Immigration, whether formally organised, or through refugee arrivals, remains a major source of population and workforce growth for Australia. This article analyses 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 data considered below point to 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 counterproductive form of ‘cultural unemployment’ that impedes the logic of the flow of migration. Yet despite repeated disappointments, the young Muslim jobseekers demonstrated considerable resilience and strategic thinking.
The objective of this research was to find out about the experiences of Muslim jobseekers in Australia. It seemed from the outset that young Muslim jobseekers came at the task of searching for a job in a different way to their elders. So what does it mean to be young, Muslim and looking for a job in Australia? In many ways the situation of young Muslim jobseekers resembles that of most young Australian jobseekers. They might have a qualification, but they lack experience. Depending on location, there may be a range of jobs available nearby, or there may not. Their situation also resembles the position of young ethnic jobseekers in Australia. Frequently they have a noticeably “ethnic” appearance and might speak with an accent. Both count against them in the labour market. Statistically, young ethnic jobseekers tend to live in urban areas in Australia associated with high levels of unemployment. So, given that most young Australian Muslims are from an ethnic background, why even talk about young Muslim jobseekers per se?

It is important to consider the experiences of young Muslim jobseekers because of the apparent marginalisation of young Muslims in Australia. For example, it has been claimed that “young Australian Muslims, most of whom are born in Australia, are becoming increasingly alienated” (Issues Deliberation Australia/America 2007, p.8). Wider concerns about the experience of Muslim immigrants in Australia were highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2010, which noted with concern reports from Australia indicating “ongoing issues of discrimination and inequity … experienced by members of certain minority communities including African communities, people of Asian, Middle Eastern and Muslim background” (United Nations 2010, p.3).

The Australian Government also takes the issue seriously. In 2008 the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) website included the statement: “consultation with young Muslim Australians is a vital part of the government’s strategy to increase cultural understanding and combat intolerance” (DFAT 2008). The strategy of “youth events” was named as providing a place where consultation on “issues of possible concern and possible solutions” could encourage a greater sense of inclusion. However, it has long been identified that the most significant indicator of social inclusion is labour force participation (Masterman-Smith 2010). Indeed, that reflects the basic logic of immigration, and Australia has long depended on migration for economic prosperity. If well-qualified young Muslims are not readily finding work, that represents a loss for Australia.

The logic of the flow of migration is that people move from their place of origin, where few or limited opportunities are available, to places where they perceive better economic, social and political opportunities to be available (Barber 2008). The benefit to migrants is that they can achieve a much better life. The advantage to the receiving country is that the labour of migrants becomes available, facilitating greater productivity (de Haas 2010). For example, the economic history of Australia has progressed according to the logic of migration. If there is high unemployment among migrants from a particular ethnic background in a receiving country, then neither those migrants nor the receiving country stands to benefit.

Muslims and work in Australia

In 1971 the Muslim population of Australia was 22,300. By the 2006 Census there were 340,393 Muslims, concentrated primarily in Sydney and Melbourne. Thirty-eight per cent of the Muslim population was Australian born in 2006.
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and almost 40% were younger than 20 years old (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2006). In the 1970s and 1980s, Muslims migrated for the most part from Turkey and Lebanon and were generally from poor backgrounds. They came to work in the construction and manufacturing sectors (Wise & Ali 2008). In more recent times the pattern of Muslim migration to Australia has changed, with more people arriving under the Humanitarian Program. New sending countries and regions include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Indonesia, Eastern Europe, Iran and Sudan. In 2008, Australia was recognised as one of three countries contributing most to the resettlement of refugees (United States Committee on Refugees and Immigrants 2009). In 2006, 53% of refugee arrivals were Christian and 33% were Muslim (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). According to Casimiro, Hancock and Northcote, “Muslim refugees represent one of the fastest growing communities in Australia” (2007, p.56).

A major issue for young Australian Muslims, whether from a refugee or a migrant background, is finding a job. In this respect they are much like other young Australians (see Foundation for Young Australians 2009). A recent report on youth inclusion by Mission Australia (2010, p.2) concludes that “the opportunity for all Australians to participate in work is one of four dimensions which underpin the vision the Government has articulated for a socially inclusive Australia in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in social life”. Nevertheless, the number of young Australians registered as looking for work rose in the period 2006–2009 (Mission Australia 2010, p.2). The percentage of young Australian Muslims without employment in the 2006 Census was already higher than for the national average (Hassan 2008), and the situation has improved only marginally.

One reason why suitably qualified young Muslims in Australia find it difficult to get steady, well-paid work is intolerance. First as young people they are already subject to some labour market disadvantage in Australia, as already discussed. Second, most have “ethnic” characteristics. Many prior studies have established the labor market disadvantage of ethnic jobseekers in Australia (for example Booth, Leigh & Varganova 2009; Colic-Peisker 2005). Third, they are Muslim. While for some scholars, prejudice against Muslims cannot be distinguished from “ethnic” prejudice, the distinction is productive for grasping structural inequalities in Australia, especially since not all ethnic groups are perceived the same way. For example, Betts and Healy (2006) note that first-generation Lebanese Muslim male youth in Australia have on average fewer post-school qualifications than first-generation 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 (Poynning & Mason 2007; Rashid 2007), including members of ethnic groups not normally associated with Islam.

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 such that many Muslims “believe that as a result of this media bias, they are vilified in society, and particularly in the workplace” (Kabir 2006, p.313). In this 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”
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explanations for the apparent failure of Muslim-background youth to successfully “adapt” to Australian norms (Poynting et al. 2004). Imtoual (2010, p.56) describes prejudice against Muslims in Australia as “religious racism” (see also Kabir 2006). Tilbury (2007, p.1) states that “the current target group for Australia’s xenophobia is Muslims”, a claim echoed by Poynting and Mason (2007) in concluding their study of anti-Muslim tensions in Western Sydney. It is in this challenging climate of anti-Muslim feeling that young Australian Muslims are looking for jobs.

Methodology

This article uses some qualitative data collected for a 2009 multi-method study on the experiences of Muslim jobseekers. It is usually accepted that qualitative data has limited generalisability. Yet, depending on the phenomenon in question, the generalisability of research findings can be assessed using different lines of reasoning. For example, if we employ the heuristic – “generalisation through recognition of patterns” (Larsson 2009, p. 25) – then analysis of some qualitative data might be usefully extrapolated, in a provisional way, to a wider segment of the population. Below, the specific experiences of 18 young Muslims aged 21–28 looking for work in urban Australia resonate so strongly with reports of sociocultural disadvantage documented elsewhere that we could well assume they are widely shared among young Australian Muslims.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by two graduate assistants from ethnic backgrounds compatible with the study participants. Interviews provide a rich source of data, yet a careful process of selection must take place for results to be readily appraised. The advantage of an interview is that it can flow flexibly like a conversation. It is a powerful research tool that yields depth of information and understanding (Babbie 2004).

A thematic coding approach was followed (Ryan & Bernard 2000) to derive themes through rigorously inspecting, coding, checking and cross-checking. The transcripts were first read to derive small-scale, detailed thematic categories. Subsequently, these categories were merged into a tighter set of thematic codes to create a codebook. Codes were then manually applied to fresh, unmarked transcripts. Some code revisions were made before the final selection of quotes. At the same time it was not judged appropriate to decontextualise the quotes too much from the circumstances of the speaker. Table 1 on the next page summarises the 18 interviewees, giving some sense of who the young people were.

Table 1 demonstrates considerable variation in the status, cultural background, English language competence, work-readiness and confidence of the young people interviewed. Generally speaking, the work-readiness and attitude to work of refugee, migrant and second-generation youth do seem different. Yet all these young people had two things in common. All were unemployed, and they were all experiencing difficulties in finding work.
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>3</td>
<td>H4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Iraqi-Arab refugee</td>
<td>Came to Australia very young. 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. Fluent English. Seeking retail or factory work. 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>Afghani 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>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>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>AB</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>

The interviewers were asked to make notes for each interview about English fluency, and whether or not the person seemed confident in their approach to looking for a job.
Young, Muslim and looking for a job in Australia

The problem of being perceived as Muslim

Most thought their perceived status as Muslims contributed to their labour market disadvantage, for example:

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

H4 then clarified what this meant:

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

H4: Troublemaker, terrorist …

One young man said in his interview:

For job interviews they would ask me are going to bomb the place if I employ you? They joke in a very nasty way. (S8, 26, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee)

In terms of job readiness, qualifications, experience, confidence and English language capacity were found to be central to the likelihood of interviewees getting a job. A young woman who had only recently arrived from under-developed, war-torn Sudan, was feeling discouraged:

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

However, some from a refugee background viewed their job chances with much more confidence, 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)

As a general finding, a long period of time living in Australia or being born in Australia was associated with better English skills, recognised qualifications and confidence, for example:

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, 26, M, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee)

Here S2 alludes to the “problem” of his “Middle Eastern” appearance readily suggesting he is Muslim. However, he feels this is outweighed by his language fluency and cultural behaviour. On balance, appearance was reported in the interviews as more of a problem for young women who wore the headscarf.

Young, female, Muslim and looking for work

According to the 2006 Census, 63.3% of Muslim women were not in the Australian labour force compared to 42% of women for the population as a whole (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006), even though education levels were roughly comparable (Akbarzadeh, Bouma & Woodlock 2009). Looking for a job presents greater challenges to young Muslim women in Australia who wear the headscarf (hijab). The female headscarf represents a key symbol of Islam in the west, and tends to evoke fear and loathing for non-Muslims (Alshar 2008; Imtoutal 2010).

The young female interviewees wearing the headscarf certainly felt this way, for example:

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

It was not just Muslim refugee young women for whom English was not a first language who felt this way. Second-generation Muslim female youth with fluent English and no accent had similar experiences. The headscarf was identified as presenting a great disadvantage when trying to get a job, for example:

Not my look but what I am wearing. They would like me without Al Hijab and I was born here. 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. They probably think I am complicated because I am Muslim so they wouldn’t give me a chance. (A2, 26, Lebanese second generation)

The common perception among female interviewees was that the headscarf mattered in a negative way to employers, and to non-Muslim workmates. A study of the difficulties faced by Muslim jobseekers in Perth found that:

Employers interviewed for the project were very creative in accounting for what might appear to be racial discrimination, denying responsibility for that discrimination, and deflecting responsibility onto other factors. They argued that if discrimination occurred it was for the sake of their clients or customers, to whom they were ultimately responsible (Tilbury 2007, p. 2).

Those who did not wear the headscarf were very well aware of negative attitudes towards it:

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)

This comment refers implicitly to some restrictions on workplaces for young Muslim women, especially those who wear the headscarf. For example, the headscarf compounds the difficulty of finding work in the health and beauty field in Australia. Another female interviewee said:

I would like to work in hairdressing but nobody is employing me because I am covering my hair. (Z1, 25, F, Iranian refugee)

The effect of religious regulations and prohibitions

In observation of a religious regulation, avoiding dealing with male clients was mentioned by a young woman who was finalising her training as a hairdresser:

Well, yeah, I wouldn’t do men [hairdressing clients]. I have done men before but now I wouldn’t want to do it, like I prefer not to. (L2, 22, Lebanese second generation)

It is not clear whether L2’s current expressed reluctance to cut the hair of male customers derives from a recent revitalisation of her faith, or whether she cut men’s hair during her training in order to gain the qualification, but would avoid doing so in a future job. This could prove problematic in terms finding a position because most hairdressing salons in Australia cater for both sexes. Although we did not find much evidence of it, avoidance of contact with men would represent a particularly difficult employment hurdle given that there is little or no formal gender segregation in the Australian services and retail sector, or in other sections of the labour market.
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The most common religious prohibition mentioned by both male and female young jobseekers was the avoidance of alcohol. A number said they would avoid workplaces where alcohol was sold or served. Some also mentioned avoiding 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)

Religious prohibitions on contact with alcohol, pork or non-halal meat in the workplace were mentioned in about one-third of the 18 interviews. The most obvious outcome is a restriction on working in the hospitality, food and entertainment services sectors of the urban labour market, where many other young Australians seek casual or contract work because there is a high job vacancy rate. One young woman said ruefully:

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

It seemed most young male jobseekers did not want to appear “complicated” in their future workplaces, so the issue of prayer was avoided, for example:

Interviewer: Does your religion matter to employers?
N1: I suppose sometimes with prayer. I find that when it comes to religion, people tend to not tread there, like especially with employers. If they have already employed me and if I pray they are not comfortable with it. Like let us say, if I say I have to pray and I have got religious commitments and that I can’t work because of that religious commitment they probably just don’t hire me in the beginning rather than deal with that after they hired me. (N1, 23, M, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee)

Strategies

Information and communication technology

In the wider study, the use of ICTs for job searching represented a divergent strategy across the generations. One aspect of contemporary Australian social practice that young Muslim jobseekers share with young people everywhere is reliance on the internet and the mobile phone. Willis and Tranter (2006, p.55) find that in Australia “young people are not only more likely to access the internet, they use it for different purposes to their elders”. All the young Muslim jobseekers made active use of their mobile phones and many mentioned using the internet, including social networking sites, to find prospective jobs. ICT resources were also often mentioned in relation to job-search agencies:

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)

One young woman mentioned using the internet to find out about vacancies, calling the employers, then, “if they say we don’t have jobs I would leave my phone numbers with them” (S5, 27, F, Afghani refugee), implying a strategy where she names more than one phone number so she can always be contacted.

Adaptability

Although some of the young Muslim jobseekers seemed disheartened, many gave the impression of being simply
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pragmatic, for example:

Most of the jobs I don’t get because it requires skills. And so I know that I didn’t get that particular job because I didn’t have the skills. (S2, 28, M, Kurdish-Iraqi refugee)

One confident young woman who wore the headscarf said, “usually I work in child care. And now I’ve changed the business to become an aged care worker” (S10, 27, F, Indonesian migrant). She believes there are more vacancies in the aged care field and presumes her headscarf will not matter so much.

Some avoided job-search agencies, preferring the strategy of tracking down vacancies themselves, for example:

I will rather look on my own because you can’t really rely on other people, like if they have a lot of other people to look for jobs you have to wait a long time. If you do it yourself, you find it easier and quicker. (L2, 22, F, Lebanese second generation)

Finally, some relied on their religious faith to give them fortitude in the search for a job. For example, B2 said that in the past when he finally found a job: “I would say thank God Alhamdulillah (B2, 27, M, Lebanese second generation).”

Implications for policy and practice

Some of the comments made by interviewees indicate the possible need for modifications to existing practices in job-search agencies. First, several of the young people mentioned that they believed they were treated differently, for example:

The treatment at the agencies for Muslim jobseekers, are very different from the treatment of the Aussie ones. They don’t like us ... you could see the body language. (S8, 26, M, Arab-Iraqi refugee)

This was not just the case for young women who wore the headscarf, but applied to both sexes. It seemed to be linked to the issue of a “Middle-Eastern appearance” (Poynting & Tabar 2007). Although some cultural sensitivity training is given to job-search agency workers, a more concerted effort may be needed.

Second, some of the young women mentioned that they did not like to talk to men about private issues. For example Z1, with two small children, had been divorced by her husband before she was 25. She later told the interviewer she was embarrassed to talk about it openly. Another young woman intimated that it would be better if a female agency worker was assigned to interview female Muslim jobseekers:

They could let the Muslim jobseeker woman talk to women in agencies in case if they’re embarrassed to talk to a man about sensitive things. (R1, 25, F, Iraqi refugee)

Finally, it was evident that the majority of young Muslim jobseekers were using their own resources, both social and technological, to search for jobs, and made relatively limited use of job-search agencies, for example:

I have help from my friends more than any other organisation or service. (A4, 27, M, Iranian second generation)

At the level of policy, it may be advisable for national employment strategies to reach beyond the institutional approach of standard job-search agencies to create various forms of facilitated networks that would support the specific needs of young Muslim jobseekers; targeting jobs and employers beyond those where being of Muslim faith poses a problem.
Conclusion

So what does it mean to be young, Muslim and looking for a job in Australia?

This paper has reported on findings from interviews conducted in 2009 with 18 young Muslim jobseekers aged 21–28 in the suburbs of Western Sydney. It is argued that finding a steady job is very important for all of them, yet none of those interviewed were working at the time of interview. Job-search experiences varied according to gender, length of time in Australia, appearance and degree of confidence. There were many accounts of being treated with suspicion because of their Muslim background, ethnicity, accent and/or appearance. Two outcomes are implied from these findings. The first is further research. A broad-based study employing a survey of a large sample of young Muslim jobseekers, supported by focus groups and interviews, should be conducted in at least three capital cities. The second implication is for a more concerted approach to social inclusion through labour force participation. The labour market marginalisation of young Muslim jobseekers represents a counterproductive form of “cultural unemployment” that works against the logic of the flow of migration Australia has long depended on. It is a potential impediment to the future prosperity of Australia if coming generations of young Muslim migrants continue to find particular difficulty entering the labour market.

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