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**Journeys towards Employment:
The Experiences of Young Adults
in the Maldives**

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Abstract

In a similar situation to most countries in the world, unemployment is rising in the Maldives and it is noticeable that more and more young adults are struggling to achieve gainful, productive employment. There are several difficulties and barriers faced by the young adults of today, before they even take their first crucial step into the labour market.

This research aims to identify these barriers faced by young adults in the employment process. To achieve this, the research conducted exploration in order to obtain an in-depth understanding into the experiences of urban young adults in the Maldives, who were in the process of finding and securing jobs.

The methodology used in the research process was qualitative in nature with the use of individual interviews and focus group discussions, in order to achieve a close, in-depth view into the employment experiences of these young adults. The researched explored and identified several barriers to urban youth unemployment. Amongst the barriers to employment, the most common themes identified were in relation to educational achievements and discrimination. This study also identified several changes emphasised as important by the young participants in the research. They believe these changes are necessary, to combat the barriers that they face and they will also enhance better employment opportunities in the future.

To Ishaq and Mamma

Whose strength and support have been my help and inspiration during those times away from home, in New Zealand, where I completed my journey – the completion of this thesis.

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Glossary and Abbreviations

ICSE-93	International Classifications of Statistics in Employment
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMCAP	Improving Capacities for Poverty/Social Policy Research
MENA	Middle East and North African
MNPD	Ministry of National Planning and Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NZ	New Zealand
NZAID	New Zealand's International Aid & Development Agency
SEA	South East Asian
UN	United Nations
WB	World Bank
YEN	Youth Employment Network

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"The journey of trying to get a job has been a 'rough sea' – a 'rough journey for me"

-Participant Eleven-

Employment for an individual, old or young, male or female, is an important aspect of an individuals' life once they reach working age. Particularly, it is more important for a young adult, who is in transition from being a child at school and moving into adulthood and the working world. These young adults should have the opportunity to start their new life with a certain stability (a decent and meaningful job) to occupy and encourage them to move on towards a prosperous adult life. The above quotation, *"Journey of trying to get a job has been a 'rough sea' – a 'rough journey' for me"*, is the voice of a young urban adult from the Maldives. Such a statement reflects how difficult it has become for some young adults to obtain a job and this has become a critical issue, due to its influence on the value of their lives. Young adults today, throughout the world are facing many difficulties finding employment, and Maldivian young adults are not immune from the effect of barriers to employment, which can be seen in most parts of the world.

As stated in the forward of 'Global Employment Trends of Youth of 2006', "Without the right foothold from which to start out right in the labour market, young people are less able to make choices that will improve their own job prospects and those of their future dependants. This, in turn perpetuates the cycle of insufficient education, low-productivity employment and working poverty from one generation to the next" (ILO, 2006). Thus, the issues that lead to youth unemployment need to be explored and addressed with the utmost urgency. We need to find ways and means to overcome youth unemployment, in order to help the youth of today as they are also the future generations of this world, upon whom the world's future is dependent.

Three years ago, on International Youth Day, Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General stated, "We must develop strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work that will allow them to become independent and

responsible global citizens” (YMCA, 2005). Governments, planners and strategists seem to be still struggling to achieve this goal, and for a small country, such as the Maldives, the increase in youth unemployment and the issues that surround it cannot be over emphasised. Addressing the topic and the issues is therefore critical both for the sake of the individuals involved and also for the prosperous development of the nation. This situation then brings us to the significance and the focus of this study.

Significance of the Study

This current study derives its significance from the hope of finding some answers to the difficulties experienced by several young adults going through the process of finding and securing employment in the Maldives. Some of these young adults are believed to have spent many months – indeed years – in the process of looking for and securing a job and at times they may never have reached the point of actually securing a decent job. This is such a critical issue for the reason that, whilst some young people at the point of actively searching for jobs become more focused and keep trying, others tend to opt out of the situation when they find the process too difficult, frustrating and psychologically taxing. The effect of this negative impact can go as far as these young people deviating to choose negative paths in life, which then hampers their prospects of a successful future adult life. This is detrimental for the nation and the ILO clearly states that youth need a good foothold to start off their adult life, in order that they can become independent individuals, valuable to themselves and future generations (ILO, 2006).

Several studies have investigated youth unemployment and certain barriers have been identified that stand in the way of the young adult getting a job (ILO, 2006; Adoric, 2004; Bessant 2002; ILO, 2001; Maxted, 2001; Dorrance and Hughes, 1996; Visaria, 1998). The issues and difficulties faced by a young person depend on individual factors, in addition to the different cultural and situational factors of the country in which the young adults are seeking employment. This study aims to explore and obtain an in-depth understanding into the employment experiences of young urban adults in the Maldives, in the hope of gaining knowledge about the several barriers faced by these young urban

adults during their employment seeking process. Therefore the research questions, for which the research aims to find answers, are the following:

- Are there any difficulties and barriers faced by young urban adults in the employment process?
- If so, what are these barriers and difficulties?
- What are the possible changes that the youth themselves perceive as necessary, in order to combat difficulties and overcome barriers to employment?

It is anticipated that the findings will have commonalities to past findings relating to employment difficulties faced by world youth in general, and in addition the study will shed light on unique issues, that are part of the present research population and their society. It is hoped that the findings of this research can then be addressed and pave the way to overcome and improve the present day situation of our young adults: the young urban adults who are facing difficulties finding and securing employment in the Maldives.

Why the research interest and why the topic area?

The idea for research in the area of unemployment was inspired by my passion for working amongst people with special needs in the Maldives. By profession, I have spent my entire career working amongst people with special needs. After many years of working with these clients in a clinical setting, there came a point when I realised that I had to help these young people towards gainful employment, as part of their rehabilitation process. Whilst in the process of exploring the situation regarding these clients finding appropriate jobs with employers who are willing to give reasonable accommodation to young people with special needs, I realised that even normal young adults today are struggling to find work: a situation very different from the past

Furthermore, a few years after this period, I accidentally came across a situation where unemployment and young adults became a topic of concern for me. This was during the first few weeks after the 2004 tsunami. During those weeks I had the opportunity to

work with an enthusiastic, hard working group of young adults, who toiled passionately for many hours, without even much rest, as part of the relief team. Some of these young adults were well educated and most of them were reasonably educated. Moreover, they were reliable, dedicated and hard working. However, sadly, over the weeks, I discovered that many of them were in fact unemployed. Therefore, having worked with them and having witnessed the level of competency and productiveness in their work, I wanted to see them in jobs and to this end I even volunteered to help them find jobs, a process which they claimed was not easy. Initially, I found it hard to agree with them, as I personally had not experienced any difficulties finding a job, at any point in my life. However, I was soon to be proven wrong and I had to accept their point of view as a result of the obstacles I faced whilst trying to find a handful of jobs for these young people: this was not an easy task. I appeared to face several barriers and obstacles when trying to find jobs for these young people and these were related to certain biased attitudes, various types of discrimination, to name but a few.

Recently there has also been concern raised regarding youth unemployment in the Maldives. According to the '2005 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Country Report of the Maldives', after having reached MDG target 1, it has now been identified that youth unemployment is one amongst the remaining four key challenges and this is stated in the introduction of this report (MPND, 2005a).

"A fourth challenge is youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is substantial and has been increasing during the period 1997-2004. About 40 per cent of the young women and over 20 per cent of the young men are presently unemployed. Although the Maldives has already achieved the MDG target 1 there is no room for complacency. High and increasing youth unemployment coupled with increasing income inequalities between Male' and the atolls may lead to unfulfilled expectations, disillusion and increasing tension in the country".

Thus my interest was further drawn to the topic of this research: unemployment and young adults. Finding out about the difficulties which they are experiencing in the

process of finding and securing employment became once again my focus. My question is/was — ‘What are the difficulties and barriers that young adults are facing in the process of securing a job today, which I/we did not experience in previous years?’ If we can understand the difficulties they experience, then we can find ways to help these young adults to overcome these problems. I have therefore embraced these issues as an area which needs to be explored and addressed. The present young generation needs to be encouraged and helped to overcome the problems they face in finding something as basic in their lives as employment.

Background to the country of research – The Maldives

The Maldives is an island nation comprised of about 1,190 islands scattered across an area of 90,000 square kilometres in the Indian Ocean. These islands include 26 natural atolls, which for administrative purposes are divided into 20 atolls. Within these 1,190 islands, about 200 are inhabited. Similar to most developing countries, rapid urbanisation has also been a feature in the Maldives. The population of the Maldives is about 300,000 of which nearly 100,000 live in the capital, Male’.

All children between the ages of 6-15 years are entitled to compulsory education, irrespective of gender or social status and free education is available for all those within this age group. The average age for leaving secondary school is 16 years. According to the available data from the 2000 census, from a population of 56,780 young people, (aged between 15 -24 years) only 22,161 young adults were economically active, which leaves 33,946 as not economically active (MPND, 2005b:81). An estimation by the ‘Ministry of Planning and National Development, Maldives-Key Indicators 2005’, states that young adults between the ages of 15-24 years in the country totals 74,925 in the year 2005, of which 37,815 are males and 37,110 are females (MPND, 2005b:57-59). The number of children who left secondary school has also doubled over the past five years, from 3805 school leavers in the year 2001 to 7666 in the 2005.

Over the past few years, there has been a general feeling amongst society that more and more young adults are finding it difficult to secure employment. Looking back over the

past few decades, it can be seen that in the 1980s there was 100% formal sector public employment available for all secondary school leavers and this continued until the beginning of the 1990s. The previously enforced bond for three years, relating to secondary school leavers, which guaranteed a job has now been waived. The availability of jobs has also been believed to have decreased and the creation of new jobs has not been sufficient to fulfill the demand from present school leavers.

At the same time, although many jobs have been created by the private sector, there is still the general feeling that jobs are scarce and the demand for jobs has increased over the past few years. According to a consultation survey, undertaken prior to this research, the feeling that there are many difficulties to face in finding jobs was found to be mutual among parents, government officials and leading private businessmen. It has also been reported that, for any given job advertised, more than 50-100 young people will make an application. This means that only the most successful candidates will have any chance of securing the available jobs.

In addition to the above scenario, although there have been a number of new jobs created in the private sector, the number of migrant labour has also increased over the past one and half decades, from just 9,000 expatriates working in the country in 1990 to 38,000 by 2005 (MPND, 2005c). This means that many jobs are filled by expatriates. This was brought to light during the consultation survey, undertaken prior to the field work, which showed there are reasons why private businesses give preference to hiring expatriate labour, rather than Maldivian nationals. There was the sense of a significant degree of prejudice voiced, regarding the offering of jobs to young people today, some of which appear to be attitudinal in nature and they may not necessarily hold true for all given cases. However this can also be assumed as a factor that can contribute towards the difficulty of securing jobs for young nationals

Operational Definitions

Youth/Young Adults

According to Echebiri (2005:5), defining who is a 'youth' has been a confusing concept and this has been debated at length over the years amongst researchers. In an effort to standardise 'age', several well-known organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations, British Commonwealth Associations and International Labour Organisations have suggested specific age categories. There seems to be some variation in the age specification for youth or young adults, which varies between organisations. The following are some of the age categorisations offered by these organisations. The World Bank defines youth as the "Time in a person's life between childhood and adulthood. The term "youth" in general refers to those who are between the ages of 15 to 25" (World Bank, 2006). The Commonwealth defines youth as those young adults falling between 15 to 29 years of age, whereas the United Nations definition of youth is those falling between the ages of 15 to 24 years (Echebiri, 2005). The ILO also defines youth or young adults as those young people who fall between the ages of 15 to 24 years. (ILO, 2005:1).

Furthermore the categorisation of youth greatly differs between some countries. Different countries adopt their own choice of definition from various organisations. According to Maria, the age ranges differ to a great extent in South East Asian (SEA) States and she states that, "In Philippines, youth are legally defined as those who are 15 to 30 years old. In Thailand, youth are those who are 15 to 25 years old (UN 1997a). In Malaysia, the state's Youth Council defines youth as those from 15 to 40 years of age (UN 1997a)" (Maria, 2002:172). In Nigeria the age range of youth is taken as 15 to 36 years (NYAC, 1987; cited in Echebiri, 2005:5). Even within countries there seems to be a difference in age categorisation. A youth employment policy in Northern Italy targets people aged between 14 to 29 years whereas, in Southern Italy, the age is between 14 to 32 years (O'Higgins, 1997).

The age group specified for the purpose of this research was adopted according to the ILO definition of youth or young adults. This includes those falling between the ages of

15 to 24 years. Hence the participants were selected within this age group, although the starting age was chosen at 17 years of age. The reason for this is that in the Maldives, on average, children leave school at the age of 16 years and the research requires the young adults to have gone through a period of searching for employment and to have had experienced at least a few months of searching for a job.

Employment/Unemployment/Underemployment/Overemployment

According to the Learner's Dictionary, employment is defined as "the fact of having a paid job" (Learner's Dictionary, 2003:358). There also exists what is termed as 'informal employment'. Informal employment is an informal job in either the formal or informal sector or in general households (Husmanns, 2003:5). Also, Husmanns states that jobs are differentiated into two categories, formal or informal, which is dependent on the status-in-employment. "For status in employment, the following five ICSE-93 groups are used: own account workers; employers; contributing family workers; employees; and members of producers' cooperative" (2003:5). The use of such classification is considered to be useful for policy purposes.

Unemployment is defined in the simplest way as "the fact that people who want jobs cannot get them" (Learner's Dictionary, 2003:1202). According to O'Higgins (1997), the most extensively used definition of unemployment is the ILO definition, which defines the unemployed as those people who are not engaged in any form of work for 'more than one hour during a short reference period'. Unemployment has also been identified in various forms (Echebiri, 2005:5). According to Onah (2001), urban youth unemployment "stands for the conglomerate of youth with diverse background, willing and able to work in urban areas. This results in pressures of supply of labour over the demand for labour, thus causing joblessness" (cited in Echebiri 2005:5). Unemployment is also at times classified as voluntary or involuntary, but it is believed to be a concept that is difficult to classify this way and there are many ambiguities (Yuji, 2005:4-5). According to Yuji (2005:4), most cases of youth unemployment are considered to be voluntary but the unemployment cases of older workers are considered involuntary, in the sense that they may be laid off their jobs without having any control over the situation. The ILO (2001:3)

defines unemployment as “the proportion of persons who during a given period were (a) without work (b) currently available for work and (c) actively seeking work”.

‘Underemployment’ is differentiated from the word unemployment and it refers to a situation when a person is at least involved in some work, even though it is minimal (Wilkins, 2004:3). Underemployment is believed to be a difficult concept to define. According to the dictionary definition, a person is considered underemployed when “they have not got enough work to do, or their work does not make full use of their skills or abilities” (Learner’s Dictionary, 2003: 1198). Wilkins (2004:3) states that someone is recognized as underemployed when he/she is willing to work for more hours. Generally, in the case of females, underemployment is usually associated with part-time work, whereas for their male counterparts it is associated with full-time employment. In other words, this is a form of ‘underutilisation’. Wilkins also states that underemployment is not free from several negative effects, although this is not to such great extent as unemployment (Wilkins, 2004:4).

Laurie (1997) suggests that another concept, that can be related to underemployment, is ‘overemployment’. Thus, overemployment “refers to persons who are willing to work less time (with a corresponding reduction of pay), work in a job with less pay or perform lower skilled work than they are currently doing. Full-time workers who would like to work part time and persons who are compelled to work overtime against their wishes are examples of overemployed persons on the dimension of hours of work” (Laurie, 1997:36). Nevertheless, as stated by Laurie (1997:36), the above categories should not be confused with those workers who are, in other words, over worked through excessive hours and who would otherwise prefer to work less hours if their income remained the same.

The focus of this present research is to explore into experiences of young urban adults, who are in the process of gaining employment and therefore to obtain an in-depth understanding of the barriers that have led to their present unemployment. Hence, for the purpose of this research, the area of concern is that of unemployment. For this particular purpose, the ILO’s (2001:3) definition of unemployment has been adopted, which defines

unemployment as “the proportion of persons who during a given period were (a) without work (b) currently available for work and (c) actively seeking work”. Therefore an unemployed young person in this study is defined as someone who is or has looked for work and s/he has had a period of unemployment at some point in their life and has experienced difficulties in the process of finding a job.

Delimitations of the Research

In this study, I have excluded analysing the data in terms of any specific analysis of gender differences in barriers to employment. Although both genders were interviewed, I made no effort to balance female and male participants. A snowball sampling was undertaken and the only inclusion criteria used were that the participants were chosen from an urban setting and they were young adults between the ages of 17-24 years, who had experienced difficulties in the employment process. The methodology is discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

An Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter Two is an in-depth review of the literature relating to youth unemployment worldwide. After a general overview of youth unemployment, the larger part of this chapter is allocated to reviewing relevant past literature and developing an in-depth understanding of the barriers faced by young adults during the employment seeking process. This chapter also offers some solutions seen in past literature and it is suggested that such solutions can be used to overcome the barriers of youth unemployment today.

Chapter Three presents details of the methodology used for this research. This section will therefore include information relating to the choice of methodology, ethical considerations, including the difficult issue of undertaking research in a small community particularly in my own home setting, the instrumentation used and the process of the data collection procedure. This chapter also includes some personal experiences and reflections of the research process.

Chapter Four presents the complete data analysis and findings of this primary research, which is an attempt to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of young urban adults in the Maldives, in order to discover the difficulties faced by these young adults in the process of finding employment.

Chapter Five discusses the findings of the research and connects it to the information in related past literature on the topic addressed in Chapter Two. This chapter discusses the similarities and differences between present and past research findings in the literature. The chapter also assembles a set of possible solutions, which have been derived from a compilation of the suggested solutions from past literature and suggestions made by the present research participants.

Chapter Six, the concluding chapter of this thesis, reflects on the primary objectives of the research. This is followed by the implications and recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with my final thoughts after the completion of this research.