of network also indicated that in an immigrant woman's and her family's life weak ties are not playing any significant role in the area of employment. The majority of the participants mentioned that some of their connections inform them of job fairs and other employment related training that comes their way. However, none of the participants knew anyone who got a formal job through their community network. This resonates with Razin (1993) when she argues that the network only facilitates immigrants' introduction to the existing market without efficiently guiding them to the next step. Razin (1993) notes, faced with limited mobility in the formal sector, immigrants rely on informal networks to survive, which confirms what many women participants shared about their work in the informal sector. All of the 12 women interviewed participated in some form of cash work either in the community or at home activities ranging from childcare to cooking and sewing. These activities are identified as typical "women's jobs" in the informal sector and point out the gendered division of labour that extends beyond the boundaries of the household (Carr and Chen, 2001; Harding and Jenkins, 1989, Losby et al., 2002; Windenbank and Williams, 2010).

According to the women interviewed men also find same issues related to employment yet their work for cash or contract is out of their home and most of is situated in the margins of the formal sector. The way networks help facilitate gendered work is another theme to explore in the future studies of networks. Social mobility within the neighbourhood and navigating the nearby facilities came out as a broader theme in this study as a positive outcome. Once again questions related to upward ability rendered negative answers. Sabina from Afghanistan described social mobility this way:

"Women I met in the community told me where to buy spices from my home country, showed the doctor's office, and helped me to get all kind of

information about the community and taught me how the system works. But I haven't met anyone yet who could help me find work in my own field and all the people I know live in this neighbourhood and nobody is doing anything big or important, people are doing survival stuff.”

Sabina’s comment not only indicates the limitation of her network but also her perception of work and life standards of people in her neighbourhood in which she is also an active participant in whatever activities take place there. Similar experiences were shared by most of the interview participants.

It will be important to explicate the various roles women play in various networks to understand as Wellman (1998) puts it “Women's triple load of work: maintaining the strong ties, weak ties and all other domestic responsibilities”. Women playing the central role in creating, maintaining, and promoting networks and her immediate family and neighbours expect her strategizing in each of these network. It is through these informal networks and connections that women sought out the informal work options that helped them to supplement their family income. The work options are gendered in nature and women find it fitting to do what they can to manage their households while earning extra income for the family and find a way to fight isolation. However, to examine the potential for a positive development it is crucial to understand women's choice of work in the sector and their view of work. In addition, outcomes of those work relations and the gendered nature of this work in reinforcing women's identity and place in the household and society also needs to be examined.

These findings suggest ‘weak ties’ play a significant role for immigrant women in navigating the new social setup. Is there a way for networks to be more impactful? These findings invoke such query. A later section of this paper shows some potential ways it can be impactful if careful attention and adequate support is given to the development of people groups. Learning was pointed out as a positive outcome by all participants despite the fact that this network is not what they see as the potential way for them to find success in Canada. The literature on social networks demonstrates how

networks are key in information sharing. Examining it from an adult education perspective is indicative of the fact that continuous informal learning occurs in this process and is found useful by all participants. The next section of this paper looks at network from a learning perspective and also how that learning leads to collective action and community organizing.

INFORMAL LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

Livingstone (2008) notes that 95% of Canadians are involved in some form of informal learning activities that they identify as crucial for their growth. It is an area of discussion that many participants noted as a significant part of their informal work. One aspect of informal learning as explained by eighty percent of the women was that they are able to share their knowledge with their consumers and felt their teaching role was an important one. Many of the women interviewed noted how much learning occurs for them through this work at home or in the community. Some of the specific skills mentioned by the participants were learning cultural practises, and acquiring work-related certificates without having to go through a formal institute or school; some examples mentioned of the latter were food-handling and child-minding certificates. Everyone mentioned some form of learning that occurred on a daily basis from their work that helped them to adapt better to their “adopted country”. Many women interviewed saw learning and sharing of knowledge as dignified ways of participating in networks that provided some form of support for an otherwise isolated journey in this country. Cindy, one of the child-minders, highlights the feeling that women share,

"Although money is not good, what makes me happy in my work is that I provide great service to my community and neighbours. I look after their children, teach them discipline and I share with them what I know of as good parenting."

Another aspect of networking that came up in this inquiry was the way this community started organizing to better their lives and opportunities. Although many felt external

opportunities were limited, by organizing in the community it helped them create opportunities within and among themselves, and also brought their voice out from the neighbourhood. Exploring the findings through a community development framework identifies that these communities have created structures with minimal support and some collaboration with a local agency promoting community development initiatives.

Drawing on social network theory (Granovetter, 1973) and a community development perspective by Christenson (1989), this analysis explored further on different dimensions of social networks and community action plans developed and run by local people that are informal in nature and proactive in terms of advocacy, leadership development, and community ownership in fighting various forms of oppressive situations. Granovetter argues that the 'weak ties' in a network are essential for individuals to integrate well into modern society and to resist various forms of alienation. Observation from this highly populated and diverse neighbourhood suggests people come to trust the 'weak ties' that they created in the few available public and social spaces to navigate this new country and culture.

Survey findings indicate that people get involved and learn of their community and neighbourhood through networks. They often join groups or activities by hearing of them from a neighbour or community member not necessarily in their immediate connection. The majority of the women who were part of the survey as well as of the interviews suggest how these informal networks become their main connection point with the community in which they live. It is in these informal networks that they find ways to fight economic and social deprivation caused by an inaccessible labour market and hegemonic cultural practises of their host country.

Two examples of such community-owned structures are the Women's and Youth councils in this particular neighbourhood. The main themes that emerged from examining the councils were a sense of ownership in the community and within the group, strong leadership, and high networking skills among 'weak ties', commitment to social change and advocacy, and independence in running an organizational model

group. Furthermore, less financial reliance on external sources to run local events, maximum use of human capital from within the community, and the promotion of economic and social development activities through locally led and run initiatives were also found to be unique to these councils.

All activities that take place within the neighbourhood and the ways in which all interactions take place are informal in nature; however, the way the councils are structured make it formal enough to meet the standard of civic society organization. With specific goals to fight the barriers that are faced by the community and created by external forces (such as an inaccessible labour market), these councils excel in knowing their community well. This helps them to find ways to create policies and programs that are accessible to other community members while inviting other agencies as partners. In order to make development successful and people-centered, it is critical to make initiatives accessible, and inclusive of people's needs and experiences. This is one of the strengths of this council: seeking partnership with agencies while modifying what is accomplished through the partnership according to the needs of its community. Furthermore, through this process, the marginalized voices of people are heard, and their experiences and concerns are validated.

The key findings from observation and conversation with the council members indicate the potential for change through community-owned and run initiatives. Both councils show individuals' agency and competency to bring change to this under-resourced neighbourhood. Another crucial aspect of these councils is the way in which they collaborate with local agencies and the academy to develop various perspectives and expertise. Community ownership and partnership are identified as key in this new community development model that foster social change as it is suggested in all sustainable community development models. This collaborative work is of particular importance at this time of funding cuts and restructuring of social service programs in Canada and elsewhere.

Although the initial inquiry revealed that the main motivation for community involvement and informal work was to gain experience and supplement income, further examination revealed that many women got involved because it was a way for them to create community in a new place. Survey findings also suggest a good majority joined in community activities to help their neighbours or learn new things. An in-depth analysis shows poverty and other barriers are motivating factors in initially getting involved; however, in the long term, people see it as a way of showing agency and resistance. Furthermore, meeting new people, gaining opportunities for networking, and learning new skills are a few other reasons that keep people active in community work. Learning and motivation are closely connected with this process as the women see that it reinforces their value and commitment as individuals and within groups.

As explained in the work of Arato (1993) these networks show many components of a civil society, although there is no long-term commitment it becomes pace of democratic and communal social relations separated from the state and the market. The irony of such a situation is that it is the capitalist market that set the stage and contribute to the gap that are evident in the social and economic disparity scale among people, yet the same market place values push social relations to get organized and find ways to survive. According to Granovetter, these are social communities with weak ties, and it is created to serve certain purposes for people living in the margins to survive.

CONCLUSION

Putnam and Goss' (2002) theory on social capital summarizes the benefit of social networks and the positive impact of it on societies and people and shows the relevance of it in our contemporary society. What needs to be developed further based on the findings from this study is the way these special networks are organized and the reasons behind such social organization among people living in the margins. This will help to avoid typology that puts everything into certain brackets. Instead, learning the foundations of these networks will provide meaningful tools to engage and develop

plans to help ways in which these networks can be strengthened further and become viable for emancipation and integration of people from the margins to the center.

The findings from this study revealed the role social networks play in the development of informal work among immigrant women in Canada. Analysing the findings from this study using social network theory analysis provided new insights and some of the contradictions of the theory in analyzing a population whose socio- economic situations are changed drastically due to transnational migration. This study also provided some insight into human agency, and revealed the potential for collective action even in the midst of major changes that result from transnational migration and globalization.

Findings indicate that the informal sector provide opportunities for growth and participation and can be transformative in nature if opportunities are given to develop further and appropriate methodologies are developed to address the issues at hand. Furthermore, social networks play a huge role in members of a community working together, learning about a new environment and their rights, the breaking of isolation, and the collective agency among individuals to fight common issues.

This analysis shed light on many aspects of an immigrant women's everyday life by exploring aspects of learning both formal and informal, the importance of geographically bound networks, social and economic mobility that is possible through these connections, and fragmented ties with a potential for expansion. Women who were part of this study conveyed the importance of having an equal voice, equal opportunity, and acknowledgment of an individual's potential for leadership and social change. An observation of the councils of women and youth in the neighbourhood suggests grass-root level movements are powerful as they reflect the unified voice of people who are often unheard. This study demonstrates the importance of understanding the learning process encountered in adjusting to a new country, especially when contextualized within social network theory and situated learning, as participants learn new ways of engaging with each other and their community when faced with difficult situations and an inaccessible labour market.

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ⁱⁱ Further information on the APCOL project can be found at <http://www.apcol.ca/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith developed the first institutional ethnography approach out of feminist insights and first presented it as a sociology for women. She now thinks of it more broadly as a sociology for people. Combining theory and method, IE emphasizes connecting sites and situations of everyday life.

^{iv} Author's role as a community consultant in the suggested community made participant observation possible, maximum care is given to avoid bias in interpreting the data and direct quotes are used to validate some interpretations.

^v Weak ties are usually made up of people in one's network, for example, acquaintances and/or people you meet or get connected through other people's networks.

^{vi} Strong ties are made up of people in one's immediate circle for example, family members and close friends with whom you socialize and spend time with on a regular basis

^{vii} Skilled category immigrants are selected through a point system in which they get points for education, employment experience, language proficiency, and age.

^{viii} Economic category includes professionals and skilled workers, Canadian experienced workers, investors, entrepreneurs and self employed persons.