

# **Transitioning into the Diverse Western Australian Workplace: Experiences of Muslim women**

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*Diversity and multiculturalism are significant for a sustainable workforce strategy in the context of the transforming Western Australian demographics. On the one hand, participation strengthens the economy through fiscal means, on the other it is an indicator of successful integration into the economy. This paper looks at gender diversity in the Western Australian workplace with a focus on Muslim women. Given that there are projected shortfalls in the labour force and shortage of skills in the Western Australian workforce (DTWD, 2010), and the WA government's focus on under-represented groups' integration in the workplace, what are the experiences of Muslim women? The paper looks at the economic integration of Muslim women through examining the factors that influence their transition into the workplace. It is based on a broader study looking at the social and cultural factors that play a role in Muslim women's participation in the Western Australian workplace.*

**JEL Codes:** J15, J16, J24 Economics, Gender, Minorities

## **1. Introduction**

As seen through global studies, female participation contributes significantly to economic growth and in a country like Australia the focus on boosting female participation is warranted to sustain its workforce and reduce fiscal pressure associated with an ageing population (PwC, 2007; DTWD, 2011). In general, female participation in the workforce is subject to social and cultural factors such as child rearing and other carer responsibilities unlike that of men which is based on mostly economic factors (PwC, 2007; AIFS, 2008; SHRM, 2006). Research shows for example that the age of the youngest child significantly affects the economic behavior of the mother as do flexibilities of working hours around caring responsibilities. In addition to these general factors, research on diverse women shows the complexity of participation woven with gender, ethnicity and other social identifiers such as religion (Syed and Pio, 2009). Syed and Pio (2009) point out that employment opportunities are not only availed through professional skills and qualifications, but also shaped by ethnic and religious identities as well as organizational diversity practices. In the case of Muslim women, opportunities may be influenced by the need to balance faith orientation with workplace cultures and practices. This paper, based on a study of Muslim women's experiences in Western Australia, examines the enablers and impediments that tertiary educated Muslim women encounter in the bid to enter the workplace.

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## **2. Literature Review**

Studies on Muslim women's economic behaviour in Australia are limited. McCue (2008) and Foroutan (2006) using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data show increased workplace participation of Muslim women in the last three decades. Increases since are indeterminate as at the time of submission of this paper, disaggregated data on employment from the ABS 2011 Census is yet to be released.

McCue's (2008) study looking at Muslim women's civic and social participation in Australian community life, finds it increased from 26.3 % in 1991 to 30% in 2001. This resounds with Foroutan's (2006) findings that 31.1% of Muslim women participated in the workforce in 2001. Foroutan's (2006) study assumes a significant impact of Islamic ideology on workplace participation, as well as the potential obstacles to working due to family formation; other significant variables such as human capital investment (education) migration, region of origin and age structure although acknowledged in this first study are held as controlled. Foroutan's later (2008) study shows Muslim women's employment in Australia is lower than that of other groups, but highlights the socio-cultural basis for this. He points out that capital endowments have a greater impact than religion in employment participation and concludes that variations across regions of origin play a role and that low levels of employment may be better explained due to socio-cultural reasons than religion. Foroutan's studies, using aggregate population data, focus on the supply of labour as opposed to others that propose that low participation may be due to demand factors. For example, McCue's (2008) study finds that there are significant barriers for Muslim women including overt racial and religious discrimination, stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of dress.

Studies that include Muslim women as migrants to Australia (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2005; Kabir and Evans, 2002; Northcote et al, 2006) uncover the double disadvantage of ethnicity and gender as deterrents to participation. Yet another study, Scott and Franzmann (2007) discovers issues pertaining to religious orientation faced by Muslim women in a 'secular' workplace. They identify mixed socializing, prayer times and spaces and the dress-code as barriers to working in the 'secular' environment as potential difficulties. Added to this, there is ample literature on Muslim women as part of the 'war on terror' discourse (Samani, 2010) which anecdotally, as well as shown in this study affects opportunities for employment in the Australian workplace. Contributing to this existing corpus, this paper based on a pilot study looks at factors that influence the transition of tertiary educated women in the Western Australian workplace.

## **3. Methodology**

The research was designed as a cross-sectional study of Muslim women who have tertiary qualifications and are actively participating in the Western Australian workplace or who have the skills to participate, but are not doing so. This criterion formed the basic premise underlying the study and is based on the fact that the incentive to acquire higher education is to increase productivity and individual earnings. Human capital investment theory (Sweetland, 1996) posits that the pursuit of higher education

increases or improves the economic productivity of people. The benefits of increased investment in education are a sustained increased presence in the workplace from jobs to careers (Goldin, 2006). The research question therefore was: what determines tertiary educated Muslim women's participation in the workplace and how easy do they find it to transition into the Western Australian workplace? This paper looks at the ease in entry, the enablers and impediments to secure employment by examining the experiences of the participating women.

Forty Muslim women participated in the cross-sectional study of Muslim women who have post-secondary qualifications and are employed or who have skills, but are not working. The sample was drawn from the general Western Australian Muslim community. The selection criteria included Muslim women:

- who self identify as Muslims and have a tertiary education,
- who are in long-term, short-term, casual employment or unemployed, and
- who wear or do not wear the *hijab* (the Muslim veil).

The recruitment of the participants was through various networks in Perth, Western Australia and used a snowball sampling strategy. The number of participants recruited was limited to forty due to the funding and other resources being available for only one year for the study. Rather than a generalisation, the purpose of this pilot study is exploratory in uncovering the factors that play a role in tertiary educated Muslim women's participation in the workplace. Based on the findings, future studies can explore the factors further and possibly on a wider sample scale across Australia and beyond.

Using a structured questionnaire, the participants were interviewed about their experiences in the workplace. The analysis was done using NVivo 10 software. Audio and transcribed interviews were exported into the software as data sources. Nodes for the areas of enquiry which included the ease in transition into the workplace were created. Coding from the source material was done at these nodes to reveal how well the participants entered into the workplace. Their narratives were examined for employability characteristics and facilitators and impediments to an easy transition into the workplace.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Demographic profile and employability characteristics**

Reflecting both the increasing diversity of the Western Australian population, as well as the diversity of the Muslim community in Western Australia, the women were from 24 different countries of origin including Australia. The countries of birth included: Turkey, Somalia, Malaysia, Eritrea, China, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, Mauritius, Kenya, Afghanistan, Taiwan, Canada, the United Kingdom, Indonesia and Australia. Of those born in Australia, Palestinian, Chinese, Indonesian, Burmese, Turkish/Malay Irish/Fijian/Indian ancestries were presented.

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<b>Selected demographics</b>			
<b>Age</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>	<b>Work type</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
18-30	19	Full time	19
30-40	11	Part time	11
40-50	6	Casual	5
50+	4	Other	5
<b>No. of children</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>	<b>Highest level of qualification</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
0	19	PhD	2
1	8	Masters	4
2	7	Postgrad Dip	3
3	4	Bachelors	19
4	1	One or more years at university	3
>4	1	Diploma	6
		Tertiary Certs	3
<b>Marital status</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>	<b>Work sector</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
Married	19	Architecture	1
Single	14	Community Development	2
Divorced	5	Disability and Mental Health	2
Separated	1	Education	12
Widowed	1	Hair and Beauty	1
		Health	6
		Interpreting	2
		Legal	2
		Mining	2
		Retail	4
		Social Work	4
		Taxation	1
		Hospitality	1

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The table above shows selected demographics of the sample group in terms of age, marital status, number of children, highest level of education and work sector. The analysis of the demographic data showed that all except two of the women had obtained their last qualification in Australia; many from the three major universities in

Perth; Curtin University, Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia. Of the two women who had their highest qualification from abroad, one had aviation credentials and the other an accounting qualification. The fact that many had local qualifications indicates that these (qualifications) would be more likely recognised and potentially enable the women to transition easily into the workforce. Together with good proficiency in English, the group of participants is unlikely to experience disadvantages related to language and lack of skills and training that research has shown many migrants face in the workforce. For example, Cook (2011), Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007), and Kabir and Evans (2001), have shown that Muslims together with other first generation migrants to Australia face considerable difficulties in finding work. Besides visible differences, these groups are faced with obstacles such as the lack of English language proficiencies and the recognition of overseas qualifications.

At the time of the study, all of women had been in the workplace at some stage. There was a varied representation in the type of work that the women were employed for or had been employed for, as five women were not actively engaged in the workplace due to studying or caring responsibilities or looking for work. Some sectors unrelated to the areas that the women were qualified in, were presented. This suggests that the women's qualifications and skills have transferability across sectors and they are utilizing these to secure employment. The broad work sectors are presented in the table on Selected Demographics above.

25 (62.5%) women wear the *hijaab* in the workplace. Of the rest (15; 37.5%) some said while their faith practices were important, the projection of faith was not something they deemed suitable in the public; others however, felt that wearing the *hijaab* would jeopardize their chances of being employed. Except for 4 single women (10% of the total) who indicated that they do not have family responsibilities, the rest of the group (90%) were providers and shared in the household expenses with spouses or other family members to various degrees.

#### **4.2 Transition enablers and impediments**

Both enabling factors and impediments to transition emerged in the narratives. The majority of the women (80%) indicated that their transition to employment either after studies or after a period of absence (due to family responsibilities or reskilling through further education/training) was fairly easy. One of the ways in which participants found that seeking employment was successful was through personal and job-seekers' networks. Career guides Bolles (2012) and Holland (2011) suggest that compared with other forms of job searching, networking (making connections with others) including the use of social media gets the best results for getting hired. Job openings may often not be advertised and even if advertised, may not reach the attention of potential candidates. While this study did not actively seek to uncover how many women had found jobs through networking, four participants indicated that they had found employment through personal and job-seekers networks.

A number of the women shared that their transition into the workplace was also made easy through having prior work experience. This included through work placements during studies, casual work done whilst studying, volunteering at organizations and having worked in the sector, overseas. Research (for example, Little and Harvey, 2006) shows that employers consider prior experience in hiring staff even recent graduates. While many may be about to get their first jobs after qualifying, employers would prefer applicants who have had prior experience. 10 participants indicated that they had had prior experience having worked casually or part-time while studying; one had taken up the opportunity for an apprenticeship and was able to transit into the work sector very easily soon after finishing studies: 'It was a smooth transition more like just a study environment to workplace just learning to learning skills of the trade' (Interviewee 38).

Peer and supervisor support was cited as a factor in helping to continue in the first place of employment. It is increasingly recognized that peer support in the workplace in overcoming distress resulting from personal and day to day work related issues is an important aspect of increasing productivity and can benefit both the individual and the organization (Allen et al, 1999). In the case of Muslim women especially given the contemporary discourse of the 'war on terror' which has created distrust and misconceptions about the Islamic faith, such support can be crucial to opening up opportunities and creating a socially inclusive work environment. Some participants revealed that their transition had been made easier because of colleagues and supervisors' support. In one case, the participant, a health therapist, wearing a *hijaab* found out that a parent had been reluctant about her conducting therapy on his child, but was convinced by the participant's supervisor to give her the chance to carry out the treatment: 'the *kid* (child) wasn't distracted by my *hijaab*. He actually worked very well with me, so the father saw this and said he was fine with it. So it's just proving to them ...' This, as well as other narratives exhibit instances where the initial probationary periods in employment can be more stressful for Muslim women. The anxiety about work performance can be compounded by distrust that clients or others may have about Muslims. Peer and supervisor support in such cases can be vital factor in overcoming negativity and encouraging productivity.

Participants not wearing the *hijaab* in the mainstream workplace found that, that can be advantageous at the recruitment point and also helps to integrate into the workplace with little difficulty. Many felt that though their faith was of great importance, an Islamic identity was not necessary in the public sphere, and may hinder job prospects. The conflation of media images and emerging stereotypes was a common theme across a number of interviews with one participant sharing that while it is important to her, she does not wear the *hijaab* as 'lots of people have issues with it', and she would have to contend with prejudice directed at Muslims. She went on to describe an incident in her office where a colleague not knowing she was Muslim reacted to the *burqa* issue in the news and shared anti-Muslim sentiments: 'if they wear that stuff they should truck off to their own country pretty much and they have no right to do that stuff because this is Australia...' (Interviewee 33). The issue of the Muslim women's veil tends to surface intermittently in the Australian media; often coalescing with international events such as the French ban on the veil, but is also related to local events such as the recent call to

ban the veil by an Australian politician based on security concerns when a man was robbed by a robber wearing a *burqa* (Bernardi, 2010). Anti-Muslim sentiments shared by colleagues can be confrontational and in the narratives of the women make them uncomfortable in the workplace.

On the other hand a resilience developing towards encountering anti-Muslim or other sentiments also surfaced in the narratives. Stereotypes about Muslims and Muslim women were taken in their stride and dealt with opening up spaces for more opportunities for engagement and acceptance: 'I observe the fasting month as well, which they find extremely surprising and they don't understand how I do it, but I do it' (Interviewee 22). The fact that fasting in the month of Ramadhan is total abstinence from food and drink is an unfamiliar concept for secular Australians and a struggle to understand why people would decide to go without food or water for most of the working day. Some participants have found that talking about this and other practices actually opens up avenues for interaction and understanding between themselves and non-Muslims.

A specific factor identified by the participants as a facilitator was finding employment in a Muslim environment. 11 participants all wearing the *hijaab* shared that their transition into the workplace had been smooth as they were initially employed in a Muslim environment. Participants related that being in a Muslim work environment was conducive to sustaining workplace participation as they felt their faith practices were catered for in terms of wearing the *abaya* or *hijaab*, religious holidays, times and facilities for prayers and acceptance of other observances such as dietary needs and fasting during the month of Ramadhan.

'I went from a Muslim school to a Muslim work environment, so I didn't face any obstacles. I could imagine if I went into another workplace what I would struggle with, but not really here' (Interviewee 28). In contrast, another wearing the *hijaab* and employed in a Muslim workplace found that her 'Muslimness' was taken advantage of as it was felt that she would not find employment easily in the mainstream workplace: 'You're not going to get employment with the *hijaab*... This was the unspoken thing. In fact, I heard some of the other ladies were actually told this' (Interviewee 1). This indicates that there are perceptions within the Muslim community that women wearing the *hijaab* find it difficult to find gainful employment in the mainstream workplace.

Demonstrating this, eight women shared their challenges in finding employment. These were mostly related to recruitment and the fact that participants were wearing the *hijaab* at the time of recruitment or had tendered applications with their Muslim names. In one case, the participant set up a database of the number of jobs she applied for using her Muslim name. She documented 42 attempts which gained her 2 interviews where she was turned down for wearing a *hijaab*: 'At every interview, there was a question that intimated how I would go into the workplace, that was essentially referring to my Islamic-ness' (Interviewee 1). Another participant (not wearing the *hijaab*) related how after she changed her name to an Anglo-sounding one on the same resume, she was called in for an interview and got the position she was aiming for: 'It took me almost a

year trying to find a job. The most horrible thing is once I changed my resume name from ....to ....., I actually got more interviews and more calls... It was the same exact information!'. A similar experience was shared by yet another participant who related that even though the firm had interviewed 55 people and she 'was the perfect candidate', she did not get the job 'because of what I was wearing' (Interviewee 17). Conversely, the same participant narrated that she turned down a position because of the dresscode required in a particular sector. Even though it was a position she qualified for and did want: 'I would be expected to wear short sleeves, tight pants-which I won't wear and I could not wear *hijab*'. Some Muslims may refrain from taking up employment in sectors where they have to abide by rules on uniforms that conflict with their faith principles on dresscode.

Ethnic prejudice also surfaced as a challenge where it was perceived that being of a diverse background impacted upon the interviewers' decision in who to offer an advertised position. In this case, the participant narrated that she had told a friend of Anglo-Celtic background who had graduated at the same time as her, to also apply at a firm as there were two vacant positions. Having the same qualifications from the same university, with the same number of placements, she did not get the position: 'We had the same qualifications from the same university and had done the same number of placements. In fact I had done a practicum in paediatrics and she had not, yet she got the job!' (Interviewee 39). These incidents give credence to the prevailing notions and research on discrimination against people who are visibly different from mainstream Anglo-Celtic Australians.

Workplace culture too was discussed as a deterrent to a comfortable transition. Having to negotiate prayer times, facilities and other Islamic faith practices not being recognized were some of the issues that the participants shared: 'I've never had the guts to ask for a place to pray or a little bit of extra time to pray. Maybe because I'm the only Muslim in the company of 200 people, so it makes it a bit harder for me to open my mouth' (Interviewee 10). Given the negative press that Muslims have had in Australia, it is not surprising that some women are slow in negotiating their faith niche in the workplace: 'I think that came from myself. I was too embarrassed to ask is there anywhere for me to pray, so I didn't' (Interviewee 15). The study also shows that there are gaps in cultural awareness within many workplace environments about certain sensitivities and that it can be uncomfortable for Muslims to negotiate these. On the one hand these are about faith observance, on the other, they can be interpreted as unwillingness to engage socially with colleagues: 'In Australia it's such a massive drinking culture, the Friday night drinks, the partying after that and it was really hard to penetrate into relationships... a lot of these relationships were built post-office hours, a lot of it over Friday night drinks...so I would go for Friday night drinks and not drink. I would always feel like a little bit outside...they'd view me as weird for not drinking with them, but I had to explain I'm Muslim' (Interviewee 22). Because of the fact that drinking is an entrenched part of the Australian culture, depending on the sector worked in, this may be detrimental in workplace networking and negotiating business deals as revealed here. This may mean that Muslims can lose out on economic opportunities that may arise during such work socializing.



## **5. Conclusion**

As Western Australia continues to face skills shortages recruiting under-represented Australian citizens makes good sense in workforce strategies. Given the diversity of the demographics, policy-makers and employers need to be more open to the employment of Muslim women. The findings of the study show that with investments in education, Muslim women have the potential to enter the Western Australian workplace and contribute to its economy positively. Utilizing this pool of potential labour well, requires an understanding of faith specific needs of employees. The study finds that the women in addition to factors pertaining to family and work- life balance, also have to weigh faith imperatives against profitable employment. While workplace participation decisions are based on skills, personal preferences and choices to work, there are facilitators and impediments to entry that policy makers and employers need to aware of in considering increasing the recruitment of Muslim women.

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