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# **Australian Muslim Jobseekers: Equal Employment Opportunity and Equity in the Labor Market**

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## ***Abstract***

*The experience of job market disadvantage is not a novel phenomenon for some in contemporary Australia, even in the face of embedded equal employment opportunity (EEO) ideals. This article addresses the phenomenon of persistent job market disadvantage for some minority groups by presenting new data from a major multi-method study on labor market obstacles for Muslims seeking jobs in Australia. Responses from jobseekers and employment service providers are analyzed together to consider how EEO principles are experienced by Muslims who engage with employment services and move in and out of the labor force. The article proposes that key EEO tenets – freedom from discrimination and support to overcome disadvantage – are not represented at present in many Muslim jobseeker experiences. Furthermore, these same EEO principles appear to be somewhat compromised in employment service provision to Muslim jobseekers and, by extension, to other disadvantaged minority jobseekers. We offer some suggestions as to how the spirit of EEO legislation might be better reflected in support of Muslim jobseekers. It is concluded that an all government approach may be needed to counter deep mistrust of Muslims in Australian society.*

## **Introduction**

Paid employment is not just the primary source of income for the working age population in any country, but is accompanied by a range of psychological benefits associated with enhanced self-esteem and social standing. This holds true for both male and female workers, despite gender disparity in participation rates and different patterns of full-time and part-time work. ‘Since incomes in Australian society are mainly distributed through the labor market, the employment and unemployment rates influence individual life chances and economic well-being more than any other factor’.<sup>1</sup> Thus, labor market outcomes, including equal employment opportunity, job security and occupational satisfaction, are viewed as critical to social inclusion. Yet there is considerable evidence in Western countries, including Australia, that migrants from countries with different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds are disadvantaged in the labor

market. This raises concerns about social exclusion and therefore warrants fresh interrogation of embedded notions of equity, such as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO). Commonwealth EEO legislation requires ‘certain Commonwealth authorities to promote equal opportunity in employment for women and persons in designated groups and for related purposes’.<sup>2</sup> In addition, each state and territory has its own specific EEO legislation that addresses the same goal. The largest ‘designated group’ consists of people from ethnic backgrounds who have migrated to Australia.

As Booth, Leigh and Varganova remind us, ‘with one in four residents born overseas, Australia is often regarded as something of a poster child for its ability to absorb new migrants into its social and economic fabric’.<sup>3</sup> Yet is this true? A number of studies<sup>4</sup> have indicated that such a claim is contentious. To test the proposition, Australian researchers randomly submitted over 4,000 fictional applications for entry-level jobs, varying only the name as an indicator of ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> They found clear evidence of labor market discrimination, with Chinese and Middle Easterners both having to submit at least 50 per cent more applications ‘in order to receive the same number of callbacks as Anglo candidates’.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that employers hold negative perceptions of jobseekers from those two ethnic constituencies, and may well exercise those perceptions in job recruitment and selection, despite national EEO legislation and social inclusion policy.

The Australian government’s social inclusion policy indicators clearly articulate employment as a priority,<sup>7</sup> and similar policies in the past have also done so. Authors Boese and Phillips trace the trajectory of Australian federal government social policy to encourage the integration of diverse groups, including ethnic minorities.<sup>8</sup> First, there was multiculturalism in the 1970s, then social justice in the 1980s. Next came social cohesion in the 1990s and, finally, social inclusion emerged in the new millennium. Boese and Phillips highlight common critiques of the social inclusion concept.<sup>9</sup> For example, we need to question the nature of the ‘space’ in which different groups of people are supposed to be included. Some spaces are supportive of diversity, while others depend on assimilation.<sup>10</sup> The formal employment sector in Australia is not one that has traditionally supported diversity.<sup>11</sup> Even today, with EEO legislation firmly in place, employers recruiting for other than cheap and expendable labor<sup>12</sup> can demonstrate intolerance for non-Anglo workers whose social, religious and cultural practices differ from those of mainstream Australia.<sup>13</sup>

The most ethnically diverse religious group in Australia,<sup>14</sup> Muslims have been targeted as a threat to the nation in the new millennium.<sup>15</sup> The Australian media has focused intensely on the dangers posed to the West by radical Islamist terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Many Muslims ‘believe that as a result of this media bias, they are vilified in society and particularly in the workplace’.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, as the Australian studies demonstrate,<sup>18</sup> Muslims are subject to intense discrimination at times. Their educational attainment profile shows that in almost all categories, they are ‘either similar to or better than non-Muslim Australians. This applies to both Muslim men and women’.<sup>19</sup> Yet this profile is not represented in their labor force participation.<sup>20</sup> The problem has come to the

attention of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The Committee noted with concern reports from Australia that highlighted 'ongoing issues of discrimination and inequity ...experienced by members of certain minority communities including African communities, people of Asian, Middle Eastern and Muslim background'.<sup>21</sup> Hassan found that Muslims in Australia are disadvantaged not only in labor force participation but on a number of other related social indicators such as home ownership and Muslim children living in poverty.<sup>22</sup>

Bloul stated unequivocally that 'there is no doubt that Islamophobia is on the rise in Australia',<sup>23</sup> and it would seem that observation still remains true. Reporting the experiences of Muslim jobseekers in Australia sheds light on what happens to this designated group as they negotiate for entry to a labor market that is governed in principle by EEO legislation, but where discrimination can readily occur against stigmatized groups. For example, data derived from census analysis showed that, in 2006, the participation rate for Muslims was only 51.9 per cent compared to 64.6 per cent for the total Australian population of working age.<sup>24</sup> This gap was reflected in the significantly lower employment rate of 44.9 per cent for Muslims compared to 61.2 per cent for the total population.<sup>25</sup> The unemployment rate of 13.4 per cent for Muslims was much higher than the Australian unemployment rate of 5.2 per cent, indicating significant labor market disadvantage.<sup>26</sup> In short, for 'all age groups the employment rates for Muslim Australians were lower and the unemployment rates significantly higher than those of non-Muslim Australians'.<sup>27</sup>

In their survey of 501 Muslims in Melbourne, Akbarzadeh, Woodlock and Bouma found Muslims respondents to be optimistic about the potential for economic engagement in Australia, and keen to access educational and professional opportunities.<sup>28</sup> However, these same respondents demonstrated perceptions of prejudice and anti-Muslim bias in both the Australian media and the government. In the study reported by Fozdar of 150 working-age refugees in Perth – primarily Muslim - who had good levels of English and education, and had settled in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s, approximately half this number had directly experienced discrimination in the employment market.<sup>29</sup> Kalek, Mak and Khawaja found that the experience of direct or indirect prejudice may be particularly harmful to Muslims who have poorer social self-efficacy and coping skills.<sup>30</sup> This would apply especially to recently-arrived refugees fleeing traumatic conflicts back home.

There certainly appears to be a moral panic about Muslims in the non-Muslim Australian community.<sup>31</sup> Fozdar explains that concerns emerged after the New York and London terrorist incidents that Australia might be vulnerable to similar attacks.<sup>32</sup> One government intervention designed to head off the threat was the 2008 *National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*. This action plan was targeted at Muslims; 'activities funded under the plan focus on employment, education and leadership training, all designed to improve Muslims' connection to mainstream Australia'.<sup>33</sup> However, as the labor force engagement figures above indicate, this initiative had a lot of ground to make up.

Tilbury finds that people whose appearance is self-defining as Muslim are most at risk of suffering discrimination.<sup>34</sup> They are less likely to be shortlisted, interviewed and selected for jobs.<sup>35</sup> In short, the economic potential of many Muslims in Australia is not being realized:

The employment and unemployment rates of Australian Muslims indicate that the cultural capital embodied in their educational profile does not materialise in producing the same level of returns as it does in the case of non-Muslim Australians. Australian Muslims have significantly high unemployment rates throughout their economically productive years compared with non-Muslim Australians. This obviously accounts for the greater prevalence of poverty among them. More importantly, the proportion of Australian Muslim children living in poverty is twice that of non-Muslim compatriots.<sup>36</sup>

We acknowledge that there is a discomfort in speaking about prejudice against a religious group in the same breath as we address unemployment. The idea that religion would in any way be determinative of labor market experience harks back to earlier sectarian periods in Australian history when religious prejudice in employment practices was notable. EEO tends to be seen as an established feature of Australia as a 'fair go' society. Yet, workplace equity is not reflected in the labor market outcomes for jobseekers of Muslim faith.

### ***Equity and EEO***

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) implies the notion of equity. Equity means fairness, giving to each person their due according to the principle of natural justice. Standard statements describing EEO policy at national and state level point to equity signaled as involving both freedom from discrimination and support for overcoming disadvantage. For example, the New South Wales Government's opening statement on its publicly available EEO website makes this clear:

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) is making sure that everyone has equal access to available employment by:

- ensuring that workplaces are *free from discrimination* and harassment, and
- providing programs to assist people to *overcome disadvantage*.<sup>37</sup>

In practice, a plethora of terms are used to talk about workplace 'equity'. These can include diversity, affirmative action, and equal opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Employers are required to follow the various frameworks of legislation that seek to advance workplace equity. For example, the Australian Government's principal online business resource states:

In Australia, national and state laws cover equal employment opportunity anti-discrimination in the workplace. You're required by these laws to create a workplace free from discrimination and harassment. It's important that as an employer, you understand your rights and responsibilities under human rights and

anti-discrimination law.<sup>39</sup>

This statement implies equity in employment as a form of enacting social justice.<sup>40</sup> Yet it is clear that despite such EEO ideals, injustice in the form of racial and religious discrimination persists in the labor sector.

An extensive study of Victoria by Berman and the Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission found that, despite broad EEO legislation, there was ample evidence of racial and religious discrimination in employment.<sup>41</sup> Instances included: prejudicial treatment in recruitment and in recognition of qualifications; disadvantage in accessing and utilising job search agencies; intimidation in the workplace; direct religious discrimination; additional discrimination related to gender; difficulties finding work in small and medium enterprises (SMEs); difficulties accessing complaint processes; and, media stereotyping of communities. There were reported experiences of alienation in the workplace, echoing the finding of Kalek, Mak and Khwaja that, 'many workplace functions impose segregation for Muslim employees as they involve events that include alcohol, or foods that have been in contact with pork'.<sup>42</sup> They also pointed out that Muslim males might avoid Friday work lunches to observe the weekly Friday prayer at their local mosque.

Syed and Pio studied the employment experiences of veiled Muslim women in Australia.<sup>43</sup> They too found ample evidence of racial/religious discrimination in the Australian work force, especially on the basis of strong markers of religious difference such as the hijab, despite lip service to employment equity and wide awareness of EEO legislation. Such studies appear to support the recent claim below:

Issues surrounding religion and social policy have recently become more difficult to manage in Australia due primarily to increases in religious diversity. The clash between demands based on different 'rights', such as the right to freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of speech, or freedom from discrimination, presents a dilemma for Australia. To this day the means for settling conflicting demands and claims of breach of freedoms are not in place.<sup>44</sup>

Our study goes to the heart of the problem of freedom from discrimination and equitable access to job opportunities. In this article, the authors use the term 'equity' in a way that recognizes its social justice origins while, at the same time, leveraging the study data to examine slippage away from social justice ideals; in this way, we actively interrogate labor market 'equity' in practice. As the guiding principle behind EEO, we make use of our data to question equity according to three key elements, namely, freedom from discrimination, recognition of diversity, and support for overcoming disadvantage to enter the labor market.

## **Methodology**

Data are drawn from the findings of a research project funded by the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).<sup>45</sup> The aim was to assess the job readiness of Muslim jobseekers and the effectiveness of employment support services, and to find out more about barriers to employment faced by Muslim jobseekers in Australia.

The project employed a mixed-method approach, including quantitative econometric modeling, surveys, interviews and case studies.<sup>46</sup> This article uses interview data. Interviews were arranged as follows: 104 surveys were completed in late 2009 by Muslim jobseekers recruited from employment centers and Muslim and ethnic community groups, centers and associations in Sydney, Newcastle and the Central Coast of New South Wales. Of the survey respondents, 75 per cent were either immigrants or refugees. Following the survey, Muslim jobseekers self-selected for interview, resulting in 50 face-to-face interviews. All interviewees were unemployed and looking for work. Due to access difficulties, only seven interviews were completed with employment service provider staff. Interview transcripts were analyzed for themes through review and categorization. The selected quotes included in this article are indicative of broad trends identified in the data overall.

## **Muslim Jobseekers' Experiences**

EEO is intrinsically linked with the idea of freedom from discrimination and recognition of diversity. Findings from our study suggest that the problem of discrimination affects Muslim jobseekers, but does so differentially. Recent arrivals with little English proficiency reported struggling to find an entry point to the labor market. For example, 'We come here as refugees and we don't have any kind of job, experience or qualification, nothing (female, 28, Sudanese refugee). 'I tell myself I have to work harder to get a job. I never give up ... I am on my way to look and knock the doors of the shops to find a job' (female, 46, Sudanese refugee). In contrast, Muslim jobseekers with confidence and good English felt they could overcome initial discrimination. An example of this is below:

When I think of it, first I think they don't like me because of my looks. But when they get to speak to me they may like me. First looks, most people when they first look at another person they don't like them, then when they speak to me they get to know a lot more. ... It doesn't really matter. They see that my English is perfect, I am great, you know, like any Aussie (laughs) (male, 28, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).

This man had arrived in Australia as a child. He had held a number of jobs, and was confident of finding another one in a short time.

### *1. The Headscarf*

The exception to this capacity to find acceptance due to a long time spent in Australia is confident Muslim women with good English who wear the headscarf:

[It's] not my accent but my appearance. So many times when I get a job over the phone and they ask me for interview. I could see the reaction when they see me wearing this scarf. They slam the door in my face (female, 30, Malaysian migrant).

In other words, English language fluency represents an asset for Muslim jobseekers in the labor market, but the advantage is undercut if a woman wears the headscarf.<sup>47</sup> One woman said, 'not my look but what I am wearing. They would like me without Al Hijab and I was born here' (female, 26, Lebanese second-generation migrant). As these examples illustrate, the greatest risk of employer discrimination does indeed seem to lie with those whose appearance is self-defining as Muslim. Aly and Walker maintain that in Australia 'the veil is inextricably linked to the cultural threat posed by Islam'.<sup>48</sup>

## *2. Lack of Recognition of Overseas Qualifications*

Lack of recognition for overseas qualifications affects many people who come to look for work in Australia, and this also affects Muslim jobseekers. The double impact of qualification recognition is evident in this interview response from an employment service provider:

We still have a general problem with overseas qualified migrants and that includes the Muslim population. People are getting jobs but they are not getting jobs that utilise their skills to the best advantage and not getting jobs that are supplying them with sustainable employment ... I think image and being a Muslim is certainly part of it (female, 30s, Lebanese, raised in Australia).

This employment service provider believes being a Muslim enhances the negative effect of lack of recognition by employers of candidates with overseas qualifications.

## *3. Terrorist Assumptions*

The negative cultural stereotype of Muslims was often referred to, as in the following: 'they will ask me are you going to bomb the place? This is a very common question. They think all Muslim are terrorists' (male, 26, Arab-Iraqi refugee). An employment service provider confirmed this pattern:

Interviewer: Do you think Muslim jobseekers face any specific difficulties or barriers compared to non-Muslims?

Participant: Only in my own opinion, I think they could have some difficulties especially after September 11 (female, 34 years, Spanish-speaking, Asian

background).

Many jobseekers confirmed this, ‘they dislike Muslims ...They can’t trust us because of the news on TV after Sept. 11, everything is changed’ (female, 30s, Palestinian refugee). This same point was made many times:

They think if a Muslim made a mistake that’s means all Muslims are bad and criminals. Our reputations are very bad at the moment because of the news and media (male, 29, Saudi temporary migrant).

One service provider indicated that negative perceptions of Muslims associated with terrorist activities could affect employer recruitment and selection:

I think in the area they would face some barriers because of the perceptions, the society’s perceptions. How they think about what’s been going on. Yeah, I think they do have difficulties comparing to other people. ... Maybe just perception wise, like even though people don’t tolerate discrimination... (female, 27 years, Italian).

It is notable here that the principle of EEO was referred to, even as the speaker acknowledged the local labor market disadvantage for Muslims.

#### *4. Muslims are ‘fussy’ and ‘complicated’*

Recognition of diversity is a key tenet of the equity principle that informs EEO. Yet cultural difference can lead to problems in the workplace if some workers are offended by the cultural practices or attitudes of others. Several of the jobseeker interviewees alluded to anticipation from the prospective employers that Muslims would be ‘fussy’ and ‘complicated’ in the workplace. The term ‘complicated’ presumably refers to religious rules and practices that might make others uncomfortable or resentful. As one employment service provider said: ‘Muslims sometimes they want a space to pray, and special holidays’ (female, 34 years, Spanish speaking, Asian background).

Most interviewees were aware of how their cultural norms might be perceived by non-Muslim employers. As another woman said, ‘I think they will say we are a very fussy people...those Muslims they don’t like anything’ (female, 24, Arab-Iraqi refugee). This perception particularly affects women who cover their heads:

Participant: When I go to look for a job they would look at your scarf and they judge you because of that. I would suffer quietly.

Interviewer: What kinds of assumptions do you think employers might have?

Participant: They probably think I am complicated because I am Muslim so they wouldn’t give me a chance (female, 41, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).

One woman who had opted not to wear her headscarf as a job search strategy added, 'that's why I don't mention my religion so they don't think I am complicated' (female, 41, Arab-Iraqi refugee). Details were alluded to in interviews, for example:

For Muslim women she doesn't like anybody to touch her hand. I know some Australians they do it without any meaning of any harm but this is the way we grow up (female, 37, Lebanese migrant).

As this jobseeker says, there is no intention to cause offence, but it happens anyway. In another example, a man was challenged in his religious principles: 'my boss asked me to clean the barbeque and there was pork prepared. But I used gloves' (male, 40s, Indonesian migrant). The taboo against contact with pork products raises challenges for Muslims in the Australian labor market. One interviewee declared that she did not want to have contact with either pork or alcohol. She added, 'I have a friend working in a restaurant, they asked her to cut the ham and she refused. She left the job', (female, 37, Lebanese migrant).

Some male Muslim jobseekers insisted on prayer time at work as a right:

I was working in the factory and people over there they abuse me for like you Muslim and like we have five minutes time for that we have to go for prayer. The boss push us and scream [*sic.*]. I said to him, 'look if we go for ten minutes break for prayer what about those people who for one hour, half hour, ten minutes, fifteen minutes go for coffee or cigarette? Why not tell this one?' Because we are Muslim we are not allowed to go for prayer. I said it must be equal. These people go for smoking, I do not go for smoking I go for prayer (male, 40s, Afghani refugee).

In contrast, another man said that he would not make an issue of praying at work because 'in Islam you could pray later at home and make it up for the afternoon for example'. He added:

For me I try my best to dress up nicely and shave my beard almost every day as I do not want anybody to think I am a complicated Muslim could go to pray five times a day (male, 43, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

As these two quotes show, there was a great deal of variation in religious observation among the Muslim jobseekers interviewed. While one interviewee said he thought employment service providers should forewarn employers that Muslims needed a space to pray, several male and female interviewees simply said they were 'not religious', for example, 'I am not a religious person and I don't tell people I am Muslim' (male, 30s, Turkish migrant).

One of the employment service providers mentioned that she believed it might be an employment disincentive for employers to have to accommodate prayer times, 'maybe they would be concerned to provide a space for a prayer and concerned about the job being interrupted. And I understand that it is difficult to accommodate people with special needs' (female, 34 years, Spanish speaking, Asian background). Yet some of the employment service providers expressed understanding of religious observations:

There would be some very particular examples where I would expect Muslim jobseekers might say that they would prefer not to work in an environment like that and that would be it. An example is we have a meat-processing plant in Chullora, which is quite close to us. They work with a variety of meat products and in any part of that processing there would be a requirement to work with pork products. So, it will be reasonable for me if a Muslim jobseeker said they would prefer not to work there (female, 32 years, Greek/Egyptian).

However, another employment service provider judged Muslim jobseekers as difficult to place in work:

Muslim jobseekers are difficult to place in a position or place because they're not motivated for work. It seems to be cultural thing. I am not sure if it is the ethnic background as well or any other reason. ... With jobs they are very reluctant. They would go to local only (female, 48 years, Irish/Scottish).

There is clearly a great deal of variation in the views held by employment service provider staff about Muslim jobseekers, and there were diverse stories told about the matter of accepting jobs far away from home:

The provider he told me there is available job near to my place and I accept that job because it is closer. I can do it. But her boss said no he should not apply for this particular job because there is long time travelling from my home to the work place. She was worry about my health condition. She said 'you are not fit to do this job. It is very far from your place'. Caring, she was caring (male, 39, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

It would seem that such judgments come down to recognition of diversity, including the recognition that for some recent refugees it may be unsettling and stressful to travel a long distance to and from work.

The notion of equity – a 'fair go' for everybody – is well-embedded in Australian public discourse and expressed in the concept of equal employment opportunity. EEO implies freedom from discrimination, recognition of diversity and support for disadvantaged jobseekers to enter the labor market. The data from interviews indicate that the two former elements of EEO are often not experienced by Muslim jobseekers, and this was verified by some of the accounts from employment service providers. In the next section, we look at the third element of EEO, namely, support to enter the labor market.

## **Support for Muslim Jobseekers**

One employment service provider interviewed in the study had the following to say on employer perceptions of Muslim jobseekers:

I think some employers may not understand, may think that if they employed a Muslim jobseeker that they would request to leave the work place frequently to pray. So maybe a perception around prayers not sure what it means but think that is going to impact on the day's job. I think some employers may have a negative perception of anybody from the Middle East. They may not know where they are from [but] they may think if they were to employ a Muslim person from the Middle East or even somewhere like Malaysia that they might have connections to terrorism, crime, social problems (female, 32 years, Greek/Egyptian).

Given this inventory of probable negative employer perceptions produced by someone who works in employment service provision, it would seem that Muslim jobseekers need a high level of support to overcome disadvantages and enter the labor market. The same agency worker felt that her clients lacked confidence, '[as for] getting a job, I would say a larger proportion of Muslim jobseekers would lack confidence' (female, 32 years, Greek/Egyptian). One of the employment service provider staff running a program specifically for Muslim jobseekers observed that, 'we have a very high employment rate ... out of our Muslim employment program. And it's mostly about [gaining] confidence' (female, 30s Lebanese raised in Australia). It is clear that some specialised treatment is warranted for those who struggle most to find a job.

In Australia, all jobseekers are referred to employment service providers by Centrelink, the government social services office. One employment service worker explained how jobseekers are streamed: 'one stream is if somebody has a barrier to find a job and one stream is if somebody's got no barriers to find a job ... You will have more funding from the government because [if] you have barriers' (female, 48 years, Irish/Scottish). Briefly, each jobseeker is placed in one of four streams according to the severity of employment barriers as determined by the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). Placement in a stream determines the level of assistance for individual job seekers as well as the level of funding for the Job Services Australia provider to assist them. Some of the Muslim jobseekers in this study, especially older people and recently-arrived refugees, had been classified in JSCI stream four; significant barriers to finding a job. In the interviews, we asked about the subjects' experiences of employment service provision.

## **Employment Services**

Jobseekers gave accounts of receiving a variety of support from employment service providers, including job referrals, referrals for training, preparing a C/V, checking job lists, and preparation

for the job interview. For the most part, interviewees were positive about the practical support they received. One woman had been sent to do a course in childcare, another had been supported to get her driving license and many had completed English language classes. Others spoke about agency staff improving their resumes. Several Muslim jobseekers spoke warmly of the positive attitudes of some employment agency staff towards them, for example, 'sometimes are very nice. If you lucky they help you and smile in your face' (female, 30s, Malaysian migrant). Practical support was highly valued, 'after several times I visited them they just pushed me to get job. So they helped me' (female, 27, Indonesian migrant).

However, there were also negative comments about compliance demands that simply wasted time. Most of these came from refugees who had the hardest struggle to enter the labor market. For example, one jobseeker said:

I did one 14 day course, that was about how should I look for work. That was for me the least useful thing. The only reason why it was the least useful thing was basically that the stuff they showed in the whole 14 days could have easily been shown in five days or four days (male, 23, Iraqi-Kurdish refugee).

One persistent claim was that employment service staff seemed merely to be going through the motions, 'they're asking the same questions again and again like a robot so they're not with you' (female, 27, Afghani refugee). Another said:

The problem is they repeat the questions all the time and asking me to stay for all the day looking for a job but I really feel it is useless as I could use this time to look for a job myself (female, 49, Iraqi refugee).

One of the strongest set of claims was that some employment service staff conveyed the impression that they did not enjoy supporting Muslim jobseekers, 'I could see they would rather look for a job for somebody else' (female, 37, Iraqi refugee). Another woman had had a job, but her job was made redundant. When she was referred again to the employment service provider, she was treated like a new arrival:

Two weeks ago I went to them she didn't understand me so she asked me to go to Agency X and when I went there they asked an interpreter to come. Then I said excuse me, I have been here for 17 years and I can speak English. They didn't bother to listen to me. I felt so embarrassed (female, 38, Iranian refugee).

Finally, there was the accusation of discriminatory treatment by some employment service staff:

The treatment at the agencies for Muslim jobseekers is very different from the treatment of the Aussie ones. They don't like us. You could see the body language (male, 26, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

It would seem that some employment agency staff required targeted training in dealing with Muslim jobseekers, especially the recently-arrived refugees. However, we also identified the problem of a possible misunderstanding of the equity principle. In answering a question about Muslim jobseekers, some employment service providers indicated that all jobseekers must be treated exactly alike:

They [Muslim jobseekers] are just like every other jobseeker that we have coming into this office. There is no difference ... we don't treat them any differently. And I think I couldn't say that we have a specific thing that we do with Muslim people and we have a specific - because we don't. That is the thing you know, they are Muslims and they need to have computer courses. We will do that. And if we also have an Australian who needs to have computer courses, we will do that ... we treat them all equal as they are (female, 62 years, Anglo-Celtic).

However, not all jobseekers are alike, as another employment service provider was keen to point out:

We put a plan in place to develop that person, link to employers, attend training, purchase tools, whatever it may be to try and get that person working. So I think employment services provide for us by offering a case management focussed individual approach. So each person is different and unique, developing an individual approach that links to employment is really critical (female, 32 years, Greek/Egyptian).

It may be that the first service provider here is making a point about not treating Muslim jobseekers as a special group, as Muslims *per se*, which does not necessarily rule out the individual treatment approach described by the second service provider (above). Certainly high levels of support are needed for those who do not enjoy success in job seeking, 'it is sometimes difficult to maintain motivation because of frequent "nos" from employers' (female, 32 years, Greek/Egyptian). So some measure of pastoral care and encouragement from employment service staff would appear to be vital yet was not always forthcoming:

They don't understand the cultural background. Also not the religious background because the religious background could vary from country to country. The agency should understand, you know, that I may be traumatised because I am coming from the war zone, okay. So they understand this part of me. They should have compassion. If he doesn't care, just a number, also I lose motivation. So I need the agency to understand me (male, 40s, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).

In summary, we found that the Muslim jobseekers gave varied accounts of the support they received from employment service providers. While for the most part they were positive about

the practical support they received, there were also negative experiences of wasted time and insensitive staff.

## Discussion

Political philosopher Andrew Mason highlights a conceptual difficulty within the EEO principle.<sup>49</sup> While acknowledging that 'equal opportunity for all is a fine piece of political rhetoric', he maintains that the concept that lies behind it is 'slippery to say the least'.<sup>50</sup> Our data on the experiences of Muslim jobseekers and the expressed attitudes of employment service providers implies that, while the principle of EEO appears to inform labor market practices and employment service provision, there is only mixed evidence at best of support for overcoming disadvantage, and little evidence of freedom from discrimination for this group. In this regard, our findings bear out those of earlier studies.<sup>51</sup>

Our interviewee accounts confirm that many employers hold negative perceptions of Muslim jobseekers and may well exercise those perceptions in job recruitment and selection, despite national EEO legislation and the Federal Government's *Social Inclusion Principles*.<sup>52</sup> The picture painted in the data above indicates that many Muslim jobseekers experience a strong sense of social exclusion when applying for positions. Moreover, not only do they face great obstacles to labor force participation, an established source of self-esteem and social engagement,<sup>53</sup> but they appear often to fail in attempts to communicate their needs to those charged with giving them assistance.

In our survey, less than 40 per cent of 104 respondents reported that employment service provider staff showed a good understanding of them as Muslim jobseekers. The interview data was informative on this topic. One example given was of a Muslim jobseeker being sent by an employment service provider to a vacancy for a Maths teacher at a Catholic school from where he was sent away once his religion was revealed to the employer. We also heard that it had been suggested to some Muslim jobseekers that they complete RSA training (Responsible Service of Alcohol training, which is mandatory in Australia for all people who are employed to serve alcohol), even though they were reluctant to work in a licensed venue.

Although these are the most extreme examples, and there were many positive stories, it is telling that there was such variation in the reported cultural attitudes of employment service workers towards Muslim jobseekers given the implicit EEO mandate for support of this disadvantaged group. These varying attitudes were also demonstrated in the interviews with employment service providers themselves. Interaction with non-judgemental agency staff members who displayed empathy, kindness and compassion was identified as important to Muslim jobseekers. Compassionate conduct was just as meaningful for positive engagement as practical assistance because it signified respect and acceptance. This was especially important for refugees.

We critically examined the claim on the part of several employment service providers that all jobseekers, including Muslims, are treated alike. Where this means treating all jobseekers

with equal courtesy and attention to cultural background, such an approach is indeed appropriate. However, equity is a misunderstood concept if taken to mean that everyone should be treated exactly the same without due adjustment for differences in disadvantage. In fact, the opposite logic prevails in formal Centrelink practice. The Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) is used to assess the level of disadvantage or employment barriers and to determine the level of assistance for individual job seekers. So, it is an example of a client management tool that attempts to treat people equitably according to EEO principles by separating them into four streams requiring different levels of service. The further logic of this same EEO principle should surely be that, within those streams, employment service staff modify the support they give to further adjust to finer distinctions of disadvantage.

At the same time, just as there is no wisdom in treating all jobseekers alike, so there is none in treating all Muslims exactly alike. The heterogeneous nature of Muslim jobseekers (recent arrivals, refugees, second generation migrants, Middle Eastern origin, origins in Central Europe, South and East Asia, and so on) indicates that they cannot be considered as a single simple category. Questions of language diversity, socio-economic differences, and education and training disparities must be taken into account.

Additionally, since the Muslim category is socio-politically constructed and popularly shaped, the full implementation of EEO will require some focused attention being given to the status of Muslim as an especially disadvantaged group among other groups that suffer from higher levels of unemployment. There also need to be distinctions made regarding the individual's degree of piety and due attention paid to their adherence or otherwise to Muslim practices and prohibitions. According to EEO principles, employment service providers should demonstrate equity in the delivery of support as well as recognition of the possibility of a different cultural background for all Muslim jobseekers, as indeed for all jobseekers.

As we saw above, EEO legislation implies both freedom from discrimination and support for overcoming disadvantage. Muslim jobseekers battle high levels of discrimination because intolerance is one of the major problems facing them in everyday life. Remedies for deep-seated hostility toward Muslims by a minority of the Australian population are essential to a socially inclusive society but difficult to achieve in an atmosphere of the open-ended 'War on Terror' that identifies Muslim radicals as the major threat to national security.

While the Australian Government provides a legislative framework consistent with its international commitments which supports a social inclusiveness agenda through promoting merit based appointment, equal employment opportunity and non-discrimination, nonetheless the government cannot direct the micro-social preferences of employers who inevitably recruit the employees they want to employ. This is why the enactment of EEO in relation to stigmatized minority groups is so 'slippery' in its implementation.

## **Conclusion**

This article has offered a fresh examination of how EEO principles are enacted, or not, in the process of Muslim jobseekers entering the labor market in Australia. Our findings indicate that Muslim jobseekers are subject to labor market discrimination. Employment service providers for the most part shared this view, given their experiences in dealing with prospective employers. Women who wore the *hijab*, men of 'Middle-Eastern' appearance, and those with weak English seemed to fare the worst. Recently-arrived refugees found the challenge to enter the labor market most difficult. As stated at the outset, job market disadvantage in the face of embedded equal employment opportunity ideals is unfortunately still a reality in Australia, and it is troubling to note the rise of 'religious racism'.<sup>54</sup>

Although there was evidence of productive 'streaming' and targeted employment service provision for this disadvantaged group, we also identified some worrying signs of a lack of appropriate cultural awareness and even perhaps a misreading of the concept of equity. Training for employment service providers and public awareness interventions are therefore recommended that focus on distinctive cultural and language attributes as potential assets rather than risks in the workplace. This positive framing could potentially influence the character of social inclusion practices by steering agency staff towards welcoming variety in cultural, religious and social practices, rather than aiming for inclusion dependent upon shaping employees to fit pre-existing norms.

Good quality cultural difference training and resources should strengthen the capacity of agencies to assist Muslim jobseekers and will reduce the discouraging perception that Muslim jobseekers *per se* are 'complicated'. This would foster better relations between jobseekers and services providers by building confidence in the job-search process, and lead to reduced levels of unemployment.

At a deeper level, there is a need for an all government approach to reduce levels of discrimination and debunk myths and stereotypes about Muslims, of whom the vast majority are law-abiding and productive members of Australian society. Specifically, such attempts need to be well-grounded and purposeful in addressing the particular perception, in other words, to be able to 'switch it off' in order to prevent such discriminatory myths and stereotypes becoming barriers to employment.

Although such a herculean task is not within the current remit of the employment service provider sector, the sector is well placed to implement programs that might emerge from such a campaign because it is directly in touch with employers. However, this is unlikely to be a rapid process of change in mind-set. A long-term concerted campaign may be necessary to change prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims that continue to be reflected in recruitment and workplace discrimination.

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