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Unemployed Female Translators in Saudi Arabia: Causes and Solutions

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude montre que 90% des Saoudiennes qui ont obtenu un diplôme entre 1990 et 1996 ne travaillent pas comme traductrices malgré qu'il y ait des emplois disponibles dans le domaine. En fait, beaucoup d'entre elles affirment que les emplois offerts ne sont pas adaptés en matière de conditions de travail, d'heures, de qualifications, de politique du personnel, de salaire ou de bénéfices offerts alors que d'autres blâment la tâche et les responsabilités, le manque d'information et de motivation à chercher un emploi, sans compter leurs obligations sociales, familiales et culturelles.

BLOC-NOTES

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude montre que 90 % des Saoudiennes qui ont obtenu un diplôme entre 1990 et 1996 ne travaillent pas comme traductrices malgré qu'il y ait des emplois disponibles dans le domaine. En fait, beaucoup d'entre elles affirment que les emplois offerts ne sont pas adaptés en matière de conditions de travail, d'heures, de qualifications, de politique du personnel, de salaire ou de bénéfices offerts alors que d'autres blâment la tâche et les responsabilités, le manque d'information et de motivation à chercher un emploi, sans compter leurs obligations sociales, familiales et culturelles.

ABSTRACT

The present study found that 90% of female Saudi translators who graduated between 1990 and 1996 are not working as translators. Although translation jobs are available in hospitals, translation bureaus, and embassies, many graduates find the jobs open for women unsuitable because of working conditions, stringent qualifications, staff policies, salaries and benefits. Others disliked the nature of the work and cited insufficient information about employment opportunities, lack of motivation, and familial, social, and cultural factors as reasons for unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, female employment in government ministries, universities, hospitals and private businesses is increasing. Suitable women's work is no longer limited to teaching, nursing and household maintenance. Translators are in demand in government ministries, international organizations, private businesses, embassies, banks, research centers, and translation bureaus. However, female graduates from the College of Languages and Translation have access to a very restricted range of jobs. Of 130 female translators who graduated between 1991 and 1996, only about 10% work as translators. This study aims to shed some light on the translation labour market in Saudi Arabia and the factors that drastically limit the recruitment of female translation graduates for translation jobs. Assessing the way female translators are integrated into the translation labour market is an important component of the study, as its overall aim is to identify current barriers to increasing both the number and quality of translation jobs available for women. The study concludes by considering remedies for the underemployment of female translators.

Prior to this study, no research into the employment potential of female translation graduates in Saudi Arabia had been conducted. The primary purpose of this study is to examine hitherto unreported difficulties that female graduates encounter as they enter the translation labour market. The study examines the demand (labour market) and supply (candidate) factors responsible for the underemployment of female translators in both public and private sectors, and records perceptions of employment held by the graduates themselves. Demand factors such as the sectorial and geographic location of jobs, information about jobs, recruitment techniques, qualifications required, staffing policies, employee benefits, translator's duties and responsibilities, as well as working conditions, will all be examined. Supply factors considered include job search techniques, attitudes towards work, preparation for the translation labour market, ability to cope with job duties and responsibilities, familial and social attitudes toward female employment in translation, and job preferences and expectations.

EMPLOYABILITY

According to Arthur (1991), Plumply (1991), Herriot (1989), Brennan & McGevor (1988), Pearson & Walsh (1983), Hacket, Schofield & Armstrong (1982), Walker (1982), Platt (1983), Ungerson (1983), and Schnider (1976), employability depends on the level of overall demand (whether created by central planning or by labour market forces) and the opportunities available for particular employees. Factors contributing to the demand for employees are: employers' perception of productivity, the relative cost of employees, recruitment and retirement policies, the place of work, the physical and mental energy involved, the advantages and disadvantages of the job, the work schedule; the experience or skills required, the employee's tasks, training and development opportunities, contact with other people, and salary. Other important variables are the recruitment techniques used by employers, such as internal search, unsolicited applications, recommendations and referrals, job fairs, employment agencies, search firms, advertising, and campus recruitment. The larger environment in which organizations operate infuences the way employers design jobs

and supervise their staff. Economic and social conditions, competition, the community, and government regulations all play an important role.

On the other hand, employability depends on individual and personal characteristics that limit the sources of recruitment. These characteristics include: age, family background and environment, level and type of education, technical or professional qualifications, previous work experience, specialized training, appearance, manner, speech, intelligence, as well as sense of purpose, general outlook, and availability of transportation (Arthur 1991; Plumply 1991; Herriot 1989; Brennan & McGevor 1988; Pearson & Walsh 1983; Hacket, Schofield & Armstrong 1982; Walker 1982; Platt 1983; Ungerson 1983; Schnider 1976).

INSTRUMENT

To identify the demand and supply factors that influence the underemployment of female translators in Saudi Arabia, a questionnaire survey was developed for the purposes of the study. First, an exploratory questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions was administered to a sample of 25 female graduates to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties that female translators encounter while looking for a job, and to obtain a knowledge platform on which to base the design of the questionnaire. Subjects were asked the following questions: Do you think that translation jobs are limited for females? Why? Where did you look for a translation job? Why could you not find a job as a translator? What are the requirements for working in the public and private sectors? Where would you/would you not like to work? Do you think that you are qualified to work as a translator? Why? What benefits would you like to get? What factors would help female graduates to obtain a job?

To categorize answers to the above questions, a list of demand and supply variables was made. A range of information specifics allied to each demand or supply variable was defined on the basis of responses collected from the exploratory questionnaire. A checklist consisting of a number of statements was developed. The questionnaire was given to four colleagues, then tried out on five female translators to determine whether the items measured the desired demand and supply factors influencing the unemployment of female translators. The subjects were instructed to read each statement and respond to it with "yes" or "no". The items were revised on the basis of the results of the pilot test. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of a list of statements covering the following:

1. Background information on respondents: age, graduation date, GPA, marital status, address and employment status.

2. Demand factors involved in the process of recruiting female translators for translation jobs in the public and private sectors: types of employer, suitability of translation jobs available for women, qualifications required, job duties and responsibilities, hiring policies, employment benefits, pay comparisons, working conditions and job information (advertising).

3. Supply factors reflecting individual and personal characteristics: suitability of translation jobs for women, parental attitudes to work, candidates' attitude towards work, preparation for the labour market, ability to cope with job duties and responsibilities, where graduates prefer to work, where candidates looked for a job, and job preferences and expectations.

4. Factors related to the larger environment: social attitudes towards translators, social and economic conditions, competition, community, and government regulations.

SUBJECTS

The population of female translators consisted of 130 translators who graduated between Fall 1991 and Fall 1996. Graduates were followed up and contacted to assess their employment position. It was found that only 10% work as translators, whether full or part time. The population of female graduates not employed as translators consisted of 117 subjects, 5% of whom are now graduate students, 75% of whom work as teachers, and 10% who do not work at all. Those who participated in the preliminary questionnaire and the validation of the questionnaire were excluded. The final sample consisted of 87 unemployed female translators. All subjects graduated from the Institute of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and hold B.A. degrees in English/Arabic and Arabic/English translation. They all completed 20 hours studying Arabic, 28 hours studying English, and 44 hours (34 required and 10 elective) studying translation. The questionnaire was mailed to all 87 unemployed female graduates. Only 81 questionnaires were returned and subjected to the final analysis.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A master list of all unemployed translation graduates was obtained. Five translation graduates participated in the administration of the questionnaires as they had access to the subjects. The questionnaires were administered individually. Open questions that describe graduates' attitudes, opinions or some aspects of their behaviour were categorized. The frequency and percentage of subjects who responded to each item were calculated. Split-halves reliability co-efficient was calculated. The

correlation co-efficient between the odd items and the even items was calculated. The Spearman-Brown formula was used. The reliability co-efficient was .78.

RESULTS

Findings of the present study are reported in Tables 1-7. Table 1 shows that translation job opportunities are available in both the public and private sectors. Female graduates indicated that translators are more in demand in hospitals (87%), translation bureaus (45%) and embassies (36%). Yet, 86% of the graduates indicated that translation jobs in both sectors are unsuitable. Working conditions (97%), qualifications required (89%), staffing policies (88%), benefits offered (73%), job information (72%), and job duties and responsibilities (39%) were regarded as unsuitable.

Findings of the present study show that unemployment of female translators is affected by the interaction of personal characteristics with employer policies and preferences. Tables 3 and 4 show that most of the qualifications required for the employment of translators by the private and public sectors do not match those of female graduates. In Table 3, 89% stated that employers in the private sector require that candidates have at least three years of previous work experience. A percentage of 84 stated that hospitals and embassies, for instance, require specialization in medical and diplomatic translation, as well as an ability to translate simultaneously (88%). Another 73% stated that translation bureaus require the ability to translate texts in different fields. Table 4 shows that female graduates feel they are not sufficiently prepared for the translation labour market: 89% stated they have difficulty with simultaneous translation because they took only one course in their preparation program and are insufficiently trained. Since the translation program is general, 84% feel they are inadequately prepared for medical or diplomatic translation. Written translation is difficult for 39%, 21% have difficulty with English/Arabic translation, and 14% find the texts they are required to translate difficult.

Table 3 also shows that private sector recruitment policies do not encourage the employment of female graduates, 77% of whom stated that employers prefer men because they believe women do not work as many hours per week, and do less shift work and night work. Graduates also felt that vacancies are filled by anyone proficient in English regardless of their degree (57%), that openings are filled by foreigners (16%) and that personal connections affect selection (14%). Non-Saudi subjects (11%) were not hired by the public sector because of policies prohibiting their recruitment.

Working conditions in translation jobs are often unsuitable for Saudi female graduates. Many graduates refuse translation jobs because workplaces in the public and private sectors, particularly hospitals, employ men and women in the same setting. Table 3 shows that 97% of female translators would prefer to work in a women's department because this allows the minimal social contact with males required by Saudi customs. Working hours made jobs unsuitable for 71%. In the private sector, particularly hospitals and translation bureaus, translators are required to work long hours: either one shift from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., or two shifts from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 to 9 p.m. Another 24% have difficulty commuting to work and 11% indicated that no translation jobs are available in their hometown (Tables 4 and 3, respectively).

In addition, employment benefits offered by the private sector are unsuitable for female translators. In Table 3, 30% indicated that translators are not well paid. The wages are not comparable to those of teachers, or in the public sector, and 43% stated that translation majors with B.A. degrees are paid the same as holders of high school diplomas who never studied translation. No retirement plans, incentives or bonuses were offered for 43% of private sector translators, and 22% stated that opportunities for added experience, such as training abroad, are not offered for women. Transportation between work and residence is not provided for 16% who have difficulty commuting to work, and another 16% state that new graduates are not financed by publishers.

Findings indicate that some female graduates enter unemployment voluntarily. Others feel inadequately prepared for the translation labour market and cannot cope with job duties and responsibilities. Table 4 shows that 23% do not want to work as translators; 61% would like to but refuse to work at hospitals and embassies; 80% feel they are not proficient in English; 30% feel that translation work is too strenuous; 27% feel that they cannot meet deadlines; and 14% feel that the texts for translation are too difficult.

The underemployment of female translators may also be due to a lack of information about employment opportunities, as well as insufficient searches for translation jobs by graduates. In Table 3, 72% indicate that jobs are not advertised on radio and television, nor in newspapers and magazines. As a result, 35% do not know if translation positions are available (see Table 4). In Table 5, 62% of the graduates applied to the Saudi Department of Civil Service, even though the government agency does not hire translators, a fact acknowledged by 61% of the graduates (Table 3). Another 19% sought employment using forms of unsolic-

ited application such as walk-ins, call-ins, and write-ins. Searches for employment using private employment agencies, candidate registers, the press and media, university recruiting services, government agencies as well as direct mail and billboard advertising, were not utilized at all.

The family unit is highly treasured by Saudi culture and parental and social attitudes strongly influenced graduates' ability to work as translators. Table 4 shows that 39% work as teachers or are unemployed because their families forbade them to work as translators. Another 84% stated that their families did not allow them to work in the private sector, at hospitals, embassies and corporations because of concerns about contact with men and working hours that might interfere with family obligations.

Certain social conditions, government regulations and culture of Saudi Arabia, all limit recruitment for employment and acceptance of translation jobs by female graduates. In Table 6, 68% stated that society does not recognize women translators. Another 42% stated that employers had not heard of translation graduates because translation is a new major at university. Teaching was thought to be more acceptable for women than translation by 22% of graduates, as women are expected to gravitate to that occupation as well as to nursing and household maintenance. Another 78% felt that social and Islamic considerations meant women should work in women-only occupations like teaching; 5% pointed out that women are not allowed to meet delegates or work as conference interpreters.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that 90% of Saudi female graduates do not work as translators because they think that translation jobs available for women are not suitable in terms of working hours, salary and benefits, qualifications required, staffing policies, job duties/responsibilities, and employment information. Translation jobs open for women do not meet their preferences and expectations. Results in Table 7 reveal that 84% prefer to work in the public sector where job security, pension and employee benefits are better; 41% prefer a salary comparable with that of teachers; 62% prefer long vacations like teachers; 71% prefer short working hours from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.; and 97% prefer a workplace without men. Therefore, increasing job opportunities for female graduates will require significant labour market adjustments. These include adjusting hiring practises and employee policies, improving working conditions, wages and benefits, and offering more job information. The creation of women's departments in corporations and government ministries, and the introduction of part-time work in the private sector would increase job opportunities, as would comprehensive legislation prioritizing the hiring of female university graduates with translation degree.

When hiring translators, employers should use every type of advertising medium to reach prospective employees — magazines, television, radio, direct mail, billboards, transit, local newspapers and specialized professional or trade journals. Employment agencies could introduce newsletters listing jobs and providing information on hiring criteria, duties and responsibilities, wages, job security and prospects for promotion. Information could be included about housing and public transportation. Since employers have not heard of translation graduates and graduates do not know where vacancies are, coordination between female graduates and recruiters could be improved by having the College of Languages and Translation provide the information recruiters need to assess the potential labour supply (numbers of female translation graduates; their addresses, interests, preferences, etc.).

The university could establish a placement center that maintains lists of female candidates and interested companies. Companies place notices advertising vacant translation positions, and female candidates fill out forms detailing their interests and accomplishments. A match is made, either by the placement center or the companies reviewing the résumés. Private employment agencies could gather names of female translators through advertising and word-of-mouth, and refer prospects to client companies.

Some universities in the kingdom, such as King Abdul-Aziz University and King Fahad University, have been organizing Career Days as annual recruiting events for graduating students that companies are invited to. Part of Career Day should be devoted to female graduates and translation jobs.

The pre-service preparation program at the College of Languages and Translation should be modified, and admission and graduation standards raised. Practical rather than the theoretical aspects should be emphasized and specialization in a particular field encouraged. Simultaneous and written translation skills and English/Arabic and Arabic/English translation should be equally emphasized. Many female graduates have suggested that a translation practicum be made part of the college translation program in order to gain on-the-job experience and self-confidence. Students enrolled would practice translation at an agency or organization.

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Table 1: Translation Job Opportunities Available for Women

Employer	%
Hospitals	87
Government ministries	49
Translation bureaus	45
Embassies	36
The press	34
Corporations	33
Research centers	32
Banks	26
Universities	24
Publishers	16
Department of Civil Service	16
Radio and TV stations	8
U.N.	5
Islamic organizations	5
Freelance	3

Table 2: Suitability of Translation Labour Market Specifications

	Yes %	Undecided %	No %
Working conditions	3	–	97
Qualifications required	11	–	89
Staffing policies	–	12	88
Benefits offered	13	14	73
Job information	8	10	72
Job duties and responsibilities	31	30	39

Table 1: Percentages of Demand Factors Affecting Underemployment of Female Translators in the Public and Private Sectors

Demand Factors	Public Sector %	Private Sector %
Ability to translate simultaneously is required	–	88
Ability to translate texts in any field is required	–	73
Challenge of teaching jobs vs. translation jobs	75	36
Employers prefer men	77	77
Vacancies are filled by non-Saudis	–	16
Vacancies are filled by anyone who is proficient in English	–	57
Jobs are not offered by the Department of Civil Service	61	–
Lack of personal connections	14	14
Means of transportation is not provided	16	16
New graduates are not financed by publishers	–	16
No bonuses and incentives are offered	–	43
No opportunities for added experience are given	22	22
No retirement benefits	–	16
No training period	75	36
Non-Saudis are not employed	11	–
Previous work experience is required	–	89
Salary is not comparable to that of teachers	–	30
Specialization is required	–	84
Translation jobs are available outside my town	11	11
Translation jobs are not advertised	72	72
Translation majors and non-majors receive the same pay	–	43
Translators are not well-paid	–	43
Vacations are short (3 to 4 weeks + national holidays)	–	62
Workplace is desegregated (men present)	–	97
Working hours are long (from 8-5 or from 8-1 & 4-9)	–	71

Table 4: Percentages of Candidate Factors Affecting Underemployment of Female Translators

Candidate Factors	%
I am not interested in working as a translator	23
I am not proficient in English	80
I cannot submit a translation within a time limit (speed)	27
I do not know where vacancies are	35
I have difficulty commuting to work	24
I have difficulty with Arabic/English translation	21
I have difficulty with simultaneous translation	89
I have difficulty with written translation	39
I have no previous work experience	89
My family does not allow me to work at hospitals, embassies, bureaus	84
My family does not allow me to work as a translator	39
Texts to be translated are difficult for me	14
Working as a translator is strenuous	30
Working as a translator is intimidating for me	18
Working at hospitals and embassies is unacceptable for me	61

Table 5: Percentages of Job Search Methods

Search Methods	%
Applied to Department of Civil Service	62
Billboard recruitment	–
Candidate registers	–
Direct mail recruitment	–
Government agencies	–
Newspapers and magazines	–
Private employment agencies	–
Radio and TV	–
School recruiting (companies visit campus)	–
Unsolicited application (walk-ins, call-ins, write-ins)	19

Table 6: Percentages of Social Factors Affecting Unemployment of Female Translators

Social Factors	%
Females should work in a women-only work environment	78
Graduates with a translation degree are not yet recognized	68
Teaching is more acceptable for females than translation	43
People have not heard of translation graduates	42
Women are not allowed to meet delegates/attend conferences	18

Table 7: Translation Job Preferences and Expectations

Preferences	%
Women-only workplace	97
Working in the public sector	84
Working hours from 8 am to 2 pm	81
Summer vacations (2 months + national holidays)	72
Salary comparable to teachers	69
Steady secure work	67
Retirement plans and fringe benefits	67
Chances for further training and learning job skills	36

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Translators and Language Engineering in Nigeria: A Case Study of Nupe Language News Translators

RÉSUMÉ

En décrivant certains problèmes de traduction vers la langue nupe du Nigeria, l'auteur aborde une problématique propre à de nombreuses langues africaines : doit-on utiliser la description exhaustive ou carrément l'emprunt lorsqu'on traduit des termes inexistants en langue cible pour un public isolé du monde moderne ?

ABSTRACT

In describing certain translation problems incurred in translating into the Nupe language of Nigeria, the author raises a question that is pertinent to a number of African languages: When translating for an audience that is far removed from the modern world, should one resort to exhaustive description or to loan words for terms that are nonexistent in the target languages?

INTRODUCTION

Language engineering has been defined by Capo (1990: 1) as:

> that domain of applied linguistics concerned with the design and implementation of strategies (i.e. the conscious and deliberate steps)

toward the rehabilitation and optimal utilization of individual languages. In fact, it is a mechanism of language planning that recognizes problems and proceeds to 'engineer' solutions to such problems.

Language engineering, then, is concerned with the problems of "underdevelopment," so to speak, that a language may be facing. Its aim is to "update" the language concerned in order to, among other things, make it capable of accounting for and communicating "the changing experiences of the speakers as well as all aspects of the human legacy called knowledge" (Capo 1990: 2). As Cyffer (1977 cited by Emenanjo 1990: 89) has noted, the ultimate goal of language engineering is,

> the development of a language and if needed be making it suitable for areas in which it has not been used before, e.g. modern education, government, economy and science.

What is immediately obvious is the fact that language engineering is not only a domain in which translators are actively involved, but also one in which they have a vital role to play. Since translation is an act of communication *par excellence*, it reveals the fact that not all languages are similarly able to express ideas, and highlights the problems a particular language may have in expressing certain things. More important to our discussion here, though, is the fact that translation also contributes to the search for solutions to such problems. The Nigerian translator, for instance, who has to render foreign concepts and notions in his native language often finds that appropriate and adequate terms and expressions are not readily available, if at all. He is thus forced to "engineer" solutions to such problems.

But how successful are Nigerian translators in their attempts to overcome the language-related problems they come across? More specifically, to what extent do translators succeed in carrying out their mission when they have to deal with texts containing terms and expressions for which corresponding items are not available in their own language? In this study, an attempt is made to find answers to these questions using the translation of English language news bulletins into Nupe, a language spoken in Nigeria.

1. THE SITUATION OF NUPE AND THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE ENGINEERING

Nupe is a "minority" language in Nigeria, so called because of the relatively small number of people who speak it. The Nupes numbered 650,000 in 1963, growing by 1986 to a population of 1,314,000. These figures can be compared to those for the