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Be proactive or fit in? Challenges of Muslim female student employment

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Abstract: For many years now, there have been calls for policy makers to appreciate the needs of ethnic minority groups in an employment context. Reportedly, there also is goodwill for change to this end by the employers. However, the lack of wider opportunities for ethnic minority students is a concern to this day. Within the ethnic minorities, there are subsets that have varying characteristics and therefore varying needs and challenges with regards to employment. This research aims to understand the employment challenges of one subset of the ethnic minority groups: Muslim female students. Using a qualitative research methodology, it was identified that Muslim females fall into two categories of proactive and fit in. Based on the findings, suggestions for addressing some of these challenges are also highlighted.

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Context

There have been calls for policy makers to appreciate the needs and diversity of ethnic minorities in an employment context (Dhaliwal, 1998) and researchers have reported that goodwill exists among employers to create change (Bowes & Sim, 2001). Yet, over a decade on, employment challenges for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups still exist today despite growing attention to the representation of BAME groups in the workplace (Hammond et al. 2017). Racial stereotypes and a lack of cultural awareness are some of the issues facing BAME employees (Kim et al. 2010; Brathwaite, 2018). Some researchers have found that an ethnic name, regardless of one's nationality, is enough to generate unequal treatments (Drydakis, 2017).

When it comes to equality in the workplace, females face challenges in certain roles which are well documented (Rattan et al. 2017). When one adds ethnic minority and religion to the mix, the challenges faced by female members of the workforce are exacerbated. Kamenou et al. (2013) found that there is low awareness of the unique position of ethnic minority women in employment and society. Furthermore, informal roles and contributions of women in general and Muslim women in particular need to be understood and appreciated (Shahid et al, 2017). More research is needed to understand the unique challenges faced by various groups of BAME females in the context of

employment.

This research aims to explore the challenges perceived by Muslim female students with regards to future employability. Understanding these challenges will further our understanding of this subset of BAME audience and will also ensure effective strategies to deliver employability support.

Method

A phenomenological research approach of trying to understand the world of careers through the perspective of the participants using qualitative data was used in this study. Participants were free to talk about their experiences and perceptions without judgement or questioning. Probes were only used as a means of gaining further clarification or information rather than questioning their understanding or experience. Data was gathered from students using three focus groups (12 students in total) and three in-depth interviews. Additionally, 3 interviews with women in employment were also used. The data were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed to identify the perceptions of the participants.

Findings

The findings from this research showed that the challenges faced by the female Muslim students fall into two categories: personal and family challenges, and job sector challenges. The perception of the workplace was often one of hostility towards Muslim females. They perceived that they will be disadvantaged due to them not 'fitting-in' to the practices in the workplace. Similar to the findings of Hammond et al (2017), the students broadly fell into two categories when it comes to perceived career opportunities: proactive self and fit in.

Those who were proactive had an 'it's up to me' attitude. These students felt that, regardless of the challenges they may encounter, the locus of control with regards to careers is themselves. If they work hard and achieve well in their education, they believed that they can build a career for themselves. Those with a fit in perception felt that they would need to change their ways and, in some ways, their identities if they are to build and maintain a career. The women in employment also concurred to these two categories. Those who were proactive felt that they need to work harder for longer to prove themselves within their fields. Those that felt they need to fit in expressed their conflict between identity and values and what they perceived as being expected of them in a work context.

It was interesting to note that both of these groups of students and women in work expressed a lack of self-confidence albeit to varying degrees. Those that were proactive felt that they may not have the skills and attitudes needed to progress in their careers as they ought to. The fit in group felt that they lack the confidence to go into certain types of job roles that may require them (based on their perceptions) to significantly change their values and identity. It was also evident that, with the students, these perceived challenges and lack of confidence is proving a barrier to them engaging with the university employment services. They often felt that their needs and views will not be recognised or understood. This is intensified by a lack of visible Muslim females in the workplace that

they encounter. In the vast majority of cases, industry speakers and mentors at the university tend to be white men or, in rare cases, women. This has contributed to confirming these students' perceptions of certain sectors and job roles not being the right one for themselves.

Implications and Future Research

The findings from this research provide some insight into the challenges faced by Muslim female women when it comes to their careers. The challenges identified here are often shared by women in general and ethnic minorities in particular. However, there are nuances to these challenges that are unique to this particular subset of BAME which need to be taken into consideration by careers services in Higher Education institutions. The research also shows that educational institutions have a key role to play in ensuring that the female Muslim students are coached to deal with the specific challenges they face in the workplace as well as actively providing them with role models from various industries. Educating employers about the cultural differences within this group cannot be underestimated. Reverse mentoring with employers and especially senior managers, as well as tailored coaching programmes for these students, are some ways to address these issue.

In the future, research needs to include a wider sample from specific industries to identify whether the challenges faced differ based on the industry. Widening participation of BAME groups in the employment market would also benefit from further research into challenges faced by specific subsets within BAME. This will help segment the BAME students based on the common challenges faced rather than ethnic groups (as is more common). Subsequently, this will aid in developing effective services for various BAME groups leading to enhanced career opportunities.

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