

Cultural and economic adaptation of Sudanese refugee migrants in Melbourne: a Dandenong case study

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Abstract

This research explores the hardships and personal triumphs of eight Sudanese men and women refugee migrants as they rebuild their lives in the City of Greater Dandenong. Caught up in the low skilled labour market segment, these people are doing their best to create better lives for themselves and their families. Our research examines their personal journeys through the Australian cultural, educational and employment landscapes.

Keywords: Refugee settlement, Sudanese, Melbourne

Background

Sudanese refugees arrive through various refugee resettlement programs offered by the Australian government. They bring with them a particular set of challenges underpinned by traumas of protracted conflicts. This requires complex settlement support and was the cause for intensive aid programs being offered to identify and support these people's strengths to enable them to establish and rebuild their lives with dignity (Pittaway et al.2006). According to a 2005 DIMIA report some 11,000 Sudanese made Australia home in 1996 and over 8,000 were granted visas in 2003/2004. Sudanese population in the City of Greater Dandenong accounted for little over 100 in 2001 compared to 2650 in 2006. This represented one third of all Sudanese people settled in metropolitan Melbourne and almost half of the

humanitarian arrivals in Greater Dandenong during that period (City of Greater Dandenong Statistics 2008).

Resettlement is defined as a process during which a refugee, having arrived in a place of new permanent settlement, is gradually re-establishing the sense of control and normality in their life. Re-established 'normality' may not be as normal as life known before the resettlement (Colic-Peisker 2005:619). There have been numerous Australian studies reflecting the problems Sudanese migrants face upon reorganizing their lives in Australia. These problems relate to refugees' finding their place in the social fabric of their new country. Recent research highlights the Importance of proper assistance with primary and secondary re-socialisation of the latest wave of Sudanese refugee migrants into the Australian community, education system and work culture (Pittaway et al. 2006; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003; 2005; 2006; Kabir and Rickard 2006).

Primary socialisation of migrants requires adaptations to a new family structure, order of authority within that structure and the disciplinary rights and responsibilities of each family member in the light of the new cultural, social and legal implications of the Australian backdrop. Dragic (cited in Farouque 2007) suggests there are many cultural gaps to bridge between the Sudanese migrants and the wider Australian community, including understanding of cultural context of family and its implications. Secondary socialization occurs in the light of wider social issues affecting the Sudanese refugee migrants' resettlement within the wider Australian community. It can be very difficult and confronting to live in a new country, learn a new language, gain training, find employment, and most importantly, feel accepted and valued (Vecellio 2007). Furthermore learning the unwritten rules of social and cultural conduct can be the most daunting experience of all.

Social and Cultural adaptation should lead to successful labour market adaptation. This adaptation is defined as securing a job appropriate to a person's qualifications, skills and experience. Rogler et al. (1991) found that immigrants low in acculturation or adjustment to the new socio-cultural environment have greater chances of suffering lower self-esteem. Some research indicate that many Sudanese refugee migrants are unable to gain entrance into the workforce and/or maintain employment mainly due to their negative perceptions of the social attitudes around them (Langley cited in Farouque's 2007). While an increase in acculturation should lead to better integration outcomes for the migrants, sometimes it can have an opposite effect and could in turn expose the person, both socially and ecologically, to the risk of increased dissatisfaction with structural inequalities within the new society. Sudanese refugee migrants' adaptation to the Australian labour market may take quite some time as they are faced with labour market structural inequalities. Existence of segmented labour markets, for example, represents almost systematic redirection of Sudanese refugee migrants into the low skilled-low paid jobs. Although some previous Australian research failed to acknowledge the existence of segmented labor markets and its impact on the refugee migrants (See Adhikari 1999; Collins 1991; Wood 1990), Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) research indicates otherwise, where racially and culturally visible migrants, and especially those from refugee backgrounds, are allocated bottom end jobs regardless of their human capital (formal qualifications, skills and experience). Their survey of three refugee groups (including Sudanese migrants) in Western Australia indicates that the recent humanitarian arrivals are concentrated in labour market niches such as cleaning services, care of the aged, meat processing, taxi driving , security and building. Apart from the building industry, these employment niches comprise low-paid jobs that locals avoid.

Several mechanisms have been identified by Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) through which the recent Sudanese refugee migrants have been relegated to undesirable jobs. These include discrimination on the basis of race and cultural difference by employers, lack of mainstream social networks that could assist in the job search and non-recognition of qualifications as a systematic barrier. The data indicates massive loss of occupational status among the few professional Sudanese refugee migrants and the existence of the segmented labour market, where racial and cultural visibility redirects these migrants towards the bottom end jobs regardless of their occupational skills and work abilities. Research into humanitarian migrant employment in other countries has found similar labour market experiences among refugee migrants (see Lamba 2003; Bauder 2003; in Canada and Rydgren 2004 in Sweden) reinforcing Colic-Peisker and Tilbury's findings.

Methodology

Through our contacts with the local Migrant Resource Centre we selected participants for this study. By using the snowballing technique we secured eight Sudanese refugee migrant participants, four male and four female. They had all been living in Australia for more than two years and were in the 25-45 age group.

We conducted an hour long semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant. The themes explored in the interviews included: Self assessment of participants' English language skills; expectations of/experiences in the Australian job market and workplace; and experience of Life in Australia (family obligations/ expectations, ethnic community support, social networking). The qualitative data collected was then thematically analysed closely following the thematic structure.

Results and Discussion

Four young Sudanese men and four young Sudanese women refugee migrants living in the City of Greater Dandenong have allowed an insight into their lives. These young people have lived in the City of Greater Dandenong for several years on average, since their arrival from Africa. They all attended the Adult English Language Classes upon their arrival to Australia and speak good English, with clear and almost grammatically perfect pronunciation.

Only three participants held a university degree from Sudan and two were lucky to gain work experience in their specialised field. All three of them studied English language at tertiary level. Two male participants also worked within their chosen fields in Sudan, while a female participant did not get a chance to get any employment experience due to having to leave her country immediately upon the completion of her studies. Instead she had gained some work experience in cleaning while living as a refugee in Syria.

The other five participants completed their primary and secondary schooling either in Sudan or while living as refugees in refugee camps and cities of the neighbouring countries. One male completed high school while in Africa but he did not have any work experience prior to arriving to Australia. A female was also lucky to complete a Certificate in Secretarial work while living in a refugee camp. However, she never got the chance to work in that field, nor did she ever hold a job prior to arriving in Australia.

Family circumstances

Seven of them are married with children; one is recently divorced also with children. Immediate families play an important role in their lives and there is enormous

emphasis given to their children. While a traditional Sudanese family living in Sudan has eight to twelve children, these young people on average have fewer children than that.

After the initial settlement process these young people turned to finding work believing that hard work and further education will give them better outcomes in the Australian labour market. Majority have by now either completed or are in the final stages of various TAFE Certificates, Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas, with an outlook towards various University Degrees. They view their current employment as support jobs that will see them through their studies. A few of them have recognised the benefits of acquiring transferable skills here in Australia which may help them contribute to future economic development of their country should they decide to go back. Juggling family obligations with studies and either full or part time employment is very difficult. They often work in shifts, taking turns with their partners in looking after the children. Few of them are aware of various childcare services available to working parents in the City of Greater Dandenong.

Language issues

Language seems to be number one hurdle in the first couple of years of the settlement in Australia. Some migrants are quite resentful in learning the new language for fear of losing their own identities. Some refuse to take part in active learning as the task of learning the new language may seem too daunting. Both approaches in the long term may lead to very limited employment opportunities for these refugee migrants.

After the initial shock of migration and resettlement, some participants took control of his situation. A male participant for instance had found himself in a new place and he made the best of the opportunities at hand. His dedication to learning English

indicates his resilience and strength to make better life for himself and his family. As he said:

We (Sudanese community elders) have to emphasise the importance of learning the language to our young and our old. I always talk to my people about the importance of being able to communicate with the wider community.

Almost all Sudanese refugee migrants are eligible for some 510 hours of free English classes upon their settlement in Australia. Seven out of eight of the participants interviewed attended and completed their English classes within the first 12-18 months of living in Australia. Majority acknowledged the added benefits of being taught not only the basic language reading, writing and speaking, but also the skills of applying the gained language skills to everyday life. Upon completing her language classes, a female participant's felt very confident in her ability to actively participate in basic job search in the Australian job market. As she explains:

We ... learnt how to look for a job in the newspaper and on the internet. They also taught us when we see a job in the paper how to call up and talk to the employer on the telephone.

Education and further study

Once they acquired the English language skills, almost all the participants turned to further studies either at TAFE or University level. Further studies usually require patience, good time management and negotiation skills as they juggle study, employment and family obligations. As such, finding the right course and not wasting time is quite crucial. All eight participants interviewed have done further studies upon completing their English classes, in order to gain better jobs in Australia.

One female participant summed up all of their reasons for going on to further studies upon completing the English language classes: *'Yes, I have to study for a better job and better future one day,'* she said.

Despite the availability of courses on offer, one of the major issues encountered by many is the lack of information and understanding on further education courses. As one male participant explains:

Once I finished English at TAFE, I enrolled into the Advanced Diploma in Business (Legal Studies) course at TAFE. I thought, being a lawyer in Sudan, I would easily get a job as a lawyer after I finish this...but soon I found out I could not be a lawyer with this course as it was more administration oriented than practicing the law...

Furthermore, many carry with them the education value system from Sudan which saw a Marketing degree for example, as providing useless skills in the job market. As one male participant said:

I got an offer to study Bachelor of Marketing. But you see, I did not know the system properly back then, and I decided not to enrol....in Sudan, Marketing was not very valued... It seemed like a waste of time...instead I chose Advanced Diploma of Accounting.

Employment and transferability of skills

Transferability of skills plays an important part of successful migrant assimilation into the employment market. This is especially true for trade skills, such as mechanical, electrical and tailoring skills amongst others. In such cases, the language barrier is not as significant as it would be in the professional jobs domain and it takes less time to adapt to the new job environment.

All eight participants had unique educational backgrounds as well as the level of employment skills they brought with them to Australia. Two of them had no valuable transferable skills. They never had a chance to work prior to their arrival to Australia. Three had professional transferable skills, such as managerial, organizational and administrative skills. The other three had gained some work experience in low skilled cleaning field.

Given their educational backgrounds, it is very interesting to see that the range of first Australian jobs included food quality control/process work, tent set up, car detailing, car assembly, factory cleaning, aged care and translating work. As one male participant said: 'I was not discriminating against what type of job I would do. I knew I had to feed and clothe my family. I just wanted to work.'

Two female participants, for example, upon completing their English classes, studied for Certificate II in Cleaning and Aged Care respectively and they found their first jobs in those fields. Both are now studying towards a Certificate III hoping to gain better paid positions in their jobs. Their aim is to eventually study Nursing and find employment in that field.

One exceptionally interesting story is that of Dara, Sudanese graduate Psychologist refugee migrant. Upon completing her English language classes, Dara saved enough money to pay for a Diploma in Hairdressing course. Dara is planning to open up her own hairdressing business one day. Having done her Australian employment market research, she has come to understand the importance of short term financial sacrifice for long term career goals. As Dara explains:

I have chosen not to go straight into working because I wanted to concentrate on getting quality, market sought skills first. If I wanted to be a Psychologist, I would have to spend many years working small jobs and studying. It would take a long time. I chose to do this and in five years time I hope I have my own business.

Dara's adaptability coupled with self-belief, optimism and persistence is most likely to lead her to a positive future in the Australian employment market.

Given their aspirations and hard work and studies, majority of the participants have either completed or are in the process of completion of Certificates, Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas or Degrees within their chosen fields. Their education has most

certainly given the skills and confidence to look for and find better employment opportunities.

Studying, working and having a family to feed are all parts of a good life balancing act. Majority of the participants managed to combine paid work and studies with looking after their children and organising childcare when necessary. A female participant for example has one child attending school and the other attending the local childcare center when she has either school classes or has to go to work. Occasionally she gets family members come by and help with childcare. She said, 'I am ok, I have my family close by and they visit me and help when needed.' Majority are drawing on both the traditional family help and the Australian childcare services, demonstrating their adaptability to the new social and economic circumstances.

Changing family values

Sudanese refugee migrants come from a culture that is remarkably different to the Australian culture. The differences range from the family size to the family members relations between each other and with the wider community. Traditionally, Sudanese families living in Sudan have always been large, some having between eight and twelve children. Australian housing infrastructure can not support such large families making it hard for the arriving Sudanese refugee migrants to find proper and sufficient accommodation. One female participant expressed the magnitude of the problem:

A lot of my friends could not find proper housing in Dandenong. They have been forced to move into country areas where there are more houses available for rent...and the rent is cheaper. With the money they get from the Government for themselves and their children, they can live well for now.

Finding proper accommodation in Dandenong is a fundamental problem that has seen many Sudanese families move out to more remote areas. This made many young

Sudanese families to rethink about their traditional family values. The participants in this study had on average about three children and most of them indicated their worries about having a large family in Australia.

Traditional lifestyles are hard to change, especially for the first generation migrants coming from a totally different social context with varying rules and expectations. One shattering story about the impact of cultural changes comes from Gora, the young mother of three. Gora migrated to Australia with her husband and two children. A few years later she left her husband due to his growing problems with alcoholism and abuse. Prior to their separation several elderly members from the Sudanese community became involved.

When the older members of our community heard about our problems, they called us to have a talk with them. We all got together and we discussed the problem. I told them my husband is not good husband. He drinks in front of our children and will not stop drinking. I do not want to live like that. The elders then asked him if he agreed to leave and he said ok. He went to live with his mother a few suburbs away from us.

Gora's marriage breakdown illustrates how a changed cultural and economic environment impacts on a stable family life. This situation reflected a strong shift in culturally expected values and behaviour experienced by both Gora and her husband. While the Islamic Sudanese culture strictly forbids alcohol consumption, the Australian culture views consumption of alcohol as a personal choice. These migrants are experiencing large tremors in their fundamental family beliefs. The very notion of family versus the individual is being challenged and reconstructed in the new society they now belong to. As one male participant highlighted:

We must remember how hard it is for the Sudanese families. They have lived through and carry with them three different cultures. Their own culture from Sudan, plus, the refuge country's culture, plus, the Australian culture. It is very hard and confusing for the families!

Conclusion

Our study highlights the Sudanese refugee migrants' efforts and extraordinary persistence to adapt to life in Australia. Many of them face daily struggles in balancing work, studies and work and family commitments. The findings in our study confirm their hardships in learning the English language, finding appropriate work and educational courses as well as balancing their traditional family structures in the context of new cultural and economic circumstances.

Lack of language knowledge can translate into lack of employment and or educational opportunities. For those migrants who do acquire language skills, further educational opportunities arise alongside with better employment outcomes. However, one of the issues highlighted by our study was the lack of information aimed at these refugee migrants on various educational courses and their relevance in the Australian workplace.

Given that the Sudanese refugee migrants have few transferable employment skills, they are being subordinated into low paid and low status jobs. This systematic barrier to better employment opportunities can be overcome by further education. Another issue facing these migrants is their lack of Australian work experience. This is more evident in the semi-professional fields, such as administration and community services.

Balancing family obligations with education and work is never easy, especially in families with more than one child. The Sudanese refugee migrants have recognised that traditional family size and the modern western lifestyle are not easily managed. One of the main issues of concern is the lack of support for those families in terms of proper housing and community support. All the female participants discussed the childcare juggling and the importance of strong family support

Further cultural shifts are also becoming more evident. Stories of divorce and family issues are now emerging as the Sudanese refugee migrants strive to adapt to the Australian way of life. Better family support also comes from having a strong ethnic community. The Sudanese community in Australia is now growing. All available resources should be committed to providing better support to their emerging community as we recognize the value of social networking from all of us. Several issues that emerged through my study need further research, such as mental health and closer look at the impact of cultural changes on the youth in traditional Sudanese refugee family settings.

Several issues that emerged through our study constitute an original contribution to the our knowledge and understanding about this particular group of refugee migrants. This study has shown that there is a lack of information aimed at enhancing the Sudanese refugee migrants' understanding of educational system values and further studies options. The Sudanese refugees experience rapidly changing and challenging family circumstances that have significant impact on their traditional family values. For instance, the new economic autonomy experienced by Sudanese refugee migrant women and their youth impact on family relations.

Further research can be done on the issues in the field of mental health support and the impact of cultural changes on the youth in traditional Sudanese refugee family settings. It is important to note that although issues explored in this study can generally be applicable to other refugee migrants, the particular socio-cultural background of each refugee group is crucial to understand their respective experiences in Australia. We recognise that refugee migrants come from different cultural, economic and political backgrounds, carrying with them unique resettlement issues. There is no uniform solution to their problems. Therefore it is important to recognise

that the findings of this may not be applicable to similar groups from elsewhere in the world. Further, as this research study was completed as part of an Honours Thesis, the sample size could not be larger. Thus to get an even more comprehensive understanding of the situation of Sudanese refugee migrants, we need to extend this study to cover the variation with the Sudanese refugee migrants in Melbourne.

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