

Barriers to work for refugee women

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Presented at

The second women in migration conference
Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research 3-4 June 1996
Wesley Centre Sydney

Introduction

This morning I will be speaking on the topic of Barriers to Work for refugee Women. As the Specialist Migrant Placement Officer for the Service for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors I am responsible for assisting many refugee women to find employment. This is not an easy task and is often fraught with frustration because, statistically, women from refugee backgrounds have the highest unemployment rate in Australian labour market. According to studies done by the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research and Darcy in 1992, unemployment rates for both male and female refugees were in excess of 30% in the first four years after arrival. Unfortunately, due to workplace restructuring and a number of other factors which I will deal with shortly, these rates are no longer declining according to the length of time spent in Australia.

Barriers at work

On entering the Australian labour market refugee women experience problems specific to all migrants, all refugees and all women. I would like to take a moment to consider the barriers that refugee women face from these angles and then discuss some of the trends which have emerged at STARTTS over the last couple of years.

As a migrant she generally has to confront problems particular to all new arrivals in a foreign country, such as language difficulties, lack of Australian work experience, difficulty with recognition of overseas qualifications, cultural differences in methods of finding employment and all too often employer's racist and stereotypical attitudes.

She must face difficulties specific to being a refugee, including, little choice over country of resettlement, sequelae of premigration torture and/or trauma experiences, the losses and demands of exile, lack of social networks, dissonance between independence after long periods of detention in camps, grief over loss of loved ones in war or through organised violence, and often chronic but undiagnosed pain. Refugees rarely flee carrying documentation proving their educational achievements or occupational status.

Female refugees experience torture mainly in the form of sexual abuse. Eileen Pittaway (1992) believes that the extent of this problem is underestimated by the general public.

The ramifications of this with regard to employment are far reaching, considering that most employers and union representatives in workplaces where NESB women have traditionally found employment are men.

Of no less importance is her status as a woman, and as such she will unfortunately experience barriers to the labour market specific to women, such as lack of access to Childcare facilities, jobs in traditional "female areas", and lesser access to educational opportunities. According to the State of the Nation Report (1993) the careers of 70% - 80% of women of childbearing age will be interrupted by the birth of a child. Women are more likely than men to be sole parents and the unemployment rate of lone mothers is 38%. In response to Childcare restraints, women tend to either move from full-time to part-time work; seek less demanding work or cease employment altogether. Newly arrived women from Non-English speaking countries face additional barriers to employment.

Backgrounds tend to opt for the latter.

Refugee women therefore carry the stresses and stigmas associated with being a migrant, being a refugee and being a woman. Valuable studies have been conducted about the experience of migration; refugee resettlement issues; gender issues; and the mental health of non-English speaking women and refugee men. They are the group who have been able to exercise the least choice over their own destinies.

The STARTTS – SMPO employment experience

In order to illustrate some of the barriers to employment for refugee women I will draw upon my own experiences. I was a Specialist Migrant Placement Officer employed by the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors and the first employment counsellor to work specifically with refugees.

I would like to examine a number of trends which emerged from an analysis of my program statistics during a one year period from January to December, 1994.

Emerging Trends

Unequal ratio of men to women

Of the one hundred and fifty seven (157) refugees to the SMPO program in 1994, only sixty seven (67) of those were women. There are many reasons for this unequal ratio; many refugee women do not have sufficient English skills to access employment related services; some are not confident enough to seek employment; women from some communities are not encouraged to work; and refugee men have generally achieved higher educational levels than refugee women, although this largely depends on the customs and traditions of their country of origin.

The difficulty of gaining employment

One of the most disturbing trends is the difficulty refugee women have in gaining any kind of employment, due to the combination of factors already discussed. Of the sixty seven (67) refugee women represented in the SMPO program, only twenty (20) gained employment. Approximately twice as many refugee men than refugee women were successful in gaining jobs. Although the men on average have higher educational levels than the women this factor alone is not sufficient to account for the discrepancy.

Lack of full-time employment

Of the twenty (20) women who gained employment, seventeen (17) of these people were hired on a casual or part-time basis. Casual work provides women with little stability, either financially or psychologically. There is no provision for sick pay, union support and the insecurity of not knowing whether the job will still exist tomorrow. In addition, it is very difficult to get a loan of money from banks with only a casual job as security so it is difficult for these women to become financially independent.

Types of industry

Of the seventeen (17) women placed in casual and part-time positions; five (5) gained employment as untrained cleaners; three (3) became cleaners; two (2) worked as Kitchenhands; another two (2) were sales assistants; one (1) as a pamphlet deliverer and one (1) as a machinist. The other three (3) positions were for an Interpreter, a Teacher and a Worker respectively. Process Work, the traditional domain of employment for women from non-English speaking backgrounds, is now quite difficult for refugee women to obtain, due to the downturn in the manufacturing and textiles industries, and the prevalence of poorly paid jobs in the service industry.

The range of opportunities available to refugee women has decreased as a result of increased competition for jobs and higher expectations of the skills required to perform many jobs previously accessible to them. During times of high unemployment, employers in the manufacturing industry can choose their workers carefully and may choose men over women. So many jobs which were previously the domain of the migrant female are now either non-existent or presumably held by men who are perceived to be stronger, more reliable and with less childcare commitments. Whilst many battles have

in the workplace for Australian born women, refugee women have not reaped the benefits.

Women's work

All the positions gained were traditional women's occupations. All except the last three required very little training and few skills.

The women's educational levels do not match the jobs

Most of the women had far better education levels and occupational experience than these jobs reflect. For example, a woman who gained a job as a Cleaner was a Teacher and A School Counsellor in South America. Another, who gained employment as a Kitchenhand was a Mathematics Teacher who, at the time of her escape from Iran was a third year student retraining as an Industrial Chemist.

This data is consistent with Pittaway's (1991) research which concludes that "professional women (who entered the workforce as refugees) were more likely to be employed in either clerical or trades positions and trades people as process workers and manual workers were likely to be unemployed". It is consistent with OMA studies (Iredale and D'Arcy 1992) which show that refugees experience greater downward occupational mobility than non-refugees. According to OMA statistics, refugees, particularly females, are underrepresented in professional, para-professional and clerical occupations compared to their pre-migration employment and are overrepresented in plant, labour and unskilled occupations.

Difficulties in keeping jobs

In most cases women leave these jobs within a few months because of the exploitation they so often encounter, although the jobs are boring and rarely lead to full time, better paid work with more responsibility. The experience of having to start over often adds to the women's sense of worthlessness and loss in society in which she remains on the perimeter.

Extended periods of unemployment

Twenty six (26) of the sixty seven (67) women represented had been unemployed for over two years at the time of the interview. This was due to a combination of factors including; poor English proficiency, the consequences of traumatic experiences impeding ability to look for work; post traumatic stress and anxiety related problems such as concentration and memory difficulties; and lack of awareness of or lack of access to available employment assistance schemes. The Nation Report (1993) confirms that the length of unemployment of non – English speaking women is longer than for Australian born women.

Risk of Occupational Injury

Some of the women in SMPO program who had previously worked in Australia had already experienced occupational or industrial injuries. One Vietnamese woman worked extremely hard as a Machinist for 13 years in order to support her family members coming to Australia. She developed a brain tumor for which she underwent surgery. She also developed a Strain Injury. Although there is no medically proven casual relationship between this kind of work and brain tumors, it is easy to assume an indirect link between the stress caused by this type of work environment and serious health problems.

As far as I am aware she has received no compensation for either injury, but the operation has left her with an impairment of memory and with concentration difficulties above and beyond those experienced by most refugees. She has forgotten the English that she learned since her arrival, and she is socially isolated from her husband and teenage children. In her home country in Vietnam this woman was Art/Law student at a prominent University with the promise of a very bright future.

English Language Training

Eighteen (18) of the sixty (67) refugee women participating in the 1994 SMPO program were placed into English training. The average proficiency of these women seen was low to intermediate many more could have benefited from additional tuition but did not enroll in classes for one or a combination of the following reasons:

- 510 hours at AMES had already been completed;

- Lack of Childcare places at DEET funded courses;
- DEET/CES may not target these women because either their husbands are employed or they are receiving a Social Security benefit other than New Start Allowance;
- Family commitments restricted their ability to attend English classes; and;
- Refugee women in outlying suburbs or in rural areas often have little or no access to transport.
- Role Reversal and Domestic Violence

Twenty two (22) of the sixty seven (67) women interviewed disclosed that they were living in domestic violence situations, the perpetrator being either the woman's husband, father or brother. My suspicion is that many more are in the same predicament but have not disclosed. A high level of physical, emotional and psychological abuse in this instance is the result of a combination of the above mentioned problems specific to refugee like situations and traditional family structures being broken down and roles reversed. Women who would never have dreamed of working in their own countries are insisting on supporting their families, especially if their husband (usually the breadwinner) is unemployed.

Alternatively, women who do not wish to work are being forced into an alien labour market by husbands, who feel that the family cannot live on a single wage. These women, many of whom may not have been in the paid labour force previously, often have no idea what they want to do, what they are capable of, or how to look for a job. They are not usually proficient in English, but are reluctant to spare the time to learn.

Industrial Reforms which exclude Refugee Women

It is important to remember that industrial reform is inadvertently excluding refugee women from an increasing number of opportunities. Multiskilling, Award Restructuring, Enterprise Bargaining and Competency Based Testing are currently being implemented in Australian workplaces. Whilst these may benefit the companies and some of the workers, refugees and migrants in general reap little benefit from them.

Refugee women are already disadvantaged in both the gaining of employment and in their ability to transfer to other jobs because they often lack crucial English communication skills needed to pass workplace English and competency tests. Workplace English tests are often used by employers to rationalise their exclusion of non-English speaking job applicants without being overtly racist. A particular company in the Fairfield area has a literacy test for process workers and machine operators which is so difficult that an Engineering graduate of non-English speaking background failed it, even though he had completed his degree at the University of NSW. What chance would a refugee woman with low literacy skills have?

Enterprise bargaining whilst seen by some as the solution to Australia's poor international economic performance, has lowered the bargaining power of refugee women who are often frightened of asking for better conditions or reporting work-related injuries for fear of losing their jobs. They will often work long hours and accept low pay and poor conditions, which enables them to feed their families and to support family members overseas.

Real Solutions

If refugee women are to achieve equity in the area of workforce participation then more opportunities must be made available to them in the form of relevant, culturally sensitive and appropriate labour market training which incorporates Childcare and a wider choice of careers. This training needs to be followed up with paid employment placements and intensive monitoring to ensure that the women continue to be trained and not exploited. Many employers still hire according to stereotypes and the supposed character traits of particular groups of people. There is a real need to continue to educate the public on the benefits of hiring migrant and refugee women.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to briefly reiterate the major points made by this paper. Refugee women are a group distri

migrant women and from refugee men. The barriers they face on entering the workforce are a combination of the in faced by all migrants, all refugees and all women. Those women who do manage to find work are often disillusioned they rarely achieve their previous employment status and often find themselves languishing in unstable, poorly paid work in the service industry. Women have less opportunities than men to improve their English which is vital for en jobs which were formerly the domain of the migrant woman; let alone white collar jobs which always require "excel communication skills". Entry into the manufacturing sector is now compounded by unrealistic workplace English tes manage to pass the tests they are in finding that their rights as worker's have been eroded by enterprise bargaining. Unfortunately, due to my experience in working with refugee in the area of employment, I cannot paint a brighter pi course there are some success stories and some people who break through the system, against all odds; but not w struggle, and these people are in the minority. Unless real solutions are sought which will integrate refugee women satisfying employment, then they will be bound to the periphery and margins of society and they will remain the mo disadvantaged group in the Australian Labour Market.

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