

Somali Women's Experiences in Paid Employment in New Zealand

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Abstract

There is growing international interest in the employment issues encountered by refugee and migrant workers. Within the New Zealand context, Somali women migrants experience one of the highest rates of unemployment, yet some are employed. In this paper we present research that explores what a small group of Somali women did to find and maintain paid employment. Interviews were conducted with six Somali women currently engaged in paid employment. These women reported that their clothing and appearance were significant barriers in their initial job search. Most attributed gaining paid employment to their having a New Zealand tertiary qualification and skills recognized by their current employers. Family support and personal time management skills were deemed important features to maintaining employment. At times, these women experienced conflict between their identity as Somali Muslim women with organizational cultures and requirements. We conclude that these barriers can be resolved with sensitivity and communication with employers.

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In the past ten years, Somali migration to New Zealand has grown rapidly. Most of the Somali migrants to New Zealand have come as refugees selected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In 1993, following an international appeal, New Zealand agreed to accept the first group of 92 Somali refugees through the annual quota refugee programme (Somali Friendship Society, 2002). By 2001, 1,971 Somali were living in New Zealand and 492 in the Waikato Region (Ho, Guerin, Cooper, & Guerin, 2005; Statistics New Zealand, 2002). The Somali community, and Somali women in particular, have encountered problems gaining access to paid employment since their arrival to New Zealand (Guerin, Guerin & Elmi, 2006). Indeed, refugee and migrant employment status has gained considerable international attention over the past 15 years (e.g., Altinkaya, & Omundsen, 1999; Buijs, 1993; Forrest & Johnston, 2000; Holden, 1999; Montgomery, 1991, 1996; Morokvasic, 1993; North, Trlin, & Singh, 1999; Pernice, Trlin, Henderson, & North, 2000; Shih, 2002; Schwarzer, Jerusalem, & Hahn, 1994; Waxman, 2001; Wooden, 1991).

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Refugees remain on government welfare-benefits for an average of three years before finding full-time paid employment in New Zealand (The McKenzie Trust, 2004). This situation is exacerbated for the Somali ethnic group generally, and Somali women specifically. As a group, Somali experience unemployment rates four to five times higher than the national average (Guerin, Diiriye, & Guerin, 2004). New Zealand labour force statistics for 2001 reveal that Somali women have the second highest female unemployment rate at 42.9%, a labour force participation rate of 26.9% (compared to 60.1% for the 'all women' category), and 14.8% in paid employment (Guerin, Ho, & Bedford, 2004). These high unemployment and low labour force participation rates for Somali women have been attributed to structural constraints, language barriers, non-transferable skills and qualifications (Guerin, Diiriye, & Guerin, 2004), and differences between religion, culture, and family composition (Guerin, Guerin, Diiriye & Abdi, 2005; Guerin, Guerin, & Elmi, 2006; Kelly, 1989).

Structural constraints affecting refugee employment status have been found to include the resettlement in residential areas removed from industrial or commercial sites, making access to employment more difficult; fewer employment programmes specifically designed for refugees compared to the general public; and a lack of English as-second-language programmes (The McKenzie Trust, 2004). In the 2001 census, 32.2% and 21.4% of Somali women and men respectively could not speak English; however, over half spoke two or more languages (compared with only 5-6% of New Zealanders); a skill that might be transferred to the New Zealand employment environment (Guerin, Guerin, Diiriye, & Abdi, 2004). Another issue is that the Somali language was only officially written in 1972 in Latin script, thus adapting to a paper-based society may be difficult for older Somali (Guerin, Guerin & Elmi, 2006). Traditional Somali business practices, involving social networks, negotiation, over-land trade routes, and few bureaucratic or legal rules, are not always recognized or easily transferable to the New Zealand environment (Guerin, Guerin, Diiriye and Abdi, 2005). Similarly, many Somali migrants (36.6% of the women and 25.8% of men) have no formal qualifications and very few have degree-level qualifications; a pattern that is changing as more Somali youth enroll and complete tertiary education in New Zealand (Guerin et al., 2005).

In addition to the above barriers to gaining employment, the majority of Somali migrants are practicing Muslims. The observances of Salat (prayer) and the Fast of Ramadan do not readily match the rhythm of the New Zealand working day or the Christian holy days, which are codified in the New Zealand Holidays Act. For example, Salat is to be observed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall and preferably in a mosque but prayer is permitted almost anywhere, such as in fields, offices, factories and universities (Farah, 1987). The Fast of Ramadan is observed in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar (falling somewhere between October and December). This holy month is deemed the time to strengthen family in which fasting during daylight hours is followed by eating small meals in the evening with family (Farah, 1987).

Somali women's highly visible religious-clothing, prescribed gender interactions and traditional family roles have also been found to influence their employment status. As with poor language skills, their long headscarf is sometimes perceived as a communication barrier and a health and safety hazard in the employment environment (McGowan, 1999). Women wearing headscarves have reported resistance and discrimination in the workplace, and some view wearing them as the main factor for their unemployment (Guerin et al., 2004). Western practices of hugging, kissing, touching, shaking hands, and flirting between men and women is strictly prohibited in Muslim teachings; practices that can restrict the type of work environment deemed acceptable to some Somali migrants.

The assigned gendered role for Somali women requires them to be responsible for childcare and the household (Abdullahi, 2001). However, educated Somali women are expected to find work and maintain these traditional household duties (Jenkinson, 1999). These values have been transferred to New Zealand (Ahmed, 1999). With an average of five children (that can range between 1 and 15 children), coupled with a relatively young population (half are under 16-years of age) Somali women in New Zealand have high family demands and responsibilities affecting their employment status (Guerin, et al, 2004). According to Somali cultural practices, once the eldest child reaches their youth, they too share these family responsibilities as part of their preparation for adulthood. Even though Somali women record the second-highest unemployment and lowest labour force participation rates in New Zealand, some are employed. Our interest is in exploring the factors identified by Somali women that contribute to their ability to gain and maintain paid employment in New Zealand. We begin by reviewing the position of Somali women in the New Zealand labour market and the factors that have been attributed to their marginalized employment status. The 'talk-around' method (Pe-Pau, 1980) was used to frame the interviews conducted with six Somali women currently in paid employment. These women identified a number of individual, organisational, and family responses that enabled them to accommodate their multiple responsibilities and obligations to family, Islam, work and community.

This review of existing research guided our development of a thematic questionnaire (Gillingham, 2000) to explore Somali women's experiences in finding and maintaining employment in New Zealand. Our first theme was to explore whether barriers were encountered in the job-search process. Our second theme was to understand how Somali women accommodated their religious, family and community commitments with their paid employment obligations. Finally, we aimed to determine strategies the women used to help maintain their paid employment. The actual method used is described in the following section.

Method

Interviews were conducted with six Somali women in paid employment in 2005. The aim was not to obtain a representative sample, but rather to obtain stories from women in diverse circumstances to help understand the range of factors influencing acquisition and maintenance of employment. Therefore, the women interviewed included three married and three unmarried women, with and without children, and in full- and part-time employment. The interviews were conducted by a Somali woman (the first author) tape recorded and notes were taken. The "talk around" method was used in which questions are asked in a natural conversational context so participants did not feel they were being interrogated. This method was recommended by Pe-Pua (1989) for indigenous Filipino research, based on *Pagtatanung-tanong* or "asking around" and has since been used in research with Somali. The questionnaire sheet was translated into Somali but, because many do not read or write the language, the interviews were all conducted orally, in Somali, and translated into English for transcripts.

Four interviews took place at the participant's house, and two interviews were conducted at the university library. The participants chose the locations based on convenience and comfort. Interviews were conducted over a two week period in August 2005 and each interview was approximately one to two hours long. Transcripts of all interviews were typed and were checked by participants for recording accuracy. The transcripts were analyzed for key themes. Names used in this report have been changed to maintain confidentiality of participants and some personal details that could reveal participants' identity have been slightly modified.

Limitations

Due to time limitations and the limited scope of the project, only six women in paid employment were interviewed from one city in New Zealand. Therefore, while these findings are not generalizable they do provide valuable insight that may form the basis of future research.

Participants

Maggie arrived in New Zealand in 1996 at age 17, and was 26-years old at the time of the interview. She is studying towards a tertiary-level qualification and has two part-time jobs. In one job she works eight-hours per week as a coordinator in an agricultural industry. For the second job, she works 12-hours per week as a Somali support-worker in a local NGO (non-government organization) providing assistance to new migrants and refugees. She is unmarried, has no children and lives with her family. As the eldest child, her family responsibilities include helping her mother, who does not speak English or understand the New Zealand culture, and caring for younger siblings. Prior to coming to New Zealand, Maggie was not employed, partly because she was young when she left Somalia and had been in high school, but she did volunteer with the UNHCR while in a refugee camp.

Anny arrived in New Zealand in 1993 at age 11, and was 23-years old at the time of the interview. She recently graduated with a Bachelors degree from a New Zealand university and currently works 100-hours per fortnight as a laboratory technician. She has gained various working experiences while growing up in New Zealand, and is conversant with the language and culture. Anny is unmarried and has no children; her family responsibilities include helping her grandparents, parents, younger siblings and extended family.

Mary arrived in New Zealand in 1998, and was 40-years old at the time of the interview, and raises nine children on her own. She owned various businesses in Somalia and draws on her business experiences and skills in her current part-time position in a family clothing store, owned by the Somali community, where she works 14-hours per week. She attends English language courses in the evenings.

Sally arrived in New Zealand in 1999 at age 16, along with her mother and siblings, and was 23-years old at the time of the interview. She graduated with a Bachelors degree from a New Zealand university and works full-time as a medical laboratory assistant. She is unmarried, has no children and lives with her family. She sometimes helps her mother with housework, but her first priority is her paid employment.

Kate arrived in New Zealand in the late 1990s and was 30-years old at the time of the interview. Kate has graduated with a Bachelors degree from a New Zealand tertiary institute and works full-time in the health sector. In the past, she has worked for refugee agencies in Africa and New Zealand and is currently involved with the Somali community and other ethnic organizations. She is married with three children. Her husband and extended family help with child care and household duties to enable her to accommodate her multiple family, community and employment roles.

Hannah arrived in New Zealand in 1998 and was 28 years-old at the time of the interview. She has graduated with both Bachelor and Diploma degrees from a New Zealand tertiary institute, and is a qualified interpreter. She has two part-time jobs in the education sector; combined, these jobs involve 10-hours per week. She is involved in providing both unpaid and paid interpreting services

for the Somali community. She is married with no children and is responsible for the household duties.

Results

These women described various experiences when trying to find paid employment, accommodating cultural and religious practices with paid employment, 'being' a Somali woman in the work environment, and strategies to help them maintain their paid employment. These themes are presented below.

Finding Paid Employment

The majority of the women had applied for at least three jobs before gaining their current position. They reported using typical job-search methods such as newspaper, internet, recruitment agencies, the government work-placement agency, word-of mouth, and networking. Maggie found her job through relatives and friends:

Not newspaper or through other things because my friends told me that there is a position available and that the company needed people and that's how I got my job.

Sally was the only one to report "no problems finding work" as she explained that she gained her position as a result of proving herself during work-placement training as a lab technician during her University studies.

The five other women described various barriers to finding paid employment. All five identified their clothing and appearance as barriers, Kate, for example, believed that employers were more interested in her appearance than her capabilities; a view shared by Hannah:

Even though I matched the skills and qualification required, they said that my application was not successful. Maybe they did not like me because of the way I dressed.

Four believed their religious practices affected their ability to find work. One perceived her colour and language-skills as significant barriers in her job-search.

'Being' a Somali Woman at Work

These women described a number of negotiations and accommodations made in terms of their cultural and religious identities within the workplace. All of these women identified cultural dress and prayer time as significant cultural and religious issues that they contended with in their workplaces. Most of the women said that they had to change the way they dressed to fit their employment situations. Some were told to wear smaller scarves to fulfill safety regulations, however, many felt these requests were less about safety and more about their employer's arrogance and lack of cultural awareness and understanding. This view was captured by Kate:

Mainly it's dress code, on how I dress as a Muslim woman, how I think I appear, and my skin color is not of the mainstream New Zealander, so I stood out from the rest.

Kate described feeling that she frequently had to choose between religious and employment practices, however, she challenged the dress code and had this to say:

Doing the job that I am required to do at the same time baring in mind and not giving away my religious and cultural practices, such as praying, wearing my head scarf and long dress was a difficult move to do. Trying to make the employers understand my religion and finally convincing them of the importance in keeping my traditional dress was very challenging and difficult but I finally overcame it and had to modify their uniform to meet my religious practices.

Ensuring the observance of prayer while at work was a key issue for all of the women. Hannah found it challenging to find a suitable time to pray and “squeezed prayer time in with her work patterns”. Indeed, three women reported praying during their break times and not the prescribed or obligatory prayer times. Half of the respondents stated that they were provided with a place to pray at work while the other half prayed at work but there was no prayer room provided.

Hannah also identified her discomfort about ‘workplace-shouts’ as she did not know if the food was Halal (prepared according to Islamic teachings):

When we are having shared lunch, I don't want to eat some type of food especially when it's not halal and my colleagues always invite me to the food, but I don't want to make them feel as if I am not favoring their food. The main reason I don't feel comfortable eating there is that I don't know what type of ingredients are in the food and whether it is halal.

Maggie identified the New Zealand customary practice of shaking hands, particularly with men, as a difficult cultural practice for her to overcome. In contrast, Sally described accommodation within her workplace as her manager and colleagues were very understanding and aware of her cultural practices:

The manager is very nice and understanding, they really promote that there is different cultural needs, and if you have problem, they will help you out and then I feel really comfortable and look forward to going there every morning because everyone is friendly.

These women all commented that observing the Fast of Ramadan was very seldom an issue that they had to accommodate at work. This was partly because they were all used to fasting and working; and partly because many finished work in time to ‘break fast’ with family. The two women who, from time to time, worked night-shifts and broke fast at work, felt Ramadan was less of an issue as observing Salat was a greater priority.

Balancing Family and Community Commitments

The three women without children reported that although their families had prioritized their paid-employment, they still attended to traditional family commitments. Three of these women had child care responsibilities, while the other three had extended family commitments and were in full- or part-time study. Yet, most of the women stated that these responsibilities did not interfere with their employment.

Sally provided the example that she manages her employment and extended family responsibilities by separating and prioritizing her multiple commitments. She manages this even though she is

responsible for helping her mother with housework, especially during Ramadan. Maggie has the responsibility of looking after her mother, brothers and sisters and studying full-time while working:

I am the eldest in my family so I have the responsibility of looking after the house. It's part of our culture for the eldest in the family to take on the responsibility. I have to take them to school, take them to hospital when they are sick. My mum can't drive and she does not understand the language so I have to take on these responsibilities. I have to help my mother.

The three women with children described the extensive help from their immediate and extended families their work obligations. Kate, who has three children, developed strategies of compromise and accommodation between paid and unpaid work responsibilities, and received help from her brothers and sisters who cared for her children while she was at work. For Mary, it was the support from her elder sons that was important:

The fact that my children understand why I am working and the fact that they are Okay with it helps me maintain my work. I am determined to work whether I have other responsibilities or not.

Strategies for Maintaining Employment

First and foremost, all of the women identified the importance of family support as key to maintaining employment (as discussed above). The second most common strategy they identified was to equip themselves with the right skills, training and qualifications needed for their jobs. This view was shared by Mary, Kate, Sally, Maggie, and Hannah. For Mary, her experience from owning her own business in Somalia and dealing with her own culture were invaluable to her current employment. Hannah noted the importance of continually upgrading skills as key to her maintaining employment. Sally's comment is reflective of all their views:

What makes it possible for me to work are the skills and qualifications that I have and whatever the job requires I am experienced and have the skills and qualification required. Also, the fact that I have trained there and they know me, so it's plus point.

Similarly, these women recognised the importance of time management skills and their own ability to organise, plan, and prioritise their competing commitments in order to maintain their paid employment. In addition to these shared views, particular individual strategies were described. Hannah noted her motivation, and willingness to continue learning and improve skills was important to maintaining her job. For Anny, key features to maintaining her employment included being productive, punctual, enthusiastic, and the fact that she does not have children to look after. Kate recognized the importance of managing workplace pressure and controlling work stress, and gaining adequate sleep:

Having good sleep and making sure that I am fresh when I go to work so I can work to the best of my abilities. Making sure that I am not stressed; every time I pray and ask God to help me so that I don't do anything wrong that costs me my job.

For Maggie, working as a team, being collaborative, enjoying her job, and having supportive colleagues and managers were important. Finally, Hannah noted the importance of being committed, hardworking, reliable, patient, as well as being able to communicate and interpret between clients and with her co-workers.

Discussion

Somali women migrants have been marginalized within the New Zealand labour market. Despite their high family, religious and community commitments a small number have gained and maintained paid employment in New Zealand. Our interest has been to understand the factors that Somali women attribute to their ability to participate in the labour market.

Similar to previous findings, these women reported initial difficulty in gaining their current positions, which they attributed to their visibility in terms of their religious dress and employer perceptions of their cultural and religious practices (e.g., McKenzie Trust, 2004). However, only one woman in our sample perceived her language capabilities, lack of recognizable qualifications, and colour as barriers to finding paid employment. This finding reflects that most of these women have been in New Zealand for a number of years and are proficient English speakers, four have graduated from New Zealand universities, and one is currently enrolled in tertiary education. Indeed, having the right skills and qualifications for the job market was deemed essential to gaining and maintaining paid employment by all these women, and took responsibility for upgrading their skills to this end. Similarly, these women identified what might be considered typical Western 'work-ethic' attitudes, for example, being punctual, productive, motivated, and so on, as important strategies to ensure continued employment.

In previous research, Somali women's responsibility to their family has been deemed a barrier to employment. In contrast, these women identified the importance of support received from immediate and extended family as key to their ability to maintain employment. Thus, for these women, responsibility to family is a reciprocal and an accommodating relationship. This relational family support was strengthened by these women's personal time management skills and their ability to plan, organise and prioritise their multiple commitments.

Accommodation within the work-setting was also deemed important to maintaining employment. For some, this meant that they had to accommodate important cultural and religious concerns, specifically Salat and modifying their scarves. Accommodations made by the employers were either an outcome of existing or newly learned cross-cultural awareness, or as an outcome of the women negotiating with their employers. Increased cross-cultural awareness with regard to issues of cross-gender mixing may further enhance the comfort, accessibility, and indeed, productivity of Somali women employees.

Conclusion

The women in this study attributed their ability to gain and maintain employment to a combination of personal, family and organizational accommodations. These women's diverse stories may inform policy initiatives to address high unemployment rates of Somali women specifically, and Somali men and refugee migrants generally, and help relieve labour and skill shortages. These women supported the need to gain English proficiency, formal qualifications and recognizable skill. These individual responsibilities may be supported by English-proficiency programmes enabling migrants to better integrate into their new communities. Small accommodations in the work setting can be achieved at little or no cost to the employer. Overall, this study contributes information and insight about a not-well understood group in New Zealand. Understanding Somali women, perhaps the most marginalized group in New Zealand, will improve our employment interventions for migrant and refugee groups more generally. Specifically, appreciation of the diversity within groups, and therefore the necessary diversity required in interventions, will benefit employment outcomes.

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