

WHAT SKILLS DO SOMALI REFUGEES BRING WITH THEM?

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Abstract

To get a better idea of why refugees have difficulties getting employment, we interviewed 90 Somali (35 men, 55 women) about their employment histories prior to resettlement in New Zealand and their experiences of employment in New Zealand. Close investigation of employment histories showed that most had numerous skills and that a large number had previously run their own businesses (mostly import/export). However, we found several properties of their prior skills did not transfer well to their current setting due to language, cultural, and environmental issues. In particular, previous business owners relied heavily on informal language use to influence customers and sellers; many relied on informal social networking over different countries; many depended heavily on informal negotiation; they had trade routes over land rather than sea; they traded goods specific to the region; they ran informal economies on the side; and businesses had few government rules and legal requirements to meet. We make some new suggestions that might help overcome these more subtle difficulties and form the basis for future research interventions.

Introduction

Refugees moving into western countries are well known to have problems getting employment, and are typically unemployed or underemployed (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Forrest & Johnston, 2000; Montgomery, 1996; Stevens, 1993; Strand, 1984; Vinokurov, Birman & Trickett, 2000; Waxman, 2001; Wooden, 1991). Apart from the difficulties this causes for successful resettlement there can also be serious long-term physical and mental health problems arising from chronic under- or unemployment (Beiser & Hou, 2001; Holden, 1999; Pernice, Trlin, Henderson & North, 2000; Schwarzer, Jerusalem & Hahn, 1994; Strandh, 2000).

Many of the barriers to employment for refugees are well known, and include language difficulties, qualifications not being recognized, and discrimination (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Beiser & Hou, 2001; Daly, Barker & McCarthy, 2002; Faelli & Carless, 1999; Montgomery, 1991; North, Trlin & Singh, 1999; Shih, 2002; Smith, 1996; Valtonen, 1999; Wooden, 1991). For example, although refugees resettled in New Zealand have their skills and qualifications assessed on entry to New Zealand, these assessments utilize western standards that often fail to acknowledge general skills, informal qualifications and previous experience. Overall, there is little research or literature on the previous skills that refugees have and how they might be better adapted to employment in the new country.

The present research study aimed to find out more about previous jobs and skills of one group of refugees in one small city in New Zealand. While narrowly focused, it was hoped that the methods and findings could be generalized to other refugee groups readily. As part of a longer term collaborative research programme with a

Somali community, we examined employment histories in detail, hoping to use the findings to develop new interventions to overcome barriers to employment for these and other immigrant and refugee groups. The community is very concerned about the problem, although a lot of effort goes into working towards employment opportunities and education for their children.

As well as confounding of factors in predicting employment, another problem with the refugee employment research area is that most of it has concentrated on men's employment and much less is known about women's employment (Ahmed, 1999; Chapple, 2001; Kelly, 1989; Markovic & Manderson, 2000; Morokvasic, 1993). We therefore over-sampled women in the present study to gain further knowledge about women's employment histories and experiences.

Method

Participants

The participants were 55 women and 35 men from the Somali community in New Zealand. They were a convenience sample but we aimed for a range of ages and conditions. The 2001 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) indicated that there were 576 males and 534 females between the ages of 15 and 69 living in New Zealand who identified as Somali. The sample of 90 was an average of 32.3 years old, and had been in New Zealand for an average of 4.5 years. Of the 53 in the sample with children, they had an average of 5.3 children, ranging from one child to 15 children. The women were on average slightly older (33.0 years, ranging from 16 to 69 years) than the men (31.1 years, ranging from 18 to 50

years) and had been in New Zealand very slightly less time (4.4 years) than the men (4.6 years). Of those with children, the women, on average, had more (5.5) children than the men (4.8). These characteristics are very similar to a previous sample, but had been in New Zealand about one year longer because the present sample was contacted about a year later (Guerin, Abdi & Guerin, 2003).

Procedures

In-depth interviews were conducted by fluent, bilingual, male and female Somali researchers in the language and place preferred by the interviewees. Most were interviewed at their home in Somali with notes on the questionnaire made in English. The interview notes were typed into an Excel database file. Descriptive statistics were calculated for appropriate data and qualitative responses were reviewed for themes. The interviews were conducted between April 2002 and June 2003.

The method of interviewing was to "talk around" the topics rather than to ask sequentially fixed questions. This follows recommendations by Pe-Pua (1989) for indigenous Filipino research, based on *Pagtatanung-tanong* or "asking around". The method is such that questions are asked in a natural conversational context so participants do not feel they are being interrogated. The information sheet was translated into Somali but because many do not read the language (it was only put into written form in 1972), the interviewer also discussed the sheets with each participant. Similarly, the questions were written in English but were talked through in either Somali or English depending upon the language preference of the participants.

Following some demographic questions, participants were asked about their education and qualifications, their current income and work, and details about their jobs before arriving in New Zealand, including whether these jobs required a lot of speaking. They were also asked about the jobs they had in New Zealand, and what they felt has made it difficult for them to get employment.

Results

Employment Background

Of the 35 men, 19 had no formal qualifications, six had Diplomas or Degrees (animal science, business (2), nursing, public administration, computing), one had a two-year automotive engineering qualification, and nine had a High School Certificate equivalent. Of those with no qualifications, five were currently completing degrees or Diplomas, and one had almost finished a Law degree before it was interrupted by the civil war in Somalia. Of the 55 women, 48 had no formal qualifications, six had Diplomas or Degrees (accounting, nursing, midwifery, machine operator, hair dressing, business), and one had a High School Certificate equivalent. Of those with no qualifications, four were currently completing qualifications. Two women also pointed out that they had done all the accounting for their own businesses in Somalia but there were no formal qualifications needed and none recognized now for all their practical work.

Of the 35 men, only six had their income from fulltime employment: one as a taxi driver, one in the computer industry, and four working in freezing works (usually as halal slaughter men). Overall, 83% were not in fulltime employment. Of the others, 26 had their main income from government unemployment benefits, and three from student allowances for tertiary education. Examination of part-time employment found that only 17 out of the 35 (49%) were unemployed and with no part-time employment, while one of the students and 10 of the others had part-time employment with their allowance or benefit.

For the part-time employment, the total sample had at one time or another held 59 jobs, making an average of 1.7 jobs per man. This ranged from no jobs ever up to five jobs held at some point. Considering that they had been in the country on average for 4.5 years, that some were students, and that some were older or with disabilities, this does not look as bad as the 83% unemployment would suggest. The part-time jobs included fruit picking, fruit/mushroom packing factory work, car groomer, management supervisor, meat works, car groomer, supermarket, plastics factory, working for a drug company, service station work, taxi, checkout, sports coach, chicken processing, computer labels, forklift, hall job, teaching aide, teaching/liaison person, laboratory work, and milk production factory.

Of the 55 women, none had their income from fulltime employment. One woman had household income from her husband's fulltime job, 38 (69.1%) had household income from government benefits, five from benefits for sole parents, eight from a student allowance, one lived with her sister but did not say where the household income came from, and two did not answer this question.

The women did a considerable amount of part-time work, however, with a total of 60 jobs. This was unevenly distributed (unlike the men) and about half the women (28) had never had a job at all. Of the 37 women who had jobs, this meant that they had an average of 2.2 jobs each, more than the men. The part-time jobs included: fruit picking, grading and packing (apples, mushrooms, kiwifruit, asparagus, blueberries), cleaning houses, checkout work, planting wood, and charging some board for flatmates. The main employment for women was seasonal fruit picking and processing, and many had done this hard work regularly for some years.

Barriers to Employment

Participants were asked about the barriers they had found to getting employment. A few reported no barriers:

I have a job. I believe I can get a job if I want one (26 year old man)

Most, however, reported a series of barriers. Most of the men answered that lack of English and lack of qualifications were significant barriers. Some also reported discrimination as a problem. Many of the women answered similarly but more answered that they

had family commitments and were not looking for work, and that English and qualifications were a problem.

Some thought that they had been discriminated against in getting jobs, either because of their age, their skin colour, the way that they dress, the lack of formally recognized qualifications, and their lack of English skills. More women (24 out of 55) also reported discrimination as a problem and especially that their dress was an issue for many employers.

Language barrier. There are not enough jobs around some places; it is hard to get a job because of my colour / race. (30 year old man)

Skills. Also employers have a negative attitude towards employing Somalis as they view Somalis as not good employees. (22 year old man)

Mostly I guess it's the way I dress puts them off, and some cases like my last job when I went to apply I had lots of layers of clothing but when I started working they told me to wear pants which was not mentioned during the interview. So it's like blackmailing you emotionally. I disagreed and told them you didn't mention in the contract and I'm not going to agree with you. I was lucky I wasn't fired but I don't expect them to give me a job in the future. (20 year old woman)

Many participants reported that they had family commitments that either precluded them from most employment or took up most of their time. This was more common among the women (although not exclusive to the women).

The most [barrier] is child care. I have four children under the age of seven, we are living on a single income, so having child care is very expensive, and I don't have any qualifications even if I work I can't earn more than \$8 hr. So I will not be able to get well paid job to cover my child care cost & transport. Plus with the way I dress with veil there aren't any job opportunities in NZ. (26 year old woman)

A common barrier was lack of sufficient English for working in New Zealand settings, although some women pointed out that some jobs they were not given did not actually need skill in English.

I can't even do my grocery shopping without an interpreter, how can I apply for any job? I need to learn the basic things first, like communicating in English (54 year old woman)

Simply because every one thinks I'm a walking tree who cannot follow the simplest instructions like picking blueberries; it's my arms that pick the fruits and not my mouth. I'm so angry about the whole issue of job seeking because there isn't any for me. (57 year old woman)

Not having the recognized qualifications for employment or not having experience in New Zealand situations was also frequently mentioned by both men and women.

Not having a New Zealand qualification is my biggest barrier (37 year old man with an overseas Diploma in Animal Science)

No English, no qualifications, my skills aren't needed here as there isn't any pastoralists and nomadic people (48 year old woman)

In a variety of ways, some participants reported that there were either not enough jobs around, or that others got preference over them because of the scarcity of jobs.

I'm experienced in retail business, but I can't do that because of my clothing and no opportunities of what I used to do. (52 year old woman)

I don't know, but sometimes I feel that I'm always going to be third best. First it's white-NZ, second is NZ Maori, and then I go to number 3 (21 year old woman)

Language, also not enough jobs in Hamilton, only seasonal work. (22 year old man)

Many of the women reported that their clothing was an issue for employers, sometimes for interfering with the work and sometimes merely because they were unusual for New Zealanders.

I think mostly is my dress code, as a Muslim and race because of my colour, and the employers presume I don't have enough English. And also my lack of professional qualification e.g. nurse, social worker etc. (26 year old woman)

...and again if employers think that I'm going to suffocate during summer because of my layers of clothes, then don't feel sorry for me, because it's my comfort zone (57 year old woman)

Previous Employment

The results so far suggest that some of the well known barriers are present in this population and a few other problems have been revealed. The idea was to go further and find out what skills they had in Somalia and what prevented those skills being used in New Zealand.

Participants were therefore questioned about previous employment prior to arriving in New Zealand. We found much diversity in prior employment experiences. Table 1 presents the main occupations of the 20 men who had jobs prior to New Zealand. Most of the others were too young to have worked at that time.

Overall, we have found important differences between previous employment experiences and the employment experiences in New Zealand. Specifically, many of the participants in this research were working as businessmen, in retailing, or in farming and agriculture before coming to New Zealand. The only apparent transferability to New Zealand employment seems to be the seasonal employment available in fruit and vegetable industries in New Zealand. However, there is a major discrepancy in the level of employment many would have

had in Somalia compared with that in New Zealand. That is, in Somalia many owned their own businesses or were running their own farms, whereas, in New Zealand, many are employed in menial labour jobs at low levels with little economic security.

Only 15 of the women had jobs prior to coming to New Zealand. The others were either looking after a family and household, or else were too young at that time. Many were in refugee camps for a number of years where there was no employment: Table 1 also presents these prior occupations, and the diversity of it compared to their work in New Zealand is even more apparent. Of special interest is that 10 of these 15 women had their own businesses or informal, self-employing import/export operations.

Some of these were set up as businesses, although everything was done informally:

I was self-employed, I had a restaurant where I was a cashier and supervised the daily function of the restaurant. (42 year old woman)

This particular case was a big operation although this counts for nothing with New Zealand businesses:

I was a cashier in Somalia and I started my restaurant by just selling tea in front of my house, then I built a makeshift hut where all the interstate truck drivers could stop for tea and refreshments. Then that gave me enough money to rent premises on site, I ended buying the property and turned it to a major restaurant chain. But all this does not apply as qualifications in NZ. (42 year old woman)

Other operations were completely informal:

I can't say I used to work in an office but looking after over 500 goats, 50 cows, 30 camels was more than a full time job, and sometimes in the process of looking for pasture involved dusk to dawn and being

very far from the shops and town, so sometimes I would also buy big sacks of different rations e.g. sugar, flour, rice and sell to other pastoralists who will pay twice the price (69 year old woman)

I used to sell bulk food that was not available in Somalia e.g. sugar shortage meant starvation in Somalia so I will travel to neighbouring countries and buy tonnes of sugar and sell it in Somalia and it was worth a fortune (66 year old woman)

The other women were nurses, machine operators, physiotherapist (unqualified), and one teacher:

I was mainly teaching women who have lived in semi-arid zones what crops to plant that can survive during famine. Yes, it was mainly speaking and giving directions in Somali (57 year old woman)

Inspection of these prior employment histories of both men and women shows a number of interesting properties about previous jobs. These include speaking in Somali, social networking, negotiation skills, the importance of over-land trade routes, multiple jobs and (legal) informal economies, knowledge of regional-specific trade, and the differences in legal and bureaucratic requirements. Some comments will be made about each of these.

Most previous employment involved work that needed good language skills, coupled with good casual or informal social skills. Those who had employment were asked whether their job needed a lot of speaking, and of the men, 19 said yes and only two said no (both had been truck drivers). Of the women, 13 said yes and none said no (two did not answer).

As one woman stated:

If I opened a shop in NZ and I never spoke to any customer when they spoke to me, how many would come to the shop? So for me it's purely language. (46 year old woman)

Table 1: Employment Prior to Coming to New Zealand

Men's Employment

Money transfer

I worked for the government in Somalia. I also was a farmer growing different crops

I was a truck driver transporting goods

Shopkeeper (cashier)

Selling ice

Business - retailing in clothing

I was farming

Business (retailing in hides) and import and export

Hotel Manager

I was a nurse

Area sales manager at a Company

Business: food and clothing

I was a driver (truck driver)

I had my own business (commodities - wholesales and retailing)

Shop assistant with my mother

Shop keeper; I worked in a farm

I worked for a petrol company and a business

Customs/ airport and seaport in Somalia

I was a business man (food stores, clothes)

Managing a hostel for orphans

Truck driver

Women's Employment

Nursing/ nurse aid

Business woman, had a clothing store where I used to import clothes from Asia and Middle East

Nurse and midwife

Selling things

Machine operator for eight years in a textile industry in Somalia

I had a good paying job in Somalia. I was mainly teaching women who have lived in semi-arid zones what crops to plant that can survive during famine

I used to sell bulk food not available in Somalia e.g., sugar shortage meant starvation in Somalia so I will travel to neighbouring countries and buy tonnes of sugar and sell it in Somalia and it was worth a fortune. In Somali, Kenya and Tanzania. I was always on the road for business

Sold clothes to customer and did daily intake like counting money and recording it and balancing.

I owned a food shop (dry rations)

Sold tea leaves from East African countries to Somali where it was not available and sometimes sugar from interstate

I was self-employed, I had a restaurant where I was a cashier and supervised the daily function of the restaurant.

Had a clothing chain shops; brought clothing and perfume from the Middle East and sold in Somalia

Business woman (selling dry foods that are imported from Middle East which were not available in Somalia)

Looking after [animals]; I would also buy a big sacks of different rations e.g. sugar, flour, rice and sell to other pastoralists who will pay twice the price

I worked as a physiotherapist but without any qualification in the refugee camp in Kenya just to get little income for survival

The majority reported needing to speak Somali, Swahili, and Arabic in their prior jobs. Only two mentioned English as a language they had used regularly, and for one of those this was only the use of roman numerals.

Most of the jobs involved close social networking to form import and export partnerships and customers. This requires good influence skills in Somali and a thorough command of the informal language of informal social settings. It also requires a good understanding of people

and communities and how the social organizations work. That is, it was not just a good grasp of the language that was important in their prior employment, but a socially skilled ability in informal settings. Even those who now have good English do not have this informal fluency and ability in colloquial English.

The prior jobs also show a strong need for negotiation skills which once again require a strong command of the informal languages used in the region. For example, the

participants needed to negotiate prices for both buying and selling of goods.

A number of participants referred to the importance of trade routes to their businesses. For example, goods may be bought in one country, sold in another, other goods purchased and sold again in the original country. These trade routes, being mostly over land in Africa, pose very different circumstances to trade in New Zealand, which is primarily international, but in all cases overseas. Trading over land has possibly easier access and transport than the difficulties and bureaucracies associated with international, overseas trading in New Zealand.

The buying and selling operations were also built around commodities specific to the region, with some saying how they took advantages of local demand. Many were also not in competition (at least at that time) with large multinational food supply companies selling basic food items cheaply (rice, sugar, flour, etc.).

Most participants had multiple jobs and took advantage of opportunities. Others not represented here would travel to Saudi Arabia or elsewhere for seasonal or longer work and send money back home to families. Small (legal) informal economies were common.

Finally, the participants were clear that there were few bureaucratic or legal rules about running a business. Rules and forms for starting a business were minimal, and no business or safety plans were required. One simply began buying and selling and hopefully this worked and expansion occurred.

Conclusions

This research was only with one refugee group in one city, but the questions are worth repeating elsewhere. While the participants in this study reported the commonly found barriers to employment (language knowledge, qualifications, and discrimination) closer investigation of employment histories has highlighted a number of properties of prior skills that go beyond just needing to learn a language. This indicates that lack of English skills and unrecognized qualifications are not the only problems, as outlined in the Introduction, but that prior employment experience required a number of subtle interpersonal skills and processes. These do not transfer easily into a developed country with a new language, such as in New Zealand, in which they have no, or very few, social networks in the larger population. More important than just the knowledge of English words are the social influence, informal conversation for networking, and the negotiation language skills that many used in Somalia and the middle-East to run their own businesses. The results also showed that the informality of previous employment was also very different, such as in the lack of rules for establishing and running businesses, the informal networks maintained, and in running multiple informal economies simultaneously to get an overall income rather than a salary.

Putting these two groups of properties together, the difficulty raised (in addition to the other barriers) is the

informal nature of their prior employment, shown both in their use of informal networks and conversation and in the lack of regulation of business.

The point of these properties should be apparent, that these employment histories do not transfer well to the New Zealand context. The sorts of jobs the participants had before arriving in New Zealand would require being able to:

- Network socially across a large numbers of business contacts
- Negotiate skilfully in informal English
- Arrange imports from overseas through a large number of customs regulations
- Learn new trade routes by air or sea
- Learn about the commodities needed in New Zealand
- Learn the regulations and accountability required to run business in New Zealand

This would be quite daunting to someone with experience only in establishing informal operations using their existing social networks, knowledge and language skills.

In the shorter term, however, it would be wise to find employment that could circumvent having to learn all these new skills rather than waste them completely as happens at present. In this particular Somali community, a number of new initiatives have arisen for small or informal employment opportunities. These initiatives include Koran teaching, small clothing trades, making and then selling incense, and selling some foods in a small way (e.g., one member of the community once made a large, one-off pasta import and sold it locally to Somali).

Such initiatives are good, but they suffer because they attempt to solve the problems we have outlined by building a trade restricted to the Somali community. That is, they overcome the problems of casual language use, social networking, negotiation, and informality of regulations by mostly dealing within the Somali community itself and not attempting to broaden to the wider economy in which they live. The problem with this is that it is either not sustainable as employment or else will only support a few people in this way. One cannot open ten dress shops for primarily Somali clients in one, small New Zealand city. Establishment of taxi companies among Somali has been one business initiative that has taken advantage of previous business skills but does not require an excessive amount of English or western bureaucratic skills. More research is needed to determine how well these businesses are doing and how they are coping with the bureaucratic rules of running a business in New Zealand.

Where to from Here

This research further illuminates the need for good English speaking, reading and writing ability for refugees resettling in New Zealand. The fact that language was still a problem for many of the participants in this study even after a number of years living in New Zealand suggests that this English language necessity is not being adequately met by the current services offered. Due to the adverse snowball effect that lack of English skills has, it may be worthwhile for government to consider injecting funds and resources to a range of good programmes, which are properly evaluated, to eliminate this problem.

There was much diversity and valuable experiences among the participants in this study. However, this is not often reflected in assessments of skills and qualifications of refugees. More detailed assessments are needed of skills, experiences and qualifications that extend beyond simply number of years of schooling and formal skill and qualification training. These assessments can then be used to explore more creatively the transfer and applicability of skills to the New Zealand context. While there are a number of refugee and migrant employment initiatives available, the number of unemployed and under-employed refugees and new migrants in New Zealand suggests the need for more and varied services to meet the needs of these groups. For example, small business mentoring programmes that facilitate the learning of bureaucratic rules in New Zealand and other mentoring programmes need to be supported and developed as well as evaluated and researched for effectiveness and best-practice.

It is also clear from the results here that English classes alone are not going to solve the problem of utilizing the skills already possessed. What is missing is the whole networking and informal, conversational ties that characterize small-scale businesses (Guerin, 2004). If businesses are to be sustainable in small cities, then the larger population needs to be accessed as a market, and restricting business to Somali speakers or contacts through Mosques will not be viable. One way might be for businesses to mentor specific Somali individuals with excellent English skills into the business social networks available. Others working in the Somali side of the business need not have the same level of informal conversational and negotiation skills if individual representatives could be mentored and trained. It could also be an advantage in business circles to be known as the Somali representative and this would certainly be noticed and remembered, and would be good for future marketing.

The employment issues for Somali women in New Zealand suggests the need for re-skilling programmes that are scheduled at times suitable for women who are meeting the demands of large families. The skills of managing large families and households could also be fostered through setting up child care and kindergarten programmes with cultural and religious emphasis for women who want to work but have small children.

In all, there are good possibilities to go beyond the large unemployment and sizable part-time employment status of most refugee groups, and move into more sustainable self-employment. This will require adapting to the skills possessed but finding ways to use them in a new context where at present these skills do not function as they once did. We are hopeful that other adaptations of skills can be made at a more micro-level with individual cases if followed though.

To this end, it would be useful for future research to look at interventions that incorporate the prior employment skills into a New Zealand context. This could include learning about the social organization and social networking opportunities in New Zealand, as well as practice with informal English.

Notes

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