

Project Summary for IAL Website

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Project Title:	Socio-cultural factors shaping Singaporean Malay-Muslim workers' decisions regarding employment and training
Project Number:	GA20-02
Year of Approval:	2021
Funding Source:	WDARF
Objectives and intended outcomes of the project:	1. To identify and examine specific socio-cultural factors that serve to frame the decision-making processes of working-age adults from the Malay community with regards to enhancing their individual career and work life. 2. To recommend solutions to address the challenges posed by these factors.
Project Team	
Principal Investigator:	Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari
Summary of Project (up to 300 words)	
This project focuses on the socio-cultural dynamics which serve to motivate or inhibit workers from the Singaporean Malay-Muslim Community (MMC) from actively seeking pathways to enhance their career and work life. With funding received from the Workforce Development Applied Research Fund (WDARF), the study is based on the hypothesis that individuals face different sets of challenges at various stages of their lives. Attention will be placed in analysing MM workers' personal aspirations and strategies; present or lack of; that go towards achieving their career objectives. For instance, the research will look into the kind of personal considerations before choice is made by individuals on participating in training programmes or activities that serve to add professional value for themselves. This research project will utilise a mixed-model methodology in terms of data collection. The first two approaches will involve the gathering of qualitative data by way of focus group discussions and life history interviews. The purpose of these two approaches is to identify specific socio-cultural norms which play a part in a MM individual's choices affecting his or her work life. Results from these two data collection exercises will enable the design of a survey questionnaire based on the identified socio-cultural factors that is in play. The survey - the third and final approach to data collection - will target a sampling size of 1000 MM working-age respondents. This exercise is intended to measure the extent and frequency in which these indicators impact groups of MM workers based on specific criteria such as age, gender and socio-economic background. It is hoped that the findings from this research project will enable stakeholder organisations to put in place policies and intervention programmes to enhance the potential for workers from the MM community to contribute optimally to the nation especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.	
Summary of Project Findings, Deliverables and Impacts (up to 500 words)	

Executive Summary (Updated)

This study investigated the socio-cultural factors that shape the employment and training decisions of Singapore's Malay-Muslim (MM) workers. Commissioned by SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) and supported by the Workforce Development Agency Research Fund, the project was conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies between June 2021 and February 2023. Its purpose was to identify the cultural, social, and structural conditions that influence MM workers' aspirations, barriers, and strategies in relation to career advancement, and to propose interventions that enhance their contributions to Singapore's economy, particularly in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

The research adopted a mixed-methods design comprising 13 focus group discussions, 20 life history interviews, and a survey of 1,007 working-age MM individuals. This robust methodology provided both qualitative insights into lived experiences and quantitative measures of prevalence, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how factors such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic background intersect to shape workers' opportunities and constraints.

Key Findings

1. **Perceived "Glass Ceiling"**
Many participants reported experiences of inequality, which they described as invisible barriers preventing them from advancing in their careers. Survey data revealed that 20.7 per cent of respondents felt racially discriminated against at work, with covert racism, stereotyping, and gendered expectations contributing to these ceilings. Female MM workers, in particular, faced the dual challenges of gender bias and family responsibilities, which constrained their career mobility and opportunities for upskilling. Religious considerations, such as the wearing of the tudung or access to prayer spaces, also influenced perceptions of workplace inclusion.
2. **Role of Social Capital**
The study highlighted the decisive role of social networks in both job acquisition and skills upgrading. Respondents frequently secured employment through personal contacts, and 67.2 per cent reported being encouraged by friends or family to participate in training. However, the uneven quality of networks meant that some workers were channelled into saturated or less lucrative sectors. The lack of visible role models further limited aspirations among younger and lower-educated respondents.
3. **Career Planning and Guidance**
Career planning practices were uneven and often reactive rather than strategic. Only 15.5 per cent of survey respondents reported studying for jobs aligned with their current careers while in school. A significant 77 per cent had never approached career coaches, with many citing lack of awareness, time, or perceived relevance. Where accessed, the quality of coaching services was inconsistent, reducing their effectiveness as a support mechanism.
4. **Aspirations, Contentment, and Motivation**
The findings also reflected a tension between contentment and aspiration. Some respondents expressed satisfaction with stable, modest employment, linking this to Islamic notions of *rizq* (sustenance) and *barakah* (blessings). Others, especially younger workers, voiced frustration at limited mobility and saw upgrading as essential for progression. Educational attainment strongly influenced these outlooks, with degree holders demonstrating greater confidence in navigating opportunities compared to those with secondary or ITE qualifications.

Conclusion and Implications

The research underscores the interplay of socio-cultural norms, systemic barriers, and personal choices in shaping MM workers' employment trajectories. While a significant portion of the community demonstrates resilience and aspiration, structural impediments, particularly discrimination, limited exposure, and uneven access to guidance, continue to restrict upward mobility.

The study recommends targeted strategies to (i) dismantle perceptions and realities of the "glass ceiling" through workplace inclusion policies, (ii) strengthen MM workers' social capital via structured mentorship and exposure programmes, and (iii) embed career planning as a valued foresight practice from early schooling through adulthood.

By addressing these areas, Singapore can better harness the potential of its youngest demographic group and ensure equitable opportunities for MM workers to contribute meaningfully to national progress.