



UNDERSTANDING THE PAY GAP FOR SOMALI WOMEN

A Collaborative Research Study Between Ayada Leads
and Idman Ibrahim, Conducted Through CURA's Kris
Nelson Community-Based Research Program

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Purpose of the Research

This research is being conducted in response to the 2020 Status of Women and Girls report, which highlighted that women in Minnesota earn 5.3% less than men, primarily due to gender bias. The disparities are even more pronounced for Somali women, who earn 2.5 times less than their white male counterparts and are among the lowest earners among Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). Our aim is to uncover the additional barriers Somali women face, such as cultural, religious, and language challenges.

Through this investigation, we seek to understand the factors contributing to this significant wage gap and the experiences of the affected population. A key focus of our research is examining how intersecting identities—gender, race, ethnicity—shape the wage gap. Our ultimate goal is to gather firsthand accounts from Somali women in Minnesota to understand why they believe they are paid less than their counterparts.

Goals

1. Investigate the causes of the significant wage gap experienced by Somali women.
2. Identify cultural, religious, and language barriers affecting Somali women's earnings.
3. Explore the influence of intersecting identities on the wage gap.
4. Examine the prevalence and impact of prejudice, undervaluation, and workplace microaggressions.

Our research aims to offer comprehensive insights into the wage disparities Somali women face in Minnesota, providing data that can guide targeted policy interventions to promote wage equity.

Introduction

The **2020 Status of Women and Girls** report highlights a substantial gender wage gap in Minnesota, with women earning, on average, 5.3% less than men. This disparity is largely attributed to systemic gender bias. The situation is even more severe for Somali women, who earn 2.5 times less than their white male counterparts and are among the lowest earners even compared to other BIPOC women. This research seeks to uncover the underlying reasons for this pronounced wage gap, identify contributing factors, and understand the specific challenges faced by Somali women. Somali women face compounded discrimination due to intersecting identities—they are Black, Muslim, women, and often first- or second-generation Americans.

Our study examines various barriers Somali women encounter, such as cultural, religious, and language challenges. We aim to understand how these barriers, combined with their intersecting identities, shape their experiences with the wage gap. Additionally, we explore how prejudice and the undervaluation of Somali women's skills, including the frequency of workplace microaggressions, contribute to wage inequity.

Literature Review

Wage gaps reflect disparities in average earnings between different groups—such as men and women—driven by factors like societal gender roles and caregiving responsibilities. In 2022, American women earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, a figure that has remained stagnant since 2002. Research indicates that women are overrepresented in lower-paying jobs, underrepresented in higher-paying positions, and face additional layers of discrimination based on race and gender (Women's Bureau, 2023).

Race compounds these wage gaps, particularly for women of color. Intersectionality plays a crucial role, as the compounded effects of race, ethnicity, and gender significantly affect women's economic realities (Bleiweis, Frye, Khattar, 2021). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Black women face significant wage disparities due to both racism and sexism, often concentrated in lower-paying service roles and underrepresented in higher-paying sectors.

Despite Minnesota's high rankings in women's economic and social well-being, wage disparities persist. Women continue to earn less than men, and the gap is even wider for Black, Indigenous, and other women of color, as well as for rural women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and older women (Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota, 2024). Somali women in Minnesota experience particularly stark wage disparities, earning less than other BIPOC counterparts and three times less than white men, a gap exacerbated by their intersecting identities.

The Somali community in Minnesota has a unique history rooted in refugee resettlement. Many Somali individuals arrived through the U.S. refugee resettlement program, which was designed to offer safety and stability to those fleeing conflict. Minnesota became a significant destination due to its robust refugee resettlement infrastructure and the promise of job opportunities. However, reality often fell short of these expectations. The Somali community has had to adapt to survive in a new economic landscape. Despite initial hopes for better economic prospects, many Somali refugees face persistent barriers in the job market, contributing to ongoing wage disparities.

Somali culture strongly emphasizes familial ties and community support, with many individuals living in extended family units. The community is predominantly Sunni Muslim, and Minnesota hosts the largest population of Somali refugees in the U.S., with many living in the Twin Cities metro area (Kasper, Fleck, & Gardner, 2009). Traditionally, Somali cultural values center around male-dominated households, where men are seen as the primary decision-makers and financial providers, while women manage domestic responsibilities (Somali Culture & Foods, 2023). However, upon immigrating to Minnesota, economic pressures shifted this dynamic. Somali women have entered the labor force as financial contributors while still being expected to maintain leadership in household responsibilities. These combined expectations exacerbate wage disparities by limiting women's opportunities for career advancement and fair compensation.

The visibility of Somali women, especially those who wear hijab, often subjects them to religious discrimination. The 2015 Supreme Court case, *EEOC v. Abercrombie & Fitch Stores, Inc.*, highlighted this issue when the court ruled in favor of a Muslim woman who had been discriminated against for wearing a hijab. This ruling underscored how religious attire can become a point of contention in the workplace. Further research indicates that Muslim women who wear hijab are 40% more likely to experience religious discrimination than their non-hijab-wearing counterparts (2021 study). This is particularly relevant for Somali women, whose religious identity is deeply tied to cultural practices, as the hijab serves as both a marker of faith and a trigger for systemic discrimination. Addressing these disparities requires a nuanced

understanding of how religion, race, and gender intersect in workplace policies and practices.

To address these challenges, it is essential to disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, and gender. Brown et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of including race and ethnicity in data collection to better understand and address the specific needs of communities. This approach will help shed light on the discrimination and wage gaps faced by Somali women.

Methodology

Survey Research Design

To explore pay disparities among Somali women in Minnesota, we utilized a mixed-methods survey, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data on their workforce experiences, perceptions of wage disparities, and contributing factors. Our sample included 21 Somali women, selected to provide valuable insights into the unique challenges they face at work.

The survey addressed key areas such as age, occupation, earnings, barriers to fair pay, job search strategies, educational attainment, and willingness to participate in future wage gap campaigns. These questions were carefully developed with an understanding of the role intersectionality plays in shaping their experiences, based on prior research from the Women's Foundation.

Participant Recruitment

We used a combination of targeted outreach methods, including community meetings and social media campaigns, to recruit a diverse group of Somali women from various industries, age ranges, and educational backgrounds. Our outreach efforts included visiting a Somali-owned coffee shop and participating in local events such as Somali Independence Day in the Twin Cities. This approach helped us foster trust and ensure our findings represented the broad spectrum of experiences in the Somali community.

Survey Instrument

The survey featured a blend of closed and open-ended questions to capture detailed information on participants' demographics, employment status, income, educational background, and perceptions of wage disparities. Additionally, we explored potential barriers such as cultural, religious, and language challenges, as well as experiences with prejudice and workplace microaggressions.

Data Collection

Surveys were distributed both online and in person at community events. To maintain the integrity of the data, regular checks were conducted on the survey platforms to filter out spam responses, and additional security measures were implemented to prevent further tampering. This process ensured the collection of authentic first-person accounts of the challenges Somali women face in the workforce, laying the groundwork for future initiatives aimed at closing the pay gap and promoting equity.

Findings

Demographic Overview

Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 45, working in sectors such as healthcare, nonprofit organizations, and education. Their reported annual incomes varied, with some earning below \$35,000 and others earning up to \$99,999, reflecting a broad spectrum of economic situations.

Educational Attainment

The survey of 21 women revealed a diverse range of educational backgrounds:

- 10 women hold a Bachelor's degree
- 4 women hold a Master's degree
- 3 women have some college credit
- 1 woman holds an Associate's degree
- 1 woman holds a Doctorate
- 2 women have a GED or some high school education

These findings demonstrate a strong academic presence, with a significant number of participants holding bachelor's and master's degrees, indicating a well-educated group despite the wage disparities they face.

Barriers to Employment

The most commonly identified barriers to obtaining fair employment were:

- Race
- Religion
- Gender
- Language
- Lack of childcare

- Transportation

When asked, "Do you feel your compensation is fair based on your education, skills, and work experience?" **17 out of the 21 respondents answered "no."** This indicates that a large majority of respondents believe they are underpaid, and face multiple identity-based and logistical challenges in the workplace.

Key Insights

1. Perceived Barriers to Higher Wages

- Occupational Clustering: Several respondents noted that Somali women are often concentrated in occupations requiring similar knowledge and skills, yet these jobs tend to offer lower wages and limited opportunities for advancement.
- Educational Attainment: Many women cited their educational background as a critical factor in determining income. However, balancing full-time work and family responsibilities often limits their ability to pursue higher education, which in turn restricts their earning potential.
- Cultural and Religious Barriers: Some participants highlighted that cultural and religious practices, particularly those related to gender roles and the visibility of Muslim identity, can impact employment opportunities and career advancement, which negatively affects their earnings.
- Prejudice and Undervaluation: Respondents frequently reported facing prejudice and feeling undervalued in the workplace. They described being overlooked for promotions and raises, and dealing with microaggressions and discriminatory behaviors from both colleagues and employers.

2. Experiences of Prejudice and Microaggressions

Many Somali women reported encountering prejudice and microaggressions in the workplace, including:

- Stereotyping and biased assumptions about their skills and capabilities based on race, religion, and gender.
- Struggles to be recognized and appreciated for their contributions.

- Discriminatory practices that impede their career growth and hinder wage increases.

3. *Intersectionality of Identity*

The intersection of race, religion, gender, and immigration status plays a significant role in the wage disparities faced by Somali women. The combined effects of these identities create additional obstacles that exacerbate the pay gap. Participants stressed the importance of initiatives that address these overlapping forms of oppression to foster equitable opportunities for Somali women.

Qualitative Data

Participants in this study represent a broad spectrum of sectors, including healthcare, nonprofit organizations, education, government, and human services. They range in age from 20 to 55 and report incomes from \$30,000 to over \$149,999. A notable portion of the participants work in the healthcare sector.

Common Barriers to Higher Wages

Participants identified several barriers that impede their earning potential, including:

- **Race, Religion, and Gender:** Systemic biases based on race, religion, and gender frequently hinder career advancement opportunities.
- **Educational Attainment:** Limited access to further education affects wage progression.
- **Transportation and Child Care:** Logistical challenges, such as inadequate transportation and lack of child care, complicate their ability to seek or maintain better-paying positions.
- **Occupational Clustering:** Many are concentrated in fields or job roles that offer limited wage growth, particularly noted in healthcare. Participants also highlighted a general lack of transparency regarding wage structures in their industries.

Perceptions of Wage Disparities

Many participants were previously unaware of the extent of wage disparities compared to their counterparts, particularly in healthcare. This lack of awareness points to broader issues of wage opacity within certain sectors.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

A significant number of participants discussed the challenge of juggling employment with educational pursuits or family obligations. Participants detailed the strain of managing these dual pressures alongside navigating systemic oppression, including xenophobia, sexism, and racism.

Insights and Advocacy for Change

Insights from participants varied, with some advocating for targeted initiatives to support marginalized groups, especially Somali women. There is a strong call for increased wage transparency and more equitable treatment across all sectors.

Recommendations

Initially, our research produced several suggestions, including developing educational support such as scholarships for Somali women and increasing access to services like legal assistance. However, we found that many of these resources are already offered by various organizations. Therefore, our primary recommendation is to conduct further research on the pay gaps experienced by Somali women, with a specific focus on how intersectionality—particularly the combination of race, religion, and gender—contributes to these disparities. Despite extensive research on related topics like mental health and immigration within the Somali community, there remains a significant gap in studies specifically addressing Somali women’s pay equity and the role of intersectionality.

We also recommend launching educational campaigns centered on race and identity. Our outreach revealed that many Somali women were unaware of how their intersecting identities—especially the combined impacts of race and gender—affect their wages. While some were familiar with gender-related barriers, there was less awareness about how multiple identities contribute to wage disparities. An educational campaign could raise awareness within the community and help organizations better inform Somali women about these complex dynamics and their impact on professional opportunities.

To address these needs, we propose that Ayada Leads take the lead in implementing the following recommendations:

Support Services and Resources

1. Provide accessible resources for legal assistance, culturally competent healthcare, and childcare services to help Somali women overcome barriers to employment and career advancement.
2. Establish community centers offering training in essential job skills, resume writing, and interview preparation. These centers would equip Somali women with the tools they need to advance professionally and advocate for themselves in the workplace.

Policy Advocacy

1. Advocate for policies that promote wage transparency, equal pay for equal work, and the dismantling of systemic barriers that contribute to wage disparities.
2. Support legislation that requires employers to be transparent about pay structures and ensures that wages reflect the responsibilities and qualifications of the role.

Educational Support Programs

1. Develop scholarships and financial aid specifically for Somali women to pursue higher education and vocational training.
2. Create mentorship programs that connect Somali women with professionals in their desired fields, offering guidance and support as they navigate career pathways.

Workplace Inclusion Training

1. Implement regular diversity and inclusion training in workplaces to address biases and foster a more inclusive environment.
2. Encourage organizations to develop policies that recognize and value the unique contributions of Somali women, ensuring they are fairly compensated and supported in their career advancement.

By implementing these recommendations, we can make significant strides toward closing the wage gap and creating equitable opportunities for Somali women in Minnesota.

Conclusion

This research sought to illuminate the wage disparities faced by Somali women in Minnesota, examining the underlying causes and how intersecting identities—such as race, religion, and gender—shape their economic opportunities. The findings highlight

several key barriers, including occupational clustering, limited educational attainment, cultural and religious challenges, and the prevalence of prejudice and microaggressions in the workplace.

To address these inequities, it is essential to implement comprehensive, culturally sensitive initiatives that acknowledge the unique experiences of Somali women. This includes promoting wage transparency, expanding access to education and professional development, and fostering inclusive workplace environments. By focusing on these strategies, we can make meaningful progress toward closing the wage gap and creating more equitable opportunities for Somali women in Minnesota.

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Appendix

