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Female Muslim Jobseekers in Australia: Liminality, Obstacles and Resilience

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Abstract

This article analyses obstacles faced by female Muslim jobseekers in Australia using the theoretical framework of liminality suggested by Homi Bhabha. Interviews were conducted with 21 female Muslim refugees and migrants of varying ages from 10 sending countries. Australia has long been a multicultural society, economically dependent on the labour of repeated waves of migration. Engagement with the labour market provides not only income but a sense of belonging in the receiving country. Yet these women faced substantial obstacles in their search for work. Nevertheless, they showed resilience in the face of repeated disappointment, and dedication to the task.

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Introduction

In August 2010, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 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, and in particular Muslim women' (UN 2010a:3). In light of that recognition, this article offers a timely analysis of the liminal position of female Muslim jobseekers in Australia, the obstacles they face and their resilience. Interviews with female Muslim job-seekers, collected for a project of wider scope on experiences of Australian Muslim job-seekers, indicate specific difficulties faced in entering the labour market. As Akbarzadeh (2010:2) points out, other Australians tend not to see Muslims as 'a welcome part of Australian society, but as representing a foreign and irreconcilable culture'.

Victor Turner's original concept of liminality described a period of transition between 'two relatively fixed or stable conditions' (Turner 1967: 93), where people were located outside of social and cultural structures of identity and belonging. Extrapolating from this to the phenomenon of immigration, Homi Bhabha depicts the migrant as suspended in a liminal or in-between space, belonging neither here (the receiving country) nor there (the sending country) (Bhabha 1994). Since engagement in paid work is integral to a sense of legitimate belonging in the receiving country (ILO 2010), it can be argued that female Muslim job-seekers in Australia are located in a liminal space as they search for work.

Statistics indicate that female Muslim jobseekers may be facing considerable challenges. According to the 2006 Australian census, almost two-thirds of Muslim women (63.3 per cent) were not in the labour force compared to 42 per cent of women for the population as a whole (ABS 2006), even though education levels were roughly comparable. 17.5 per cent of Muslim women over the age of 18 had a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 18 per cent of all Australian women aged over 18 (ABS 2006; see also Akbarzedah, Bouma & Woodlock 2009). First, the fact that well-qualified Muslim women looking for jobs encounter great difficulty in finding them contradicts the economic logic of migration that has sustained Australia since it became a nation. Second, as indicated above, finding work is an important aspect of migrants' achieving wellbeing and a sense of belonging: 'employment acquisition is, in other words, a key

indicator of the attachment to the host country labor market and a measure of labor market integration' (Dahlstedt & Bevelander 2010: 159). Engaging with the labour market represents an important stage for female Muslim jobseekers in moving beyond the liminal state of being 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967: 96). On the other hand, as Bhabha (1994:168) points out, the experience of liminality can produce an 'empowering knowledge for the migrant' that can be put to good use. In this instance, there are two sets of cultural resources – sending country and receiving country –for female Muslim jobseekers to draw upon in mustering strategies and resilience in the quest for paid work.

The women we interviewed had their immediate or generational origins in 10 Muslim-majority countries with different cultural traditions. Muslim-majority sending countries vary not only in terms of culture, but on measures of religious observation and regulation (Hassan 2008). Certainly, in some countries, the female labour force participation rate is low. In Iraq, for example, it is only 14.1 per cent (UN 2010b). However, in some neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Turkey, female labour force participation is much higher. So, while some Muslim countries have a low rate of female education and labour force participation, high rates of poverty and higher-than-average levels of fertility and mortality, other Muslim countries show none of these characteristics. For example, in Indonesia, Malaysia and Iran, levels of female labour force participation are relatively high, at 50 per cent, 45 per cent, and 35 per cent respectively (World Bank 2009). Gross domestic product (GDP) does not explain it either. For example, two of the wealthiest Muslim nations are Brunei (Southeast Asia) and Saudi Arabia (Middle East). In Saudi Arabia, the female labour force participation rate was only 19.3 per cent in 2008, while in Brunei the rate was 58.1 per cent in 2008 (World Bank 2009), not much less than in Australia. The participation of women in the labour market seems to be more a matter of culture and tradition than religion. In short, as Haghighat (2005:84) argues, we need to recognise the influence of 'patriarchal states' in the Middle East and North Africa (see also Yasmeen, 2004; Moghadam, 2003). Foroutan's Australian study (2009:980) found that the probability of employment for female migrants from the Middle East and North African region is 'half that for all other female migrants'.
As a comparable finding, Peach (2006:629) found in the United Kingdom that the migrant Muslim population (South Asian) was 'marked by the exceptionally low participation rate of women in the formal labour market'. However,

Peach argues that ethnicity alone cannot explain this, claiming that the 'absence of Muslim women from the formal labor force and their presence as home makers is the strongest evidence of the force of a distinctive religious, rather than simply South Asian culture' (Peach 2006:629). In Australia, Betts & Healy (2006:39) found that female Muslim Lebanese migrants were less likely to be in the labour market compared with female Lebanese Christians. It may be the case that there is a circular set of pressures operating in Muslim minority communities in western countries, where internal cultural pressures and prejudicial mainstream attitudes are hard to disentangle. Our study showed that female Muslim jobseekers face some distinct challenges. The first is the relatively low and sector-restricted labour force participation of Australian women in general. The second is media-fuelled prejudice against Muslims that may well shape a disinclination on the part of employers to take on Muslim women, especially those who wear the headscarf.

Methodology

Female Muslim jobseekers are not a readily-accessed population. Other contributors to this journal have experienced similar difficulties in accessing 'hard-to-reach' populations (see Adeleke & Ibiwoye 2011). The larger project[1] on Muslim job-seekers in Australia, from which the data below has been taken, used a multi-method approach, involving survey and interview research methods. Interviews with female Muslim jobseekers were conducted by the second author of this article, who has a similar cultural background to the women recruited for the study[2]. The women were recruited according to the larger project's methodology. 21 interviews with women from Western Sydney and the Central Coast of New South Wales in 2009 are represented here. Interviews provide a rich source of data, yet a careful process of selection must take place for the 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).

[1][content withheld for peer-review process as it contains author identification and affiliation]

[2]Participants were recruited at community centres, employment agencies and a government welfare support agency and only job-seekers were offered the opportunity to participate. Surveys were all in English and participants without strong English literacy skills were offered assistance by research assistants.

Female Muslim jobseeker interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic coding approach, following the recommendation by Ryan & Bernard (2000) to derive themes through rigorously inspecting, coding, checking and cross-checking transcripts. The transcripts were first read to derive a number of small-scale, detailed thematic categories. Subsequently, these many small-scale categories were merged into a tighter set of themes and sub-themes to create a codebook. The codes were then manually applied to fresh, unmarked transcripts. Following the lead of Imtoual (2010: 57), thematic codes were then checked to see whether they were exhaustive, and some revisions were made before a final selection of quotes was made.

Interviewees included women from Iraq (6), Lebanon (4), Iran (2), Pakistan (2), Sudan (2), and one each from Malaysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Palestine and Bosnia. They were aged from 22 to 58 years. 13 were married, three were divorced or separated, and five were single. 11 had small children or children in school, and one woman had small children living in Pakistan. 14 of the women were refugees, three were first generation migrants, two were second generation migrants, and two were in Australia on temporary visas looking for full-time work. 11 wore the Muslim headscarf, while 10 did not.

The women's experiences of job-seeking varied widely according to English language proficiency, ethnicity and appearance, qualifications, previous work experience and whether they had responsibility for dependent children. Glimpsed in interview, their family situation, degree of piety, and cultural background also varied, forging diverse attitudes to job-seeking and differential availability for certain kinds of work. Yet they all seemed genuine in their desire to find paid work.

Female labour force participation in Australia

Australia does not have a high rate of female labour force participation compared to other OECD countries where childcare provisions are better, a greater proportion of women earn more, more women are engaged in paid work throughout their lives, and where women's paid work crosses a greater number of labour sectors. While the labour force participation rate of Australian women was 58.7 per cent in June 2009, for men it was 72.1 per cent. Australian women are much less likely to work full-time than men (54.9 per cent compared to 84.1 per cent). Women comprise over 70 per cent of the part-time workforce. Australian female workers are still tightly clustered in a narrow range of occupational sectors and professions, primarily clerical, sales and community and personal service. Most are low wage-earning sectors (FAHCSIA 2009).

Moreover, despite gains over time, Australian women's earnings remain persistently lower than those of men. Compared to other OECD countries with similar tertiary education levels, Australia has the fifth largest pay gap. Australia's ranking in the 2008 Global Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Forum was 21. The index incorporates measures of workforce participation, remuneration and opportunity. Australia was significantly behind New Zealand (5th place), the United Kingdom (13th) and Ireland (8th) (FAHCSIA 2009). Female workforce participation rates by age show a marked dip between the ages of 25 and 44, which is not evident for men. Australia has a lower participation rate for mothers with young children than Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom or the United States (FAHCSIA 2009). In other words, the female labour market that refugee and migrant Muslim women encounter in Australia is not characteristically welcoming, lucrative or even 'family-friendly' for female workers from any background. Given these circumstances, it is evident that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds such as female Muslim jobseekers will face significant obstacles and challenges (FAHCSIA 2009) in moving beyond the 'betwixt and between' liminal state of partial belonging through the medium of engagement with the Australian labour force.

Female Muslim jobseekers in Australia

According to the 2006 Australian Census, Muslim women in Australia experience a much higher rate of unemployment, at over 15 per cent compared to just 5.3 per cent for the total female population (ABS 2006). The Muslim population in Australia grew from 22,300 in 1971 to 340,393 in 2006. The population is concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne and is ethnically diverse. In 2006, 38 per cent of the Muslim population was Australian-born and almost 40 per cent were younger than 20 years old (DIAC 2006). In the 1970s and 1980s, Muslim migrants to Australia were primarily Turkish and Lebanese from poor backgrounds working in manufacturing and construction (Wise & Ali 2008). Arrivals increased under the Australian Government's Humanitarian Program in the following decades. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Indonesia, Eastern Europe and Iran became major sending countries. By 2008, Australia ranked as one of the top three countries

contributing to resettlement of refugees (USCRI 2009). Religious affiliation of refugees in 2006 was Christianity (53 per cent) and Islam (33 per cent) (ABS 2010). Accordingly, 'Muslim refugees represent one of the fastest growing communities in Australia' (Casimiro, Hancock & Northcote 2007:56). Yet the majority of Muslim job-seekers are migrants, many of them second-generation young people.

The profile of female Muslim job-seekers in Australia is different for migrants and refugees. In the 2006 Census, there were more females (52 per cent) than males (48 per cent) in the total population of migrants, attributed to a high proportion of women in the family visa category (ABS 2010). Conversely, more men than women arrive as refugees. 63 per cent of male skilled migrants were employed full-time in 2006, and 35 per cent of females. When it came to refugees however, only 25 per cent of males were employed full-time and only 6 per cent of females (ABS 2010), a very low figure indeed. Using 2001 Census data, Foroutan (2008) found substantial variations in the employment of female migrants in Australia, with non-Muslim women from the Middle East and North African region more than twice as likely to be employed as their Muslim counterparts from the same countries.

Traditionally-sanctioned caring responsibilities may impact negatively on the availability for work of some female Muslim job-seekers. Caring responsibilities were found to severely limit employment opportunities for Muslim South Asian women in the United Kingdom (Tackey et al. 2006; Aston et al. 2009). For example, young women were expected to care for elderly relatives. Women with young children avoided paid work because they did not have family members for child-minding and were disinclined to use formal childcare services or community assistance. The majority of Muslim mothers 'viewed their primary responsibility as looking after their children, with working as a secondary priority' (Tackey et al. 2006:271). Those seeking jobs were only prepared to work part-time and locally (Tackey et al. 2006; Aston et al. 2007). McCue (2008) found that some Australian Muslim women who were mothers expressed preference for fellow Muslim women to mind their children if they were to take up employment. However, these findings should not be taken to infer that Muslim migrant women might be 'less likely to assimilate into "Australian" life because of their cultural distance in terms of language, values, and practices' (Fozdar & Torezani 2008:32). It is evident from the population-wide Australian female labour force participation figures quoted above that many non-Muslim Australian women hold strong views about women not working when they have young children. We maintain that the most important factor affecting Muslim women job-seekers' ability to find work remains 'disadvantage and discrimination on the part of employers in the residing society' (Foroutan 2009:986). In considering what the data can tell us about the discrimination faced by female Muslim job-seekers when they try to enter the workforce, we turn first to the headscarf, a prime signifier of female Muslim identity.

Categorization by headscarf

It has been claimed that '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 fueling the fires of Islamophobia and making it extremely difficult for many to live their everyday lives' (Afshar 2008:412). Imtoual (2010:56) has described prejudice against Muslims in Australia as 'religious racism'. Muslim women are commonly viewed as victims of a patriarchal religious ideology, and 'those Muslim women who wear the hijab to cover their hair are at the forefront of a culture war. The hijab has come to represent everything that is unacceptable about Islam' (Akbarzadeh 2010:1). Muslim women who wear the hijab often find themselves uncomfortable in job interviews and workplaces (Imtoual 2010: 61).

Interviewees confirmed that the headscarf posed an obstacle. One woman said ruefully, 'covering my hair is a big problem for some people as they would avoid me' (H3, 49, Iraqi refugee), while another said 'I think it is the head cover is the problem' (N2, 37, Lebanese migrant). Both women refer to the reactions of non-Muslim people to their appearance. A study of Australian media between 2001 and 2005 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). Our data implied an association of the headscarf with Islamic extremism, 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). The headscarf-wearing women used emotive language to describe employer reactions to the

headscarf, including: 'afraid', 'fundamental', 'extremist', 'bad', and 'complicated'. One woman said, 'they would think I am complicated because of my scarf and they don't bother to know why I am wearing it' (M2, 37, Iraqi refugee). She implies employers are less interested in the woman herself than what the headscarf as a symbol of Islam might mean in the workplace, given the prevailing 'moral panic' over Muslims in Australia (Poynting & Mason 2007). She added, 'the scarf is not going to take away my intelligence'. Interviewees who did not wear the headscarf often said they would not mention their religious faith to employers or employment service providers.

Some women mention their accent as an obstacle; but this seemed a lesser problem than the headscarf, which constituted an obstacle even for fluent English speakers:

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 (R3, 30, Malaysian migrant)

In other words, English language competence represents an asset in the labour market, but this advantage is undercut if a woman wears the headscarf. One woman said, '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). A2 implies that employers are disappointed when they realize that she was born in Australia but still chooses to wear the headscarf.

Some women talked about the problems their headscarf caused in relation to specific jobs, for example:
Being a Muslim and covering my hair. They don't like it as they need me to show my hair. I am doing a course in hairdressing and my appearance is a problem so much. In beauty and hairdressing you need to look after your beauty and appearance. I am looking for this job especially for ladies and I would like to sell things to women but I don't feel confident because I might find myself
working with men as well (S6, 30, Pakistani, on a temporary visa).

S6's dilemma exemplifies the challenges for some female Muslim job-seekers. She is seeking the qualification so she can work in a beauty/hairdressing salon for Muslim women or from home. During the vocational training course, however, her headscarf contradicts normal practice. She does not display her own

well-cut, styled hair when offering the same service to a client. Moreover, the most readily available post-training employment will be in a unisex hairdressing salon, since few salons in Australia cater only to women. Yet, because she is on a temporary study/work visa, she cannot risk refusing a training placement or, possibly, an eventual job offer where she will have to cut the hair of men. Without salon experience she will find it difficult to attract female Muslim customers to a home hair-cutting business, since it appears many such services are already operating. S6 has a husband and four small children living in Pakistan whom she hopes to bring out once she has found work. There are no easy answers. S6's dilemma seems to embody what Edith Samuel identifies as the 'acculturative stress' experienced by some migrant women:

Acculturative stress results when individuals try to adapt to a new culture and incorporate unfamiliar cultural traits of the host society into their own. It also occurs when the process of finding a suitable job is prolonged and on-going (Samuel 2009:17).

10 female interviewees did not wear the headscarf. Some had taken it off, and some had never worn it. This diminished the capacity for others to identify them as Muslim, as one participant stated, '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). Another woman said, 'I feel sad about the women's head cover for Muslims as this would prevent them from finding jobs' (S1, 41, Iraqi refugee).

These comments confirm the claim that there is no single viewpoint among Muslim women themselves on the question of the headscarf (Akbarzadeh 2010). Considering the headscarf in terms of liminality, as a symbol of the 'other', it seems to locate an individual female Muslim job-seeker more cogently outside established social and cultural structures of identity and belonging in Australia, regardless of other labour market capacities and advantages that woman might have. Certainly, Muslim women in Australia are 'increasingly weary of being confined to it' as the main focus of their female status (Hussein 2010:165). Next, we consider other obstacles faced by Muslim women in their quest for work in Australia.

Family obligations and childcare responsibilities
Given the different cultural backgrounds of the women interviewed, different views were

expressed about women in paid work. Yet only one woman was resentful about the pressure to find paid work. She concluded with the comment, 'in our countries women do not need to work' (N2, 37, Lebanese migrant). It is probable N2 is speaking relative to the social status of her own family since women clearly do undertake paid work in Lebanon to support households. The most common view among interviewees, widely shared in Australia, was that women should not be asked to engage in paid work while they had dependent children, for example:

I think they should see the family as a group not individual as if my husband's working and I am not they shouldn't ask me to work. One working partner is enough especially if they have children (S1, 41, Iraqi refugee).

Many of the women had family obligations that impeded their work availability, especially mothers of babies and small children. For example, 'I have two kids so I couldn't work for a while' (A7, 30, Palestinian refugee), and 'I have little children 2 years old' (S7, 29, Pakistani on temporary visa). Interviewees with dependent children were searching for part-time work, for example, 'I have kids so it would be better for me to work in school hours' (G1, 38, Iranian refugee). One refugee woman used the cultural resource of the Australian vernacular to express her view: 'They need to give me a *fair go*. Like they should consider that I have a family and I need a part-time job so I could look after the kids, as I have three' (M2, 37, Iraqi refugee).All mothers of dependent children looking for work face similar challenges. Unfortunately, Australia simply does not provide adequate and affordable childcare (Pocock 2005). Costs are prohibitive for families on low incomes. One woman explained that she was looking for work even though 'at the moment I have an 18 month old baby so I am looking after him. The childcare is very expensive' (H1, 34, Iraqi refugee).

Another woman, whose daughter was working, commented that 'the childcare is very expensive. I could see my daughter, she's paying most of her money for childcare' (H3, 49, Iraqi refugee). For women whose husband had left or was absent, their search for work was particularly constrained. One Sudanese woman was desperate to find work to support relatives back home who were still trying to get out of the country. Her husband had gone back to facilitate this, leaving her to earn income while he was away, but she had to leave her job to care for their children. With few skills, she was now looking for part-time work in school hours. She explained:

I got work for last two years in Sydney in a chicken factory and I left my work because of my kids. Because I have little kids and my husband will go back to Africa and so it is very hard to work and look after the kids. So, that is why I left the job (A8, 28, Sudanese refugee).

Hussein (2010:162) writes that 'many Muslim women face a range of challenges within their own families and communities' in Australia, as well as the structural problems and obstacles outlined above. In this study, the situation of mothers with small children seeking work was identified as a liminal state characterized by a specific kind of ambiguity and acculturation. Their status is shared in one direction with other mothers of young children in Australia. However, as refugees or migrants seeking to assist the migration of family members from the sending country, their status as female jobseekers is under far more pressure. To a large extent they share this status with many ethnic mothers of small children in Australia, regardless of religion. However, the possibility of their labour market engagement is further constrained by the avoidance of particular kinds of work on religious grounds.

Availability for specific kinds of work

When it came to readiness for work, many of the obstacles named by female interviewees were the same as for men. These included lack of English language competence, lack of qualifications, skills and experience, and, for some, lack of recognition of overseas qualifications. However, more female interviewees indicated their inability or unwillingness to relocate, or to travel outside the suburb for work. Furthermore, more women than men mentioned jobs they would consciously avoid. 13 female interviewees indicated they would avoid workplaces where alcohol was served. Avoiding contact with pork was indicated in six interviews. R1 said she would not take up the following kinds of work: 'bars, butchery, cleaner or security guard'. She added, 'I know that Australian woman could be a guard but I don't think it would be suitable for the Muslim women' (R1, 25, Iraqi refugee). S1 said, 'I can't work in a restaurant. Bar is difficult for me too and selling pork' (S1, 41, Iraqi refugee). Another woman said:

I don't like to work in a bar. I have a friend working in a restaurant they asked her to cut the ham and she refused, so she left the job (N2, 37, Lebanese migrant).

In the interviews, statements about taboos and avoidance implied adherence to the tenets of

religious faith. A 2005 UK study of the barriers to Muslim employment found half of male respondents and two-thirds of female respondents stated their employment options were limited for religious reasons (Tackey et al. 2006), even though maintaining this position diminished their labour market availability in the high vacancy hospitality, food and entertainment services sector.

Our study found similar implied limits on availability for work in certain high vacancy sectors. One woman said she would avoid 'some jobs like working in a bar or club. Against my religion' (Z1, 25, Iranian refugee). R3 was staunch about this:

I don't like to work in a club. This work would be against my religion so I don't take it. Money is important but my beliefs are more important because Allah in the end got the real power (R3, 30, Malaysian migrant).

Clubs where men gather were specifically mentioned as workplaces to avoid, and more than one woman indicated her family would be shamed if she took up such a job, for example, 'model in a club? Just kidding! I do jobs that protect my family's reputation' (S5, 27, Afghani refugee). Keeping such preferences in perspective, however, , a disfavour for jobs in pubs, clubs and male-dominated work sites seems quite widely shared among many Australian women. It is really a disfavour for working with alcohol and pork that serves to distinguish those preferences as specific to Muslim job-seekers. We note that such avoidance makes finding work quite challenging for some of the women we interviewed, since not only restaurants and cafés, but female-dominated workplaces such as childcare centres, aged-care institutions and school canteens might require preparing and serving food which includes ham.

Avoiding working with men, or avoiding dealing with male clients, was only mentioned by three women, two of them hairdressers, for example:

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

It is not clear whether L2's current expressed reluctance to cut the hair of male customers derives from a revitalization of her faith, but it may well be the case (see Aran et al. 2009). 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 gender segregation in the Australian services and retail sector, or in other sections of the labour market. We might view second-generation migrant L2's statement as a strong expression of her distinctive female Muslim identity. McCue and Kourouche (2010:140) maintain that 'the social structure of Islam remains a significant site of identity and culture for Muslim women in Australia'. For some like L2, preference for certain conditions in the workplace may stand as an assertion of reinvigorated female Muslim identity. Such a stand emphasises the location of the speaker within an elected social liminality that implies heightened awareness and self-realization of being a Muslim woman and an Australian jobseeker in the same moment.

Jobseeking strategies and resilience

Full of both risk and potential, liminality carries within it possibilities for transformation and reinvention. The location of female Muslim job-seekers within a transcultural space means that there are a range of resources to draw upon in developing strategies to find work, and for mustering resilience in the face of frequent disappointment.

First, all the women we interviewed were avidly searching for jobs through agencies, the internet and newspapers, even while some of them were in training courses. At the same time, they relied greatly on the assistance and information of family and friends. For example, S1 said her husband helped her look for jobs. H3, recently separated from her husband, said her daughter and son-in-law were helping her search for work. Some were supplementing the family income through informal sector work at home. One woman dreamed of being a chef, but said, 'I have worked as a baby sitter for cash money' (H1, 34, Iraqi refugee). Some thought of transforming their domestic skills into sources of income, 'I like dealing with solving problems for Muslim women and sewing so I would be happy to do that' (H3, 49, Iraqi refugee).

Caring was another skill often mentioned in the interviews. A woman from Pakistan and a woman from Malaysia had previously worked in the caring industries and were keen to find similar work again. One interviewee had reinvented herself as an aged-care worker in the belief that she would more readily find work as a female Muslim job-seeker who wore the headscarf, 'usually I work in childcare. And now I changed the business to become an aged-care worker' (S10, 27, Indonesian migrant). Recently-arrived refugee women seemed quite desperate to

find work. Ready to take any kind of job, they implied they would do whatever was required. One recent Iranian arrival said, 'a simple job, cashier, coffee shop, *Best and Less* [clothing chain store]. Because I don't have so much experience' (G1, 38, Iranian refugee).One woman from Sudan with few labour-market skills was taking daily direct action in her pursuit of a job:

I tell myself I have to work harder to get a job. I never give up. You have stopped me now for this interview, I am on my way to look, and knock on the doors of the shops to find a job (S11, 46, Sudanese refugee).

Second, the women we interviewed seemed remarkably resilient. One of the questions asked in interview was how they coped with disappointment when they were unsuccessful in a job application. They made it clear that they relied on the support of their family and friends (see Samuel 2009) as well as their religious faith. We identified highly effective coping strategies. This matches the finding of Hussein (2010:167) who interviewed female refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan in Australia. Those women had suffered 'the most extreme brutality, trauma and grief'. Yet Hussein concludes, 'I seldom found that these women were passive or beaten down. More often, they presented as resilient, articulate and often funny'. Refugee women in our study also expressed remarkable attitudes of resilience and determination to overcome obstacles. For instance, when asked about how she dealt with disappointment, S1 said:

You need to prove yourself and keep going nonstop. I am going to do some courses. They have encouraged me to have a driving license and I did it and I am so proud of myself. I ask my children, seven and nine years old, to speak to me in English so I could improve mine. I said I taught you Arabic teach me English (S1, 41, Iraqi refugee).

There are a number of transcultural strategies and resources for reinvention named here. First, S1 points to a desirable work ethic that would apply in both her country of origin and Australia. Then she mentions the Australian government-subsidised training courses she intends to take. In the next sentence, she alludes to 'they', meaning the employment service agency which encouraged her to get a driving license, something she may not have undertaken in Iraq, and which makes her proud. Finally, S1 is enhancing her skills for a future employer by using the cultural resources of her own children

in the home to improve her English. When S5 was asked how she coped with adversity in the job market, she replied, 'I am scared of God only and nobody could scare me at all. I am so lucky as wherever I go I get the job as soon as I speak to them maybe because of a sense of humor' (S5, 27, Afghani refugee). S5 holds to the notion of being easily able to get a job because she can connect with the joking culture of Australian workplaces. As a cultural resource for resilience, another woman maintained her view of a specifically Muslim work ethic: 'Muslims they like to work. I am talking about mature women over 30' (R3, 30, Malaysian migrant). Even the oldest woman we interviewed was insistent in her campaign to find work, and suggested a number of points of reinvention to enhance employability:

For me it doesn't matter if it is a cleaning job or a factory job if it is going to help me with my son's education. If you live in a country like this you would like to prove to them that you're a good person and willing to help. You must push yourself and learn so you could meet other people and make friends (I1, 58, Bosnian refugee).

Finally, a striking instance of cultural reinvention was H1's decision to take off the headscarf to make her job search easier: 'I could see people staring at me because of my different look. I used to wear a head cover but now I havetaken it off so people could stop treating me in a different way' (H1, 34, Iraqi refugee). H1 was determined to get a job even though she was caring for young children, including an 18 month old toddler. She explained that even though her husband had found a job, they needed more income because 'we have to help his family in Iraq by sending some money. War is forcing people to beg sometimes and we don't want this to happen to our families'. Accordingly, she has made the decision to take off the headscarf to increase her employability. One imagines this was not an easy decision.

H1's story illustrates Bhabha's (1994) contention that the migrant is located in a liminal space of ambiguity and ambivalence, where identity is in flux and where traditional systems of knowledge are challenged and extended in contact with new cultural resources. The pressures on H1 come from two sides and so do the cultural resources and interpretations. She and her husband want to help their relatives in war-torn Iraq with the resources they gain from having migrated to a rich developing country. The best way to do this is through increasing their family income in Australia. However, Muslim jobseekers in

Australia encounter anti-Muslim prejudice when trying to enter the labour force, especially Muslim women who wear the headscarf. H1's decision to take off the headscarf therefore addresses the discourse of religious values in two ways. On the one hand, it could be seen as a regrettable retreat from displaying a visible Muslim identity of female piety in Australia. On the other hand, H1 is making a kind of sacrifice to gain income to rescue family members in Iraq. That could certainly be seen as laudable, given the emphasis in Muslim theology on family values. From a mainstream Australian perspective, on the other side of the transcultural binary, H1's decision to take off the headscarf could be interpreted as evidence of acculturation and assimilation. However, that would represent a misreading of her strategic, goal-focused decision-making in the liminal subjective space of the female Muslim job-seeker in Australia.

Conclusion

In our interviews with female Muslim jobseekers, we found wide diversity in the views held by different women. Some were keen to diminish their Muslim identity and 'pass' in the workplace, while others located their Muslim identity at the forefront of their proposed engagement with the labour market. In the context of increasing external concerns over the discrimination endured by Muslims in Australia, this article has considered some of the obstacles faced by female Muslim job-seekers in Australia, both migrants and refugees. While many of the obstacles were acknowledged as common to both sexes, attention was paid to specific factors and attitudes that impact negatively on the workforce participation of Muslim women. It was evident that women wearing the Muslim headscarf suffered the worst intolerance. The 11 women we interviewed who wore the headscarf reported much greater difficulties than those who did not. Other identified obstacles included caring and family responsibilities. A few indicated reluctance to take particular kinds of jobs that confronted religious regulations.

The resilience of these women in the challenging task of finding work in Australia was one of the most striking features of the accounts given in the interviews. Regardless of limitations, structural, cultural and otherwise, all 21 female Muslim jobseekers expressed a keen desire to find paid work, and were taking active steps toward that goal. They obtained income in the informal sector through services such as baby-sitting, and sought job information from family and friends, as well as through conventional channels such as the newspaper, employment agencies and the internet. Some were taking training courses or systematically acquiring skills that would assist them to get jobs. It was evident that failure to get a job was a routine part of life yet they showed great determination to continue searching.

Throughout the above discussion, liminality has been taken to refer to a state of transition located outside established structures of identity and belonging. In terms of their subjectivity, female Muslim job-seekers in Australia are understood to be located in a liminal space as they search for work. Engaging with the labour market represents an important stage for female Muslim jobseekers in moving beyond the liminal state of 'betwixt and between' in wider Australian society. At the same time, the experience of liminality provides two sets of cultural resources – sending country and receiving country – for female Muslim job-seekers to draw upon. It allows resourcefulness stemming from awareness and self-realization of being a Muslim woman and an Australian job-seeker in the same moment. It is concluded that female Muslim job-seekers are positioned within a transcultural space from which to draw resources for finding work, and for mustering resilience when their job aspirations are not realized.

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