

Difficulties Linked to Hebrew Language Among Immigrants in Israel^{*}

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The present study examines language barriers experienced by Ethiopian women in Netanya, Israel. It aims at providing data on both the existing literature on the subject as well as on the empirical results based on answers to a questionnaire. In particular, this paper looks into the difficulties linked to the Hebrew language with regard to the integration of these women, which is regarded as a hindrance towards a better and thorough integration in the city of Netanya. This language barrier affects all aspects of their daily life particularly in the fields of education and employment. This investigation into language barriers is seen through the eyes of one Ethiopian woman within her three-generation family. In addition to the disadvantage linked to language, this survey points out the discrimination which this minority population, especially women faces.

Keywords: Ethiopian women, integration, language barriers, discrimination

Introduction

This paper is the first in a series of research articles dealing with the integration of Ethiopian women in Netanya with respect to language barriers. In particular, this study focuses on the influence of language in the fields of employment and education. This survey has been carried out with a view to update previous findings and to provide the latest data and a clear picture of Ethiopian woman living and working in Netanya. It is a case study of a three-generation family whose language barriers with respect to employment and education are assessed. In particular, this paper highlights how language barriers impact on getting a degree, finding a job, and receiving equal treatment at work in comparison to the treatment of the native population.

Theoretical Background

Literature on Ethiopian women in Netanya, which would include comprehensive and detailed themes such as their integration as far as language, employment, housing, health, social care, and political involvement, is either lacking, outdated, or insufficiently substantial.

Despite that, a significant amount of scattered data on the health of Ethiopian women in Israel as a whole is available. For example, in the field of health and social care, research emphasizes different and inadequate treatments administered to women of Ethiopian origin in comparison with native born women due to language barriers. Indeed, in their paper entitled *Ethnic Differences in Preventive Medicine: The Example of Jewish Ethiopian Women in Israel* (Tandeter, Masandilov, Kemerly, & Biderman, 2007), the authors report that:

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One of the areas of inequality in many countries is ethno-cultural disparities in health care. Among women, racial differences were found in breast cancer screening by mammography and in the use of hormone replacement treatment. These differences may be related to language barriers, lack of knowledge, and differences in attitudes, but the result is that ethnic minority populations may receive lower standards of care, leading to lower health status and even to higher mortality among migrant groups than the local population. (p .452)

Aspects reflecting language problems have also been tackled in other sources as this is a recurring theme among the Ethiopian community in Israel as a whole and it is true among Ethiopian women. As is rightly mentioned in an article from *The Guardian* regarding the fact that women from Ethiopia received birth control shots against fertility without their consent, “Sava Reuben, an Ethiopian woman who has lived in Israel since 1984, interviewed more than 35 women from her community” and she clearly argues that “... this is a deliberate policy on the part of Israel. They are taking advantage of women who... do not understand the language...”.

The extent to which the language barrier is shown to be an urgent field to be dealt with by the authorities clearly appears in the following excerpt which was published at Haaretz, in 2013 and which revealed that:

In the absence of communication, stereotypes and assumptions take the place of understanding. Multiple doctors have told us students to remember that Ethiopian patients don't believe that they have been treated unless they are given an injection and to remember to treat them with injections instead of pills whenever possible. (Meyers, 2013)

The survey carried out by Tandeter et al. (2007) also supports this view and clearly points out this phenomenon: “Ethiopian women [...] had a poorer knowledge of the Hebrew language (in comparison with non-Ethiopian women). [...] The majority of Ethiopian women noted that their level of Hebrew was very poor: 89% compared to 26% among non-Ethiopian women”.

Similarly, Fenster (1998), in her research paper on *Ethnicity, Citizenship, Planning and Gender: The case of Ethiopian immigrant women in Israel* states that:

Language is an important indicator of integration and adaptation to a new culture. Although 75% of those surveyed by Benita *et al.* (1993) in Kiryat Gat attended *Ulpan* (Hebrew language courses), only 58% spoke Hebrew fluently, only 37% were able to write a simple letter in Hebrew, and only 43% were able to read a simple letter in Hebrew, although some had lived in Israel since 1984. (Fenster, 1998, p. 183)

The difficulties linked to the Hebrew language are also pointed out in an article written by Edelstein (2013) who observes the: “[...] acculturation process these immigrants have undergone and the language barriers they must surmount”.

Empirical Study

Methodology

The tool used for this survey was a questionnaire. An individual interview was conducted with a woman of Ethiopian origin who responded to questions which were divided into five categories: status, language (assessing your language proficiency, language used mostly with others, use of language depending on the activity), education, employment, and perspectives. The interview was conducted in English in the presence of an interpreter in order to make sure that the subtleties of language were not distorted.

Results

This woman of Ethiopian origin is 46 years old. She lives in Netanya, Israel. She is married and has six children. She came to Israel together with her parents in 1984, during the first wave of immigration from

Ethiopia to Israel. Her father has since died. Her mother lives near her. We shall take the assumed name of Malka when talking about the interviewee as well as when reporting the answers, for reasons of anonymity.

Malka works full time (6.5 hours a day) as a kindergarten teacher in Netanya. Her husband also works full time.

Regarding how she viewed her language proficiency between herself and her husband, Malka reported that it is "good in general". However, she added that "we sometimes speak in Hebrew and sometimes in Amharic, depending on the subject".

Interestingly enough, the language that she used with her children was "Hebrew only". She said that her children "did not understand Amharic". One reason for it is that they go to school where they hear and speak Hebrew all the time. The fact that they are immersed with the Hebrew language at school has become second nature to them to speak it at home, too.

In contrast, she speaks Amharic with her mother. The latter was portrayed as knowing "very few words in Hebrew".

Regarding the "language used mostly with friends at home", Malka mentioned straightforwardly "Amharic". One feels more at ease when speaking one's native language with close friends for it enables a better feel and avoids distortion or misinterpretation.

However, with respect to "language used with friends in the street", the answer differed: Malka says "good morning in Hebrew" if the friends she met were young. If not, she would greet them "according to their ages".

When dealing with "language used in thinking", Malka pointed out that she "sometimes used Hebrew and sometimes Amharic".

However, when it came to "dreaming", she said that she "mainly dreams in Amharic".

Regarding counting or calculating, Malka said she used "Amharic", but she mentioned she could also "use Hebrew" if she experienced the need.

Malka said she read "books in Hebrew more than in Amharic". She "seldom reads Amharic newspapers because they are very few in number and come out only once a month".

She "sometimes listens to radio shows/news in Amharic" and writes "a lot of notes in Hebrew to her children before going to work".

In the sphere of education, Malka holds "a teaching certificate, as well as a diploma as a kindergarten teacher". It took her "seven years to graduate", "owing to breaks after giving birth" "and her life as a mother with her children and as a wife". She emphasizes that "it was very difficult to succeed in class because the classes were in Hebrew". She said she had once learned little Hebrew in Ethiopia (she originates from a village in Ethiopia), however, when she came to Israel, she "had to start learning it from scratch".

With regard to Employment, Malka said that: "It was not easy to find a job". She added: "there were barriers linked to racism and discrimination". At work, she feels she is "looked at every minute and watched every now and then".

She reported that: "the other teachers got their jobs thanks to their connections. They were guided, given advice, and given material to exploit during the training", whereas she "did not receive any help". She had "nobody to consult".

Regarding whether she thought there would be some improvements in the future and in particular what the country could do in order to facilitate the integration of Ethiopian women in Israel and in Netanya, Malka mentioned: "the number of working hours which is extremely high and the minimum salary given for those

hours”—(such is her husband’s case). Malka’s husband “works 12, 13, or 14 hours a day and his monthly salary does not even reach 5,000 shekels”, she pointed out.

Sometimes, one job is not enough. “We have to have two jobs” she said, and she added that “we do not have time to go and study”. Moreover, “there are no rights or advantages”, “no pension scheme, no holidays”.

Conclusion

The interviewee seemed extremely brave in her role of mother of six, a spouse, and a woman who works full time. Her persistence and strong will to succeed in life by overcoming the barriers of the social ladder gives an optimistic picture of the integration and development of Ethiopian women in Israel in general and in Netanya in particular. The example of Malka is not unique. Other Ethiopian women are hard-working and appear as a pillar of their home. They are striving to provide a better living for their children.

However, the findings of this research do not extend to the whole Ethiopian community. Government policies should endeavour to absorb this minority population who has so much to give.

Malka mentioned that they “should get help in order to raise their status, because for the time being she feels they are exploited”.

“The language barrier plays a significant weight on all that”.

Implementing greater equality of chances to the least favoured families by enabling them easy access to Hebrew lessons (*Ulpanim*) and making them free and compulsory would represent a positive step towards a better integration.

Discrimination owing to origin was also found to be hindering the process of integration and acceptance by the host society.

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Appendix¹

1 –Status
Age :
Gender :
Family status:
Country of Origin :
Date of Alyah :
Number of children :
2 –Assessing your language proficiency (Speaking only)
How do you view your proficiency in Hebrew?
with yourself?
with your husband?
with your children ?
with your mother?
3 - Language used mostly with:
Husband:
Siblings:
Friends at home:
Friends in the street:
People in the shops:
4 - Language used in:
Thinking:
Dreaming:
Counting/Calculating:
Reading books:
Reading newspapers:
Listening to radio/news:
Writing letters:
5 – Education
Did you follow a course?
Do you have a diploma?
How long did it take for you to graduate?
6 – Employment
Occupation:
Full time / Part time:
Number of working hours a day:
Was it easy to find a job? Why?:
How many wage-earners are there in your household?
Do you know any people or any organization which might be of help for the finding of a job or the finding of a qualification training course?
7 - The way forward
According to you, what could the country do in order to help the Ethiopian community be better integrated?

¹ This questionnaire stems from two main sources: The first one is from a Ph.D thesis carried out on the Integration of Chinese Women in Manchester in the second-half of the Twentieth Century in 1997-2000 for the Sorbonne University (Paris IV –School of Doctoral Studies n°4) carried out by Valerie-Efrate Berdah. The second source is from an extract from Guus Extra and Kutlay Yagmur (2010), Language Proficiency and socio-cultural orientation of Turkish and Moroccan youngsters in the Netherlands, *Language and Education*, 24(2), 117-132, Department of Language & Culture Studies, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands.