Obstacles Facing Young Muslim Jobseekers in Australia

Pam Nilan

Abstract

Immigration, whether formally organised, or through refugee arrivals, remains a major source of population and workforce growth for Australia. This article undertakes a sociological analysis of the experiences of some young Muslim jobseekers in Australia. Some are recent migrants. Some are refugees. Others are second generation migrant Muslim youth. The Australian Government has identified Muslim youth as needing some special assistance to obtain paid employment. The study reported here investigated some of the obstacles faced by 18 young Muslim jobseekers in Western Sydney in 2009. Interviews were conducted with young Muslims of both sexes who were actively looking for work. It is concluded that the apparent “religious” ostracism of young Muslim jobseekers results in a highly counter-productive form of “cultural unemployment” that impedes the logic of the flow of migration.

Keywords

Muslim youth, obstacles, workforce entry, Australia

This article undertakes a sociological analysis of the experiences of some young Muslim jobseekers in Australia. Some of these young people are recent migrants, or refugees. Others are second generation Muslim migrant youth. Migration remains a major source of population and workforce growth for Australia. In 2006, 40 percent of the population comprised first and second-generation immigrants (DIAC [Department of Immigration and Citizenship] 2006). The 2006 census recorded the total population of Australian Muslims at more than 340,000 people with one-third are born in Australia. Muslim refugees represent one of the fastest growing cohorts in urban Australia (Casimiro, Hancock and Northcote 2007: 56).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Muslim migrants to Australia were primarily Turkish and Lebanese people from poor backgrounds. They came to work in the manufacturing and construction industries (Wise and Ali 2008). More recently under the humanitarian program, arrivals have been from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Indonesia, Eastern Europe and Iran. In 2008, Australia ranked as one of the top three countries contributing to resettlement of refugees (USCRI [United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants] 2009). The religious affiliation of refugees as reported in the 2006 census was Christian (53%) and Islam (33%) (ABS 2010).

The young people experienced many structural and cultural obstacles in their quest for work. There appears to be widespread suspicion and intolerance of Muslims in the wider Australian community and workforce. Young women who wore the headscarf found
particularly severe difficulties in their search for work.

**YOUNG MUSLIMS IN AUSTRALIA**

The Muslim population of Australia is youthful and ethnically diverse, including migrants drawn from more than 120 countries. Thirty-eight percent of the Muslim population is Australian-born and almost 40 percent are under the age of 20 (DIAC, 2006). A recent report found that:

The Muslims surveyed were very optimistic about the economic and social potential of Muslims in Australia. They were keen to take up educational and professional opportunities and were relatively engaged in social and political processes. However, there was also a strong perception of the existence of prejudice and anti-Muslim bias in the Australian media and government, particularly in regard to issues of foreign policy and national security. Consequently, frustration arising from this perception does contribute to a sense of blocked progress (Akbarzadeh, Bouma, and Woodlock 2009: 1).

Young Muslim jobseekers in Australia are searching for work in a context where their religious identity can be expected to count against them. It came as no surprise to find experiences of marginalization and even ostracism in the study reported here.

In 2006, the unemployment rate for Muslim males at over 12 percent was more than double that of all males. Muslim females fare even worse in looking for jobs. The figures are worse again for young Muslim jobseekers, even though many have better English than their parents. In Australia, youth unemployment is higher than for the adult population across the board (FYA [Foundation for Young Australians] 2009). In short, unemployment is an important aspect of the marginalization experience for young Muslim migrants, and a key reason why they may feel excluded from mainstream Australian society. In her recent article on the cultural spaces that young Australians inhabit in “everyday multiculturalism”, Harris (2009) argued that an important research direction for multicultural youth studies is a focus on practices. Given the significance of paid work in the lives of young Muslims in Australia, searching for a job is an important practice through which we can better grasp the reality of inequality that lies behind contemporary liberal discourses of Australian multiculturalism.

For some scholars, Muslim cannot be distinguished from “ethnic”, yet the distinction is productive for grasping structural inequalities in Australia. For example, Betts and Healy (2006) noted that first generation Lebanese Muslim male youth in Australia have on average fewer post-school qualifications than first generation of Lebanese Christian male youth in Australia, indicating that being Muslim and ethnic may carry a greater marginalisation penalty than being ethnic and Christian. While tolerance towards different ethnic groups in Australia varies, there appears to be a remarkably unanimous moral panic about Muslims in the non-Muslim Australian community (Poynting and Mason 2007; Rashid 2007). A study of media portrayals of Muslims between 2001 and 2005 in Australia noted the direct association of Muslim dress, customs and religion with terrorism so that many Muslims “believe that as a result of this media bias, they are vilified in society, and particularly in the workplace” (Kabir 2006: 313). The global context of fear is widespread. “Islamophobia has gained a momentum of its own, creating a ravine between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West. The fear of Muslims as a category is fuelling the fires of Islamophobia and making it extremely difficult for many to live their everyday lives” (Afshar 2008: 412; Fozdar and Torezani 2008). In this highly-charged, media-fuelled context, material and structural obstacles including unemployment, urban location, poverty, lack of voice, social exclusion and racism tend to be sidelined in favour of “cultural” and “religious” explanations for the apparent failure of Muslim background youth to successfully “adapt” to Australian norms (Poynting, Noble, Tabar, and Collins 2004).
Initial findings from a research team led by Jock Collins in 2010 found that many young Australians from immigrant backgrounds find it hard to call themselves Australian. They identify themselves more readily by their ethnic background (Horin 2010). The Australian Federal Government is concerned about the alienation of young Muslims in Australia. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs Website (2009) “consultation with young Muslim Australians is a vital part of the government’s strategy to increase cultural understanding and combat intolerance”. The primary measure of engagement seems to be “youth events” where “issues of possible concern and possible solutions” can be discussed. Yet, it can be argued that the most important issue for young Muslim Australians, like so many other young Australians (FYA 2009), is finding well-paid steady work.

BACKGROUND OF INTERVIEWEES

This paper reports on findings from interviews with 18 Muslim jobseekers aged 20-28 in the suburbs of Western Sydney in 2009. Data indicate experiences of marginalisation and intolerance in the labour force, and the wider community.

Table 1 offers a brief profile of the 18 interviewees. It is evident from Table 1 that there was considerable variation in the status, cultural background, English language competence, work readiness and confidence of young Muslim jobseekers interviewed. Yet, every one of them had two things in common. All were unemployed, and all had difficulty in finding work.

On the other hand, it was evident that the experiences of refugee, migrant, and second-generation youth were quite different. Even among those who had arrived as refugees, there was great diversity. At one extreme, a recently-arrived young woman from Sudan, an under-developed sending country, said:

We come here as refugees and we don’t have any kind of job, experience or qualification, nothing (A8, F, 28, Sudanese refugee).

At the other extreme, some of those who had arrived via the refugee path as small children from more developed sending countries felt they were now little different in terms of labour market engagement than other young Australians, for example:

I have never had any experience of anyone looking at me differently because of my name or religion or background as a person. So I don’t have that problem… it never comes up… I grew up in Australia (S2, 28, M, Iraqi-Kurdish refugee).

Despite confident assurances from some, the majority believed that the disadvantage of their ethnic background was compounded by the fact that they were Muslim, for example:

They will ask me are you going to bomb the place ... this is a very common question... they think all Muslims are terrorists (S8, 26, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

and,

I don’t think my accent is too much of a problem. But my appearance is because of the problems going on with the Middle Eastern crisis and other situations. I reckon that affects it a lot (H4, 22, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

Most interviewees had learnt to expect some level of pre-judgement from prospective employers on the basis of appearance. Those who had grown up in Australia, and were confident, believed that their English language competence and their appropriately “aussie” cultural persona would overcome any initial suspicion towards them:

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) (S2, 28, M, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).
Table 1. Young Muslim Jobseekers: Details of Interviewees (N = 18)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Identifier code</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity &amp; status</th>
<th>Notes from interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>R1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Iraqi-Kurdish refugee</td>
<td>Married; 2 children aged 3 and 5; English adequate; wears headscarf; husband unemployed; seeking work as interpreter or teacher but does not have qualifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Indonesian migrant</td>
<td>English strong; seeks work in retail; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>H4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Iraqi-Arab refugee</td>
<td>Came very young and grew up here; fluent English; seeking work across wide range; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Iraqi-Kurdish refugee</td>
<td>Arrived 17 years ago and grew up in Australia; fluent English; seeking retail or factory work; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>N1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Iraqi-Kurdish refugee</td>
<td>Fluent English; experienced; has worked in security; seeking work in agriculture, biology; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Lebanese 2nd gen migrant</td>
<td>Born in Australia; fluent English; wears headscarf; well-educated; seeking business or office work; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Iraqi-Arab refugee</td>
<td>Came to Australia at 5; fluent English; wears headscarf; just qualified; seeking a job in pathology; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Turkish migrant</td>
<td>English not strong; looking for any work available; suspects that her youth counts against her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Iranian 2nd gen migrant</td>
<td>Born in Australia; fluent English; long interest in computers and has studied IT; confident; seeking job in IT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Afghan refugee</td>
<td>English adequate; seeking any kind of work but cooking; confident; has been interviewed several times on TV regarding railway issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Lebanese refugee</td>
<td>Has been 6 years in Australia; English strong; married; husband is security guard; studying business and seeking job in this field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Lebanese 2nd gen migrant</td>
<td>Born in Australia; fluent English; seeking sales work; especially mobile phones; has worked for Optus; confident, entrepreneurial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Z1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Iranian refugee</td>
<td>Divorced; 2 children under 5; English not strong; wears headscarf; seeking work as a secretary and would like to train as a hairdresser; discouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>S8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Arab-Iraqi refugee</td>
<td>Married with children; English adequate; will take any job; currently working unpaid with a mechanic to get experience; has degree from Iraq in economics; worked in family business making gold jewellery but can't get that work here; discouraged and angry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Lebanese 2nd gen migrant</td>
<td>Born in Australia; fluent English; wears headscarf; has worked in the beauty industry and is qualified; is currently training to be a hairdresser; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>S10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Indonesian migrant</td>
<td>English adequate; wears headscarf; has child care certificates and experience; has now switched to aged care; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Turkish 2nd gen migrant</td>
<td>Born in Australia; fluent English; seeking retail work; confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>A8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sudanese refugee</td>
<td>Married with 2 children but husband has gone back to Africa; English adequate; left Sudan in her first year of university; seeking any job now her son is at school; little work experience except in Sydney chicken factory; discouraged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


FINDINGS

Young Female Muslim Jobseekers

Getting a job in Australia is definitely more challenging for young Muslim women wearing the headscarf. The Muslim woman who wears the headscarf has become a key symbol of Islam in the West, and one that evokes fear and loathing (Afshar 2008). A common view of Muslim women is that they are victims of a patriarchal religious ideology (Akbarzadeh 2010: 1). As Imtoual (2010) found in Australia, plenty of Muslim women who wear the...
hijab find themselves uncomfortable in job interviews and in workplaces. The young female interviewees who wore the headscarf supported this claim, for example:

*Al Hijab* is the main problem as employers are afraid of this appearance as it could affect the business or they would think because I am covered I could be fundamental or extremist specially with this bad reputation of Muslims at the moment (R1, 25, Iraqi refugee).

This was the experience not only of Muslim refugee young women, but also of second generation Muslim female youth who spoke perfect English. For example, when asked about whether her appearance was an issue for potential employers, A2 replied:

Not my look but what I am wearing. They would like me without *Al Hijab* and I was born here (A2, 26, Lebanese second generation migrant).

It was certainly a common perception that the headscarf mattered to employers, and to non-Muslim workmates. Another second generation young female Muslim Lebanese jobseeker who did not wear the headscarf pointed out:

I don’t find myself having any problems that others have out there. They have their headscarf on. For example if you wear a scarf and you are looking for a hairdressing job, it is pretty hard. You have to find someone who does it at home, which is pretty hard to find. But for me I don’t really find, I don’t think, that people will find that I am Muslim by looking at me. So, I don’t find any difficulties but other people they would (L2, 22, Lebanese second generation migrant).

**Prohibitions and Workplace Suitability**

A number of the young Muslims interviewed mentioned that they would prefer not to work in places that served alcohol, or where they would be in contact with pork or non-*halal* food. For example:

Interviewer: Are there particular kinds of work tasks or activities you would not take on as a Muslim?  
S4: Bars, clubs, alcohol places, working in a shop with pork (S4, 21, M, Turkish migrant).

One young woman said she would not like to take up:

Some jobs like working in a bar or club. Against my religion (Z1, 25, Iranian refugee).

When asked about whether they were prepared to take any job, most said they wanted to work in the area they were qualified or experienced. Only a third mentioned the prohibition on contact with alcohol, pork, non-*halal* meat or unrelated men, and how they would prefer to avoid such work conditions. For those young Muslim jobseekers who hold firm on these prohibitions, their availability for employment is diminished in the high vacancy hospitality, food and entertainment services sector of the urban labor market, where many other young Australians seek casual or contract work.

Older male interviewees in the wider study (see footnote above) often mentioned their desire for provision of space and time to pray at work, but none of the younger men mentioned this. They talked about how they did not want to seem “complicated” to their employers and workmates. One young woman said:

I think they will say we are a very fussy people … those Muslims they don’t like anything (H5, 24, F, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

**Experiences of Looking for a Job**

Just as a variety of cultural backgrounds, personal histories and attitudes was identified among the young Muslim jobseekers interviewed, so there were clearly different experiences of looking for a job. Although most experiences with job-search agencies were positive, some felt they offered little:

Actually looking for a job is very hard. Agencies are
lying to you. They say yes, look for job, look for job but when you tell them I couldn’t find a job… no one answering you… no one giving you a job, if you have a CV or any ability, they don’t care. The last job I got, it was through a friend—working in a factory (S8, 26, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

In fact, given the highly mixed ethnic suburbs where the young Muslim jobseekers live in Western Sydney, local “anglo” employers are a minority:

Interviewer: Does your ethnic background matter to employers?
H4: In some cases it does and in some cases it doesn’t… like most of my employers are not one hundred percent Australians. They are usually from other countries. So, that doesn’t affect my job seeking (H4, 22, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

However, it should equally not be presumed that working for a boss who is “ethnic” and Muslim will avoid exploitation:

It is very hard to find a job… sometimes you just find work for cash temporarily but they use you and they don’t give you money you know. You can’t tell anybody about it. I know so many people they’re working with trolleys, collecting trolleys, but they are getting very little money. That boss who employed me he will get $25 an hour and the money he pays me? $4 an hour. In the end the person who doesn’t have English or a driving license he will work very hard and then nothing to be gained (S8, 26, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee).

Young mothers were equally critical of government income support schemes that pushed them into the workplace without acknowledgement of the high costs of childcare. R1 felt this implicitly encouraged unregulated work for cash-in-hand:

When you work your money will go to childcare and if you compare it with the support of the government it would be the same so why would you bother to work? You need more money gained from the job so you could have an interest to work. That’s why people are working for cash—illegal (R1, 25, F, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).

**Information and Communication Technology**

In contrast to older Muslim jobseekers interviewed for the larger project, all the young Muslim jobseekers interviewed mentioned using their mobile phones, social networking sites and the internet to search for jobs. This generational shift among Australian Muslims mirrors the same trend in the Australian population. When asked about how useful she had found the local job-search agency, N1 was more enthusiastic about the new technology available there than any other service:

Interviewer: So, when you were with agency X, what was the single most useful resource or service that you used?
N1: Oh, their new catchy screen. Thanks be they have got their computers set up. You can go in and say what town, or local area, what job you are looking for and they can print it out for you and send it straight through. And it will show you your details listed on the CV in there as well and so you just fax it straight through them and it is very useful (N1, 23, M, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee).

**CONCLUSION**

This article has offered a short critical analysis of findings from interviews with 18 young Muslim jobseekers aged 20-28 in the suburbs of Western Sydney in 2009. Job-seeking experiences tended to be different according to gender, length of time in Australia, appearance and degree of confidence. There were many stories of prospective employers regarding the young job applicants with suspicion because of their Muslim background, ethnicity, accent and/or appearance. As indicated above, the current federal government approach is to identify the problems faced by young Muslims in Australia as primarily cultural and religious, yet, the data here indicate the key role of steady paid work in their lives, work that none of those interviewed in the period had been able to find.

It is concluded that unemployment is a highly important, if not central, aspect of the marginalization experience for young Muslims in Australia. Given the
findings of this paper, it is argued that the apparent “religious” ostracism of young Muslim jobseekers results in a highly counter-productive form of “cultural unemployment” that impedes the logic of the flow of migration that has sustained Australia since it first became a nation. Moreover, the transition of young Muslim jobseekers to full adult status may be well fragmented by their inability to find work. Further empirical research is needed to establish whether this is the case.

References


Bio

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