The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

Race, Faith and Gender:

Converging Discriminations Against Muslim Women in Victoria

The Ongoing Impact of September 11, 2001

Final report

"I had an incident where someone swore at me because of my hijab. I told him I could take the hijab off my head but he couldn't take off the shit in his brains."

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Executive summary

Research is emerging in Australia and overseas documenting a surge of racism against Muslim communities after the terrorist attacks of September 11. While noting the visibility of Muslim women and their over-representation in the number of racist attacks, very little research has specifically explored Muslim women's experience of racism and its impact on them.

This report investigates and documents racism experienced by Victorian Muslim women after the September 11 attacks. It also explores the impact such racism has had on their lives. In addition, this report investigates the perceptions held by non-Muslim Victorians of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. This information has been used to formulate recommendations and strategies to improve community relations and to reduce racism.

The current study was performed in three stages. The first stage involved an initial round of focus groups held from 2003 to 2005 with Muslim women across Victoria to map experiences and perceptions of racism after September 11. The second stage consisted of a random telephone survey by the Social Research Centre in July 2005 of 600 non-Muslim Victorians to investigate perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women in Victoria. And in the third stage a further series of focus groups conducted from 2006 to 2007 were held to provide a longitudinal analysis of Muslim women's experiences of racism. These focus groups also examined if Muslim women's initial reactions to racism had changed.

Key findings

- Muslim women reported a range of racist incidents supporting the conclusion that these incidents were not isolated and one-off events.
- The incremental impact of racism on Muslim women's sense of safety, particularly in public places, eroded their social participation and sense of belonging in Australian society.
- Muslim women who wore the hijab and African Muslim women reported experiencing higher levels of racism than other Muslim women.
- Muslim women, although aware of the impact of racism on their children, found it difficult to assist and advocate for their children and were very concerned about the impact of racism on their children in the future.
- Victorians have little contact with Muslims and those who held positive views of Muslims based these on principles that people should be treated fairly and equally.
- A majority of Victorians sourced their information on Muslims from the media, even though they distrusted the fairness and unbiased nature of media portrayals of Muslims and recognised that these negative portrayals influenced their perception and treatment of Muslims.
- Victorians associated Muslim women with poor and unfair treatment, as well as being dominated and submissive.
- Victorians' associations of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular were very different. There was a much larger emphasis on negative associations for Muslim women, implying that the stereotype of Muslim culture as misogynistic and sexist has had a significant influence over how non-Muslim Victorians view Muslims.
- Greater contact with Muslims significantly reduced the negative associations held about Muslim women by non-Muslim Victorians, except for those aged 25 or under.
- Both Victorians and Muslim women made similar suggestions to improve relations between the two. These included community education, increasing interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, positive media portrayals of Muslims, greater participation of Muslims in the broader community and greater support from government.

Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations to improve social inclusion and reduce racism:

- A Muslim survival kit that provides information and empowers Muslims when these incidents occur.
- Implement a community education strategy for the general public on Muslims and Muslim women.
- Establish a Centre Against Racism that monitors and evaluates the impact of racism and that designs education programs for the general public and targeted communities.
- A support program that provides information, support, and counselling to Muslim women and their children who may be affected by racism.
- A community awareness-raising strategy to develop awareness within the Muslim community of the incremental impact of racism and to support the community's capacity to challenge and contextualise experiences of racism.
- Improve the accessibility of racism and discrimination complaints mechanisms.
- Provide training for police and public transport staff to better understand, identify and deal with mundane and everyday racisms.
- Capacity building, leadership and mentoring initiatives that promote Muslim women in community roles in the broader society.
- Counselling and support services be made available to address the impact of racism on Muslim women.
- Develop awareness of screening by health professionals for the effects and impacts of racism on Muslim women and their children.
- Empathy training and a pamphlet to make bystanders aware of their options in situations of racism.

The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria

The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (the Council) is a community welfare organisation established and managed by Muslim women for Muslim women. The Council was established in 1991 as a non-religious organisation reflecting the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and sectarian diversity of Muslim women living in the state of Victoria.

The Council is founded on the belief that meaningful change in the status of Muslim women will be achieved through the improved situation of Muslim women individually and by building their capacity collectively. To this end, the Council aims to facilitate Muslim women's full participation in Australian society. It is a grassroots organisation, informed by the historical, present and evolving status and needs of Muslim women, reflecting the impressive and complex diversity present in the Australian Muslim community.

The Council aims to facilitate Muslim women's full participation in Australian society by:

- Developing and delivering programs and services to meet the needs of Muslim women in a manner consistent with their values and those of their community.
- Empowering Muslim women through information, skills development, support and advocacy.
- Promoting social justice, access and equity in the provision of services to Muslim women.
- Contributing to the development of knowledge about Muslims at all levels of government, amongst professionals and within the general community.
- Promoting the complexity and diversity of Muslim women's identities and building an interconnectedness between women through increased awareness of their common and diverse challenges.
- Promoting Muslim women's right to equality, justice and self determination.
- Working to eliminate discrimination against Muslim women both from within their community and from within the broader social, economic and political spheres of Australian society.

Background to the Report

The terrorist attacks in America on September 11 changed the world for Muslim women living in Victoria and what began as a single event soon became a series of events. There was the Bali bombing in 2002, the Madrid train bombing in 2004 and the London train and bus bombings in 2005. In addition, the Cronulla riots in 2005 focused the nation's attention on anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The Council has been aware of regular negative public commentary and media representations of Muslims, Muslim women and Islam in general over recent years and the Council has tried to address this by publishing a media guide[1].

These events and the regular negative representations of Muslims in the media have had a tremendous impact on the lives of Muslim women living in Victoria.

The Council first noticed the reactions of non-Muslim Victorians to Muslim women immediately after the September 11 attacks when women began reporting racially motivated violence and abuse. While reports of physical abuse decreased, the Council received reports from women of their scarfs and hijabs being forcibly removed, of verbal abuse on the street and other public places such as public transport, as well as incidents of women being spat at. These reports by Muslim women are supported by the research conducted here and overseas indicating rising levels of discrimination and prejudice against Muslims after the September 11 attacks.[2]

While racial violence and abuse had existed prior to September 11 in Victoria, the series of terrorist attacks galvanised negative Muslim sentiment and increased the visibility of Muslims as outsiders and potential threats to the community. As a result community leaders began telling women to stay home, placing in jeopardy the hard fought for gains in Muslim women's independence .

The UN's Human Rights Charter (1948) acknowledges the right to participate in the community (articles 18 to 22) the right to freedom of movement (article 13) and the right to have freedom from discrimination (article 7). The anecdotal information received by the Council suggested that these universal human rights were dramatically curtailed for Muslim women living in Victoria after the September 11 terrorist attack.

The Council is committed to ensuring the human rights of Muslim women in Victoria and is particularly concerned when services established to assist Muslim communities are not utilised by Muslim women. In 2002, the Victorian Multicultural Commission established a community support line for Muslims to receive support and advice on racist attacks and violence. Muslim women did not utilise this service, but continued to report abuse and violence to their community organisations. Anecdotal information suggested that, despite the Commission's positive relationship with community leaders, women continued to see the Commission as 'the Government' and did not feel confident or indeed safe enough to access government services on these issues. The limited community access to the assistance provided by the Commission became an important reason for the Council's motivation to undertake further work on women's experiences.

1 *The Council has addressed the regular negative public and media representation of Muslims, Muslim women and Islam in another project: Media Guide, IWWCV, 2005.*

2 *See "Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia" and "Perceptions of Discrimination and Islamophobia" can be downloaded at http://fra.europa.eu/ ; Tanja Dreher 'Targeted' Experiences of Racism in NSW after September 11, 2001, UTS (2005)*

Having worked with women from a range of Muslim backgrounds, and a range of recently-arrived and long settled Australian Muslims, the Council was familiar with the difficulties and challenges that the post-September 11 environment would pose. The Council feared that women would respond by withdrawing from Australian society and literally hiding in their own homes. This would solve the problem, as it would reduce taunts, attacks, assaults or discrimination if women simply stayed away but only as a result of sacrificing their rights and freedoms. It was unclear whether Muslim women would have the confidence or knowledge to utilise appropriate complaint mechanisms, thereby adding to the invisibility of the problem for authorities responsible for policing racism.

This report aims to investigate to what extent Muslim women's human rights have been impacted since September 11 and to make recommendations to assist the implementation of effective and appropriate strategies to ensure the safety and human rights of Muslim women living in Victoria.

The Council applied for and received funding from the Myer Foundation in 2003 to:

- systematically investigate and document Muslim women's experience of racial violence, abuse, discrimination and incivility in Victoria;
- examine the impact of these experiences on Muslim women;
- identify what perceptions non-Muslim Victorians have of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular;
- identify variables associated with anti-Muslim prejudice;
- identify Muslim women and non-Muslim residents' views on how to improve and strengthen community relations; and
- develop a series of recommendations to shape future policies and intervention programs to address these issues.

Ultimately it is the hope of the Council that this report can contribute to mitigating racism against Muslim women and the erosion of Muslim women's participation and sense of belonging in the Australian community.

Structure of the Report

This report is divided into the following sections:

- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Stage 1: Focus groups with Muslim women
- Stage 2: Non-Muslim perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women
- Stage 3: Follow up focus groups with Muslim women
- Key Findings and Discussion
- Strategies and Recommendations to Promote Inclusion and Reduce Racism

Literature Review

Introduction

The Muslim population comprised 1.5%, 2.0% and 2.2% of the total Victorian population in 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses respectively. Victorian Muslims are a linguistically and culturally diverse group. While most Muslims are Australian-born those born overseas are predominantly from the Middle East, Asia and more recently Africa.

Since 2001 there has been a significant number of reports, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, that have sought to document the Western world's perceptions of Muslim communities and the experiences of Muslim communities living in the West[3]. This section summarises the findings of international and national research on the perceptions and experiences of Muslims and Muslim women in the West.

a) Perceptions of Muslims – International Research

A number of international opinion polls have been undertaken to gauge perceptions of Muslims and Islam and to assess the level of anti-Muslim sentiment in western countries.

GfK Custom Research survey – December 2004[4]

This survey was conducted on behalf of The Wall Street Journal Europe by GfK Custom Research Worldwide. The sample comprised 21,102 people in 21 countries (18 Western and Eastern European countries, the U.S.A. and Turkey). They were interviewed between September and October 2004.

Over fifty per cent of Western Europeans were aware that Muslims living in Europe today are viewed with suspicion. This was particularly true of Sweden (75 per cent) and the Netherlands (72 per cent). Two in three respondents agreed with that proposition in Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Germany. Among Western European nations, the lowest number of people who felt this way was in the UK. In Central and Eastern European countries only three in ten believed Muslims living in Europe are unwelcome.

Standard Eurobarometer Survey 2005[5]

The Standard Eurobarometer covers 30 countries or territories: the 25 EU member states, the two accession countries (Bulgaria and Romania), the two candidate countries (Croatia and Turkey) and the Turkish Cypriot Community.

Across the 25 EU member states – 41 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that "Turkey's accession to the EU would favour the mutual comprehension of European and Muslim values"; with agreement ranging from a low of 24 per cent in Austria to a high of 60 per cent in Sweden. In contrast, 54 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that "the cultural differences between Turkey and the EU Member States are too significant to allow for this accession"; with agreement ranging from a high of 73 per cent in Austria to a low of 41 per cent in the UK.

3 *Modood, Tariq The Political Quarterly, Volume 74, Supplement 1, August 2003 , pp. 100–115(16)*

4 *GfK Custom Research survey on behalf of The Wall Street Journal Europe. More information at www.gfk.com (14.05.2006)*

5 *More information at http://europa.eu.int/comm*

Council on American-Islamic Relations – American Public Opinion About Islam and Muslims 2006[6]

An independent survey by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) showed that around one quarter (23 to 27 per cent) of Americans consistently believe stereotypes such as "Muslims value life less than other people," and "the Muslim religion teaches violence and hatred." Those with the most negative attitudes toward Muslims tended to be older, less-educated and politically conservative.

CAIR's survey also showed that only six per cent of Americans have a positive first impression of Islam and Muslims, and that just two per cent said they were "very knowledgeable" about Islam. Some 60 per cent of respondents said they "are not very knowledgeable" or "not at all knowledgeable" about Islam. The Washington-based Islamic civil rights and advocacy group says those figures demonstrate that education is the key to improving public perceptions of Islam.

A majority of the respondents in CAIR's survey said they would change their views about Islam and Muslims if: Muslims condemned terrorism more strongly, Muslims showed more concern for issues important to ordinary Americans, Muslims worked to improve the status of women, and Muslims worked to improve the image of America in the Muslim world.

Pew Global Attitudes Project

The Pew Global Attitudes Project is a series of worldwide public opinion surveys. After the terrorist attacks on September 11 the project began measuring the public's attitudes toward terrorism, the intersection between the Islamic faith and public policy in countries with significant Muslim populations, and probing attitudes toward the United States more deeply in all countries.

The 2005 survey 'Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics' found 57 per cent of people surveyed in the United States and 72 per cent in Great Britain held favourable views of Muslims. There appeared to be a varied picture of public opinion towards Muslim communities and the threat of Islamic extremism. The majority of respondents believed that "Muslims want to remain distinct" and that "they have an increasing sense of Islamic identity". Also, the majority were "concerned about Islamic extremism". Nevertheless, the majority of respondents in France and Great Britain and a significant number in the other countries had a favourable view of Muslims.[7]

There was also varied public opinion on the wearing of the headscarf. In answer to the question "whether there should be a ban on the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women in public places including schools" 78 per cent of respondents in France and 54 per cent in Germany saw this as a "good idea". This figure was only 29 per cent in Great Britain. The high result in France possibly reflects 2004 ban on obvious religious symbols from state schools.

In contrast, majority populations in the U.S., Canada, and every European country other than France, judged that some religions are more prone to violence than others. When those taking this view were asked which religion they considered to be more violent, large majorities in each of these countries nominated Islam.

6 *See: CAIR: American Public Opinion About Islam and Muslims Summary: www.cair.com/cairsurveyanalysis.pdf Detailed Results: www.cair.com/CAIRSurveyReport.pdf*

7 *More information at http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=809*

The 2006 survey, 'The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other', covered four EU member states; Germany, Spain, Great Britain and France with a booster sample of Muslim minorities. Its findings were described as "more mixed than unremittingly negative", although an analysis of the survey suggests that many in the West see Muslims as "fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance," whilst Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerners as "selfish, immoral, and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical."

But the survey also found that views held by European Muslims "in many ways, represent a middle ground between the way Western publics and Muslims in the Middle East and Asia view each other"[8].

Overall, the findings suggest that Westerners are broadly sceptical of Muslim values. Many Westerners – including solid majorities of the general public in Germany and Spain – say that there is a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. Westerners are also less optimistic about the prospects for democracy in the Muslim world than are Muslims themselves.

While Europe's Muslim minorities are about as likely as Muslims elsewhere to see relations between Westerners and Muslims as generally bad, they more often associate positive attributes to Westerners, "including tolerance, generosity, and respect for women"[9]. European Muslims also are less likely than non-Muslims in Europe to believe that there is a conflict between modernity and being a devout Muslim.

In 'Unfavourable views of Jews and Muslims on the increase in Europe'[10], the Pew Global Attitudes project 2008 reported that the portion of residents holding favourable views of Muslims decreased to 56 per cent in the United States from 57 per cent in 2005 and to 63 per cent in Great Britain down from 72 per cent in 2005. The 2008 report also surveyed Australian attitudes to Muslims and found that 60 per cent of Australians held a favourable view of Muslims, placing Australia slightly above America but below Great Britain.

8 *Ibid*

9 *Ibid*

10 More information at http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=262

Gallop World Poll: Muslims in Europe 2007

Surveys of Muslims in London, Paris and Berlin were conducted between November 2006 and February 2007. General public surveys were conducted between December 2006 and January 2007, using random digit dialling in each country to reach representative samples of adult populations aged 15 and older.

While Gallop's 2007 surveys of Muslims in London, Paris and Berlin point to the need for greater understanding between Europe's Muslim residents and the broader societies in which they live, they also offer plenty of evidence that the foundation for that understanding is already in place.

Perhaps, most importantly, the results reflect a desire among both Muslims and the general public of each country studied to improve the mutual understanding of ethnic and religious differences. For example, majorities of all groups interviewed expressed a preference for living in a neighbourhood with mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds, rather than one in which most people shared their own background.

The report suggests that the first step toward greater understanding is to dispel common misperceptions on both sides. The non-Muslim European public should recognize, for example, that isolated terrorist attacks do not imply that most Muslims advocate or tolerate the use of violence.

Asked to rate the moral acceptability of using violence in the name of a noble cause on a 5-point scale, the proportion of Muslims in London who chose a low rating of 1 or 2 was 81 per cent, compared with 72 per cent of the British public overall. In France, the corresponding numbers were 77 per cent of Parisian Muslims and 79 per cent of the French public. In Germany they were 94 per cent of Muslims in Berlin and 75 per cent of the German public. In other words, Muslims in the capital city were less likely than the overall public to approve of such violence in Germany and the United Kingdom, while the per centages were similar in France.

Moreover, the data failed to support fears that Muslims do not respect democratic institutions. In fact, Muslim respondents in each city were more likely to express confidence in the country's democratic institutions than the general public with about two-thirds of Muslims in London (64 per cent) saying they have confidence in the British government compared with just 36 per cent of the British public overall. Muslims in Paris were also more likely than the French public (40 per cent compared to 36 per cent) to express confidence in the French government. The question was not asked in Germany.

b) Experiences of Muslims – International Research

European Union

It is estimated that more than 20 million Muslims currently reside within the European Union (EU)[11]. Most Muslim communities residing within Europe arise out of economic migration in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, Muslims have arrived as refugees seeking asylum.

There has recently been a spate of reports undertaken by countries within the EU, both individually and collectively, in relation to Muslim communities. These reports have broadly been generated by the following developments:

- demographic trends which indicate that a significant proportion of the growth in Europe's population over the next decade will be within Muslim communities. This has necessitated greater consideration of how governments will meet the needs of their Muslim citizens;
- growing official acknowledgement of prejudice and discrimination against Muslim communities;
- smaller local studies which indicate severe levels of disadvantage experienced by sections of the Muslim communities in the EU. They are among the most impoverished and disadvantaged communities, suffering from poor levels of educational achievement, employment, income, housing and health;
- Muslim community groups and politicians are increasingly campaigning for governments to address issues of concern to them; and
- there has been unprecedented scrutiny and focus on Muslim communities following the attacks in Madrid and London, the murder of Theo van Gogh and the riots in France in November 2005.

Given these developments it is not surprising that there has been considerable activity within the European Union in relation to the documentation of perceptions of Muslims by non-Muslims and of incidents of discrimination and violence against Muslims in Europe. Importantly, however, very little research appears to have been done to specifically address the question of the intersections of gender, racial and religious vilification, and its impact on Muslim women.

Of major significance to documenting discrimination against Muslims has been the work undertaken by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) which was established by the European Union as an independent body to combat racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism throughout Europe. It also works with the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

Following the events of September 11 the EUMC implemented a reporting system on potential anti-Islamic reactions in the EU member states. Since 2001, the EUMC has continued to monitor discrimination against Muslim communities, culminating in the more recent report 'Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia 2006'[12]. This report presents data on discrimination experienced by

11 *It is however difficult to provide an exact number since several EU countries do not register the religious affiliation of their residents. See David Masci, An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, December 2004, at http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/MuslimsinEurope2004.pdf*

12 *See : http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/ for full copy of report*

Muslims in employment, education and housing. It also includes manifestations of Islamophobia ranging from verbal threats to physical attacks on people and property. The report stresses that the extent and nature of discrimination and Islamophobic incidents against European Muslims remain under-documented and under-reported.

Key findings and conclusions include:

- regardless of their ethnic background and/or approach to religion, many European Muslims are facing discrimination in employment, education and housing;
- discrimination against Muslims can be attributed to Islamophobic attitudes as well as to racist and xenophobic resentment, as these elements are often intertwined. Hostility against Muslims must therefore be seen in the more general context of xenophobia and racism towards migrants and minorities;
- it is evident that Muslims are experiencing Islamophobic acts ranging from verbal threats through to physical attacks, even though data collected on religiously targeted incidents is limited;
- the available data on victims of discrimination show that European Muslims are often disproportionately represented in areas with poorer housing conditions, their educational achievement rates fall below average and their unemployment rates are higher than average. Muslims are often employed in jobs that require lower qualifications. As a group they are over-represented in low-paying sectors of the economy;
- Many European Muslims, particularly young people, face barriers to their social advancement. This could give rise to a feeling of hopelessness and social exclusion; and
- racism, discrimination and social marginalisation are serious threats to integration and community cohesion.

Specific mention was made in the above report on the issue of the headscarf:

"The wearing of the headscarf is a complex and multifaceted issue that is often raised in public debate in most European countries during recent years particularly in the areas of education and employment. It is in these areas that the issue of the headscarf has become controversial, as it is seen as a symbol of female oppression and gender inequality".[13]

The report highlighted that a range of legal issues concerning the wearing of the headscarf have arisen in some EU member states – particularly in relation to wearing a headscarf by school teachers or students.

Importantly, the Report is accompanied by a study entitled 'Perceptions of discrimination and Islamophobia'[14], which is based on in-depth interviews with members of Muslim communities in ten EU Member States.

Interviewees suggested that many Muslims in the European Union feel that they are under intense scrutiny. The interviewees agreed that a great deal changed after the September 11 attacks with respondents across

13 *P. 42*

14 *"Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia" and "Perceptions of Discrimination and Islamophobia" can be downloaded at http://fra.europa.eu/*

different countries reporting an increase in open incidents of everyday hostility after the attacks. Most of those who were interviewed thought that the situation had deteriorated over the last five years.

According to the interviewees, even when Muslims are citizens of a Member State, they can still feel a sense of exclusion. They feel that they are perceived as 'foreigners' who are a threat to society and treated with suspicion. This feeling is reported to be stronger among young European born Muslims than their parents. The interviewees expressed the view that the demands on Muslims to 'integrate' are often unreasonable and inconsistent. Respondents considered that the media presented a largely negative image of Muslims. They reported feeling frustrated by what they considered to be negative portrayals resulting from distortions through selective reporting. They claimed that often Islam is presented as monolithic, authoritarian and oppressive towards women, often as a consequence of the perceived treatment of women in some Muslim communities, adding that this is reinforced by a constant focus in media and public discussion on issues such as forced marriages and female circumcision.

Respondents suggested that the majority of attacks suffered by Muslims are mostly verbal. Nevertheless, respondents stated that they were 'worn down' by such daily experiences, which are far more likely to happen when a person is visibly Muslim, such as when wearing a headscarf. Respondents also reported facing discrimination in access to housing, education and employment. Many felt that Islamophobia is expressed in the small details of every day encounters, in passing comments, jokes and the way Muslims are observed and looked at by others.

Another significant report released in the EU in 2005 by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) was titled 'Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU – Developments since September 11'.[15] The report provides a summary on the situation of Muslims in the EU and an in-depth mapping of intolerant attitudes and facts on discriminatory actions directed against Muslims in the eleven European countries where the largest Muslim communities exist. The key message of the report is that:

"in the aftermath of 9/11, the social climate facing Muslims has deteriorated in the countries covered by this report […] pre-existing prejudice and discriminations against Muslims have been reinforced. The xenophobic prejudice against Muslims has resulted in attacks on Muslims in the streets and other public spaces".[16]

The report states that in some countries it has become more "legitimate" to openly express hostility and to use intolerant language against Muslims. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the courts have acted in general to protect the rights of Muslims against discrimination.

The report also states that for the most part unbalanced and scandal-oriented mainstream media coverage of issues relating to Islam and Muslims in general dominated the majority of countries surveyed. The report registered a growing tendency in the media since the September 11 attacks to portray Muslims in a negative and stereotypical fashion.

In the German media, for example, the coverage of the conflicts in the Near and Middle East largely serve to associate Islam with terrorism and therefore have a negative impact on public attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. Similarly, the British media is criticised for reinforcing prejudice and mistrust towards Muslims through irresponsible and unbalanced reporting.

15 *The IHF report, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU – Developments since September 11 can be found at the IHF website: www.ihf-hr.org.*

16 *Ibid*

The report highlights that anti-Muslim attitudes, like all other forms of discrimination against minorities, are not compatible with democracy and human rights. The report recommends the facilitation of an inter-cultural dialogue in Europe based on transparency, tolerance and "de-alienation" of the 'other' with the aim of re-modelling the multicultural-concept from one of "living beside each other" to "living together".

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has approximately 1.6 million Muslims, forming one of the most diverse multi-ethnic Muslim communities in the world. Most communities are the result of economic migration in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently Muslims have arrived as refugees seeking asylum.

There has been growing official acknowledgement of prejudice and discrimination against Muslim communities dating from the publication of the 1997 report of the Commission on British Muslims called 'Islamophobia', launched in the House of Commons by the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw. Several reports have indicated unprecedented scrutiny and focus on British Muslim communities following the attacks of September 11.

In 2002, as part of its programme on minority protection in the EU, the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute published a report on minority protection in the five largest EU member states. The EUMAP report on the UK was a snapshot of the situation of Muslims in terms of minority rights and their experiences of discrimination and disadvantage. It identified the severe levels of disadvantage experienced by British Muslims and that the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Muslims is a significant barrier to their participation and integration in British society.

Since the release of the report, the London train and bus bombings that took place on 7 July 2005 claimed the lives of over 50 people and injured many more. The EUMC undertook a further review of the situation of Muslims immediately after the attacks. The report confirmed that in the immediate period after the attacks there was a temporary and disturbing increase in faith-related hate crimes across the UK. The view of the report was that the:

"... strong stand taken by political and community leaders both in condemning the attacks and defending the legitimate rights of Muslims saw a swift reduction in such incidents. As a result of the strong stand by political and community leaders there was a largely positive response from the media across the EU which avoided making generalisations and stressed the importance of distinguishing between the act of a few individuals and the community in general."[17]

17 *EUMC 2005 – The impact of 7 July 2005 London bomb attacks on Muslim Communities in the EU.*

The positive view taken by the report was not universally shared. However, the organisation, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, released an article which highlighted that women are likely to bear the brunt in several ways following attacks such as those in London[18]. The article stressed that, in the overall context where all "Muslims" are constructed as potential terrorists, women will be branded as part of extremist groups and at the same time remain the target of fundamentalist forces within their own communities.

The article goes on to state that:

"the immediate aftermath of the bombings, the potential impact on women's rights within Muslim communities, especially migrant communities in the UK, was already visible. The President of the Muslim Association of Britain was prompted to warn: "women in headscarves, particularly, should be vigilant and avoid unnecessary journeys'. Thus, racist violence is already being exploited to restrict women's mobility and further enforce gender segregation".[19]

United States

A number of key reports have been released in the United States, all of which indicate a significant rise in incidents of abuse and violence against Muslims living in the US. Very few reports specifically detail the gender dimensions of such incidents.

One of the most significant reports is 'The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States: Stereotypes and Civil Liberties' (2002) by the Council on American-Islamic Relations Research Center (CAIR). This report has been regarded as the only national study of its kind, detailing incidents and experiences of anti-Muslim violence, stereotyping, discrimination, and harassment in the year following the September 11 attacks. It also outlines the 'Islamophobic' backlash that occurred and examines the impact of anti-terrorism policies on American Muslims' civil liberties.

Data gathered for this report demonstrated that the daily experiences of Muslims in schools, workplaces, public areas, and airports often included incidents in which Muslims were singled out, denied religious accommodation and discriminated against by reason of actual or perceived religion or ethnicity. In the year of the research for the report CAIR received 1,516 complaints from community members, representing a three-fold increase over the previous year. Individual claims reported directly to CAIR affected the lives of more than 2,250 people. Most victims were subjected to incidents of bias-motivated harassment and violence: "Unlike any other past crisis, the post-September 11 anti-Muslim backlash has been the most violent, as it included several murders."

The report also demonstrated a 43 per cent increase in the number of reported incidents. These incidents included:

- the termination or denial of employment because of religious appearance;
- the refusal to accommodate religious practices in the workplace, schools, and prisons;
- the singling out of individuals at airports because of their distinct names, appearances, and travel destination;
- the detention or interrogation of Muslims by federal and local authorities based on profiling criteria; and
- the denial of services or access to public accommodation facilities because of religious or ethnic identity.

18 *See www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-262999*

19 *Ibid*

In November 2002, the American organisation Human Rights Watch released the report: 'We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab or Muslim after September 11'.

In that report, Human Rights Watch detailed the nature of the September 11 backlash and the local, state, and federal government responses to it. Drawing on research in six large cities, Human Rights Watch identified public practices used to protect individuals and communities from hate crimes. The report focused particularly on four areas of response: police deployment, prosecutions, bias crime monitoring, and outreach to affected communities.

The report details how in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Arabs and Muslims in the United States, and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim, such as Sikhs and South Asians, became victims of a severe wave of backlash violence. The hate crimes ranged from murder, beatings and arson to attacks on mosques, shootings, vehicular assaults and verbal threats.

The report highlights that while no national statistics are readily available, Arab and Muslim groups reported more than two thousand September 11-related backlash incidents. It refers to the Federal Bureau of Investigation which reported a 17 fold increase in anti-Muslim crimes nationwide during 2001. In Los Angeles County and Chicago, officials reported 15 times the number of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim crimes in 2001 compared to the preceding year. This is extraordinary considering that the increases are likely to relate to the last four months of 2001.

A very important point that the report makes is that flaws in the various systems to track bias crimes in the United States hindered complete and accurate reporting of the nature and extent of September 11 backlash violence.

A national telephone survey was conducted by Cornell University Study investigating how much the public fears terrorism.[20] Of the 715 respondents interviewed:

- about 44 per cent of respondents said they believe that some curtailment of civil liberties is necessary for Muslim Americans;
- twenty-six per cent said they think that mosques should be closely monitored by US law enforcement agencies;
- twenty-nine per cent agreed that undercover law enforcement agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations, in order to keep tabs on their activities and fund raising; and
- sixty-five per cent of self-described highly religious respondents said they view Islam as encouraging violence more than other religions do, compared with 42 per cent of respondents who described themself as not highly religious.

20 *www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Dec04/Muslim.Poll.bpf.html.*

Canada

Canada, interestingly, provides the greatest source of specific research relating to Muslim women and their experience and perceptions of discrimination. Of particular interest is a report conducted by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. The 'Voices of Muslim Women' was a participatory research project that investigated the effects of September 11 and its aftermath on Canadian Muslim Women. The report was finalised in 2002 and its purpose was three fold:

- to provide an opportunity for Muslim women to give voice to their own experiences and concerns;
- to increase awareness of the impact of September 11 on the lives of Muslim women; and
- to develop concrete, practical recommendations directly from the community based research.

These results, derived from a series of focus groups, demonstrated that the "everyday lives of Canadian Muslim Women have been negatively affected by the events of 9/11". The negative and positive consequences of the September 11 were analysed by examining individuals, communities and the media. There were two prevalent emotions in all focus groups: fear and anger. Participants expressed fear about the potential for terrorist attacks in Canada and the potential backlash of such events on their personal safety and the impact it could have on the future of their children in Canada, and even the affect potential attacks could have on their country of origin.

Of particular relevance to the current report is the research undertaken in 2004 by the Community-University Institute for Social Research on 'Immigrant Muslim Women and the Hijab'.[21] The report documented the outcomes of a series of focus groups with immigrant Muslim women in relation to how they constructed their Muslim identities both within the Muslim community and the dominant Western society.

The report highlighted that Muslim women often need to contend with the negative "Muslim woman" stereotype of a passive, backward, non-professional *hijab* wearer. The report also highlighted that within Western media, the *hijab* has become a symbol of Muslim women's gendered oppression. In contrast, most Muslim women participating in the research viewed the hijab as a positive affirmation of their identities and as a tool to confer power and status in their own communities, as well as in mainstream Western society.

21 *Ruby, Tabassum. (2004). Immigrant Muslim Women and the Hijab: Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Identities in Canada. Saskatoon: Community-University Institute for Social Research.*

c) Australian Research

Perceptions of Muslims in Australia

Investigating racism through telephone surveys in Queensland and NSW, Professor Kevin Dunn and his colleagues[22] found that anti-Muslim sentiment is particularly strong among Australians. The study indicated that a substantial degree of racism existed with 12 per cent of respondents identifying themselves as being prejudiced. Racism was more strongly associated with older age, lower levels of formal education, Australian-born and male respondents. Muslims were most commonly identified as the group that least fitted into Australian society and way of life. Women respondents in particular were concerned about the marriage of a close relative to a Muslim, suggesting that Muslims suffer from stereotypes of misogyny and sexism.[23]

'The More than Tolerance' report, a Vichealth study exploring discrimination affecting migrant and refugee communities in Victoria, surveyed 4,000 Victorians. To identify perceptions of out-groups, respondents were asked the extent of their concern if a close relative were to marry someone from a culturally and linguistically diverse group. The highest level of concern in relation to any group was Muslims, with 43 per cent of respondents saying they would be concerned.

The Scanlon Foundation Surveys also provided some information on outgroups. When respondents were asked whether they thought Australia's current immigration intake was 'about right', over one third (35 per cent) stated that the balance of the intake was wrong. When asked from which regions or countries there should be fewer immigrants, respondents most frequently mentioned the Middle East, Muslim countries and Asia.[24]

In another study, Dunn[25] examined the Australian public's knowledge of Islam. One third of survey respondents reported knowing nothing about Islam, half said they knew a little, while one seventh said they knew a reasonable amount. When asked to detail their perceptions of Islam, over 40 per cent of respondents could not, suggesting a higher level of ignorance than the one third who reported knowing nothing about Islam.

Of those who could detail their perceptions of Islam, 38 per cent of respondents could only offer criticisms. As noted by Dunn, almost half of the criticisms offered as knowledge by respondents could in fact be classified as stereotypes of Islam. These findings suggest a high level of ignorance and misunderstanding about Islam by the Australian public. This lack of knowledge and negative stereotyping is likely to be linked to the identification of Muslims as a key out-group by Australians.

Dunn also measured the extent to which Australians knew Muslims. Of the people surveyed, 55.2 per cent reported not knowing any Muslim people while 42.3 per cent reported knowing a few Muslim people. Those who had no contact with Muslims had double the rates of stated ignorance (45.7 per cent) than did those with some contact (21 per cent), suggesting a link between contact and knowledge of Islam. Interestingly, older respondents had less direct contact with Muslims but claimed higher rates of knowledge.

22 *Dunn, K. (2003) Racism in Australia: findings of a survey on racist attitudes and experiences of racism, National Europe Centre Paper No.77, Paper presented at The Challenges of Immigration and Integration in the European Union and Australia, University of Sydney*

23 *Ibid*

24 *Markus & Dharmalingam, 2007*

25 *Dunn, K. (2005). Australian Public Knowledge of Islam, Studia Islamika, Vol 12(1), 2005.*

Experiences of Muslims in Australia

Throughout the last decade, Australian Muslims have increasingly been stereotyped by some members of the wider community. More recently research clearly indicates that the increased racism and prejudice against Muslim and Arab Australians after September 11 produced a climate of intense fear and insecurity among Muslim communities.[26]

Consultations undertaken by Poynting and colleagues[27], consistently reveal reports of individuals and families afraid to leave their homes, afraid to dress as they choose, fearful of neighbours or colleagues and scared of further violence or abuse. Pervasive fear for personal safety limits the use of public space as members of targeted communities may be afraid to leave the house, afraid to go to school, to visit the beach or to travel on the train. Poynting also highlights how the experience of living in fear serves to diminish the exercise of citizenship and limit the possibilities of participating in social and political life.[28]

Poynting and Noble [29] investigated the types and extent of racially motivated attacks reported by Muslims since September 11. Three quarters of Muslims surveyed had experienced an increase in racism against them and the community with which they identified. Women reported that they were significantly more likely to experience racism than were men. More women were likely to experience racism on the street and in shops and shopping malls than men, and the wearing of the hijab was the most frequently cited cause for experiencing racism. This led the authors to suggest that there might be a gendered dimension to racist experiences and to acknowledge that this has not yet to be adequately analysed.[30]

Only a small number of incidents were reported to authorities. Poynting and Noble suggest that authorities charged with policing racism are, for Muslims, too strongly identified as institutions that condone racism or are unwilling to treat the issue seriously.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's (formerly Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) Isma□ project, undertook a series of national consultations in an attempt to document discrimination against Muslim communities.[31] This project was a response to increasing concerns expressed by Arab and Muslim organisations about the rise in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia. The aim of the Isma□ project was to explore the extent of discrimination and vilification faced by Arab and Muslim Australians after September 11 and the nature and impact of these experiences.

26 *See Dreher, T (2006) 'Targeted': Experiences of racism in NSW after September 11, 2001 UTS Shopfront Monograph Series No 2, 2nd Edition. Poynting, S (2002) "'Bin Laden in the suburbs': attacks on Arab and Muslim Australians before and after 11 September" in Current Issues in Criminal Justice 14 (1) July, pp. 43 – 64. Poynting, S and Noble, G (2004) Living with Racism: The experience and reporting by Arab and Muslim Australians of discrimination, abuse and violence since 11 September 2001, Report to The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 19 April 2004.*

27 *See following reports: Poynting, S, Noble, G, Tabar, P and Collins, J (2004) Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab other Sydney Institute of Criminology Series, Sydney.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid*

30 *Ibid*

31 *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2004) Isma□ - Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*

In summary, the report detailed the following key findings:

- the majority of participants in the Ismaξ project reported experiencing various forms of prejudice because of their race or religion. These experiences increased after international incidents such as the attacks of September 11 and the October 2002 Bali bombings. They were also exacerbated by particular national and local events such as public debates over asylum seekers and the trial, conviction and sentencing of gang-rapists in Sydney in 2001–2002;

- participants reported experiencing racism and discrimination ranging from offensive remarks about race or religion to physical violence;

- participants felt that those most at risk were readily identifiable as Arab or Muslim because of their dress, physical appearance or name. For example, Muslim women who wear traditional Islamic dress were especially afraid of being abused or attacked. Many have restricted their movements and reported becoming more isolated since September 11;

- participants identified lack of knowledge and misinformation about their history, culture and faith as the major underlying cause for the rise in prejudice against them. This lack of knowledge and misinformation has been exacerbated by terrorism and an international climate of political tension between the Arab and Muslim world and western nations, including Australia; and

- participants also felt that biased and inaccurate reporting of issues relating to Arabs and Muslims was commonplace amongst sections of the media and was extremely damaging.

In 'Whose Responsibility? Community anti-racism strategies after September 11', Dr Tanja Dreher, Research Director for the UTS Shopfront community program, examined the way government and community organisations have responded to increased tensions in Sydney since September 11. One of the key findings of the report is that far from being passive victims of racism, Muslim, Arab and Sikh Australians are actually at the forefront of contemporary community relations and anti-racism work in NSW.

Dr Dreher's 'Targeted' report builds on a previous study, which highlighted that Muslim, Arab and Sikh communities in New South Wales experienced an increase in racism, discrimination and harassment since September 11.[32] The 'Targeted' report analysed the data collected by a telephone hotline established by the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW two months after September 11.

Two hundred and forty-eight reports were made in the following categories: verbal assault (43.4 per cent), racial discrimination and harassment (17.5 per cent), physical assault (13.2 per cent), threat (10.3 per cent), media attack (10.3 per cent) and damage to property (5 per cent). Women were more likely to be victims than men, 50.4 per cent compared with 44.4 per cent. Nearly half of the incidents occurred in public spaces, with a smaller number occurring in schools, residences or neighbourhoods, and in the media.

Thirteen per cent of callers had contacted the police prior to calling the hotline. Other responses included challenging the perpetrators and doing nothing. Visible markers of difference such as the hijab and turban were strongly linked to racist incidents.

The impact of racism against Muslim and Arab communities in NSW resulted in community members experiencing a climate of fear in which communities felt targeted, insecure and unwelcome.

32 *Ibid,*

Impact on Belonging

In his paper, 'The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Comfortable Nation,' Greg Noble[33] explores the increasing experience of discomfort amongst migrant Australians and their children, drawing on two sets of empirical data: one about a sense of home amongst migrants and the other about incidents of racism towards Arabs and Muslims since 2001. The idea of comfort captures what Giddens calls ontological security, or the trust we have in our surroundings, both human and non-human. This sense of security, built on mutual recognition, is fundamental to our capacity for social agency. Migrant home-building constantly negotiates the displacement thrown up by the act of migration as migrants attempt to settle in a new country. Experiences of racism, especially since 2001, undermine the ability of migrants to feel 'at home', and hence their capacity to exist as citizens.

Noble [34] analysed the reporting of social incivility to highlight the prevalence of mundane and even routine forms of harassment directed towards Muslim and Arab Australians after September 11. These banal and everyday racisms include 'rude or insulting everyday behaviours – name-calling, jokes in bad taste, bad manners, provocative and offensive gestures, a sense of social distance or unfriendliness, an excessive focus on someone's ethnicity'[35]. This form of racism is rarely reported. Yet Arab and Muslim Australians increasingly feel uncomfortable in their everyday worlds as a result of these harassments. While comments, gestures and looks may seem relatively inoffensive, they are in fact experienced as deeply hurtful, particularly where there is a lack of response or care.

Experiences of Muslim Women

One of the only Australian studies focusing on the impact of post-September 11 events on Muslim women is a recent research study undertaken in relation to Muslim women and public space[36].

The study involved a series of individual interviews and two focus groups with Muslim women and was geographically focused on the inner western suburbs of Sydney where the Muslim population is concentrated. In all, 23 Muslim women were involved in the study, ranging in age from approximately 16 to 50 years. The women were born in or had lived in Australia, Afghanistan, England, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon and Turkey. The majority of women who participated in the study wore the hijab.

Each participant described having experienced some form of verbal or physical abuse. This included being shoved while waiting on train platforms, being told to go back to their own country, and having their hijab tugged and pulled off. Many women also experienced everyday forms of racism, such as being served last or not at all while at shops, in banks, post offices and local offices.

Participants described feeling like an 'other' who did not belong in Australian society. Women linked their perception of otherness to personal experiences of discrimination, prejudice and abuse, and reported that media representations claiming Muslims are to be feared and not trusted only reinforced their feelings of otherness and discomfort. This further eroded their sense of belonging.

This report found that this perception of otherness related significantly to Muslim women's behaviours in, and attitudes towards, public space.

33 *Noble, G (2005) 'The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Confortable Nation' Journal of Intercultural Studies Vol 26 No 1, February – May, pp 107 – 120.*

34 *Ibid*

35 *Ibid*

36 *Carolyn Whitten and Susan Thompson (2007): When Cultures Collide: Planning for the Public Spatial Needs of Muslim Women in Sydney – Social City 1*

Summary

While research clearly demonstrates a rise in racism against Muslims in Australia and overseas associated with the attacks of September 11 and subsequent events, few studies have analysed the gender dimension of racism. Muslims are vulnerable to manifestations of racism and anti-Muslim sentiment in the form of anything from everyday racisms through to racial violence. A great majority of incidents are not being reported to authorities, implying that an effective mechanism for dealing with racism is lacking for Muslim communities.

Opinion polls in Australia and overseas have identified a high level of negativity toward Muslims post-September 11. In Australia, Muslims have been identified as the key out-group in Australian society, making Muslims vulnerable to being spatially managed by those who feel entitled to say who belongs in Australian society. Moreover, a majority of Australians involved in existing studies knew little or nothing about Islam and offered criticisms when asked to detail their knowledge. However, this ignorance decreased with greater contact with Muslims.

Muslim women were more likely to be victims of racism than men in NSW, and they were more likely to experience racism on the streets and in shops and shopping malls. While this suggests that Muslim women are at greater risk of experiencing racism, only one study explored these issues with a group of Muslim women in Sydney's west.

The finding that hijab wearing increase the likelihood of experiencing racism is only further evidence of Muslim women's heightened vulnerability to racism.

The aim of this report is to investigate and systematically document the perceptions of Muslim women in order to substantiate anecdotal claims of racism and to examine its impact, how women have responded and what women suggest as a way of combating the problem.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is particularly strong among Australians. It would appear that Australian women were particularly sensitive to the treatment of women by Muslims. And that the West often associated the hijab with Muslim women's gendered oppression. An aim of this report was to get a better understanding of how Muslim women are perceived by non-Muslims to assist in the development of recommendations to strengthen the relationship between non-Muslim Victorians and Muslim women.

Methodology

To achieve the aims of this study data was collected in three stages. And the methods used to collect data in each stage is described in the following section

Stage 1: Focus Groups with Muslim women

A series of focus groups were run with Victorian Muslim women between November 2003 and March 2005.

The aims of the focus groups were to:

- document Muslim women's experiences of racial violence, abuse, discrimination and incivility in Victoria post-September 11;
- examine the impact of these experiences on the lives of Muslim women; and
- receive women's input on how to improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Victoria.

A total of 206 women participated in 13 focus groups.[37] Every effort was made to ensure that the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Muslim communities was adequately represented in focus groups. They were, however, representative of the Council's service users, tending to be unemployed, from low socio-economic strata of Muslim communities, non-English speakers and a significant proportion were newly-arrived immigrants. As a result, focus group participants were less representative in terms of age, level of education or social status.

Focus group participants' ages ranged from 14 to 75 and focus groups were held in English, Turkish, Arabic, Amharic, Tigri, Dari, Urdu and Somali. The Council's bilingual staff used various community networks to recruit participants from a range of ethnic and cultural groups and also worked in partnership with relevant organisations. Two focus groups were held in conjunction with the Human Right and Equal Opportunity Commission's Ismaξ project.[38]

Focus groups were run with pre-existing groups, including newly-arrived women's groups, mothers' play groups, support groups for temporary visa holders and a Muslim students' union. In groups where there was a mixture of Muslim and non-Muslim members, only Muslim women members participated in focus groups. A number of group leaders were paid for their assistance in organising focus groups. Focus groups where held at each group's usual venue and were conducted in the participants' preferred language, with sessions often multilingual.

Participants in focus groups were informed of the goals and outcomes of the research project, such as the publication of the project report and the development of programs. Some participants from war-torn countries were particularly concerned about providing any identifying information. They were afraid of being identified due to fear of repercussions, or were temporary visa holders who feared the consequences of complaining. In addition, some women who grew up in conflict situations did not know their ages and dates of birth. This resulted in the Council having no means of consistently identifying informants for the

37 *See Appendix A for complete list of focus groups conducted.*

38 *Ibid*

purposes of referencing their statements in the report. We have tried where possible to provide the ethnic background of informants.

Focus Group Questions

The focus group discussions were semi-structured. This allowed for greater interaction between participants, as well as increasing the capacity of bilingual workers and group facilitators to explore and elicit a range of perceptions and attitudes to specific questions.

Questions were developed by the Council based on the complaints of discrimination that the Council had received from Muslim women. Focus group questions were designed to investigate women's experiences of racial abuse, violence, incivility and discrimination and how women understood, responded to, and coped with, such incidents.

An initial set of questions was piloted with a pre-established group run at the Council. The results from this pilot group indicated it was necessary to ask what constituted safety, as it was evident in the pilot group that women required a neutral question to provide a gentle entry to a more focused discussion. An extra question was also added to better describe safety concerns in public spaces.

In focus groups, participants were asked to define what being safe meant, and to what extent violence was an issue in and outside their community. The participants were asked to what extent racial violence, abuse, incivility and discrimination were issues for them and whether such experiences had increased or decreased and why. Focus group participants were asked about the impact these issues had had on them and to describe what they did to protect themselves, as well as their knowledge of available support services. Women were asked what they thought had motivated the racial violence, abuse, incivility and discrimination and why they thought this. Finally participants were asked about their sense of belonging, and about what things could be done to improve the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

The terms violence, abuse, incivility and discrimination were used interchangeably during focus groups as the distinction between them were difficult to translate and many participants described their experiences with little regard for these distinctions.[39] The term racism has been used in this report as an all encompassing term for these different categories. Where the violence, abuse, or incivility was not directly linked with participants' religious or racial background, the data was not included in the results of this study.

Data Recording

Focus groups were recorded only when all participants consented. In four focus groups, participants did not consent to being identified, to providing demographic details or to allowing the recording of the session. In these instances, data was summarised in written form by a note taker.

The issue of confidentiality of participants' views was crucial in this study. In order to obtain Muslim women's genuine thoughts and perceptions on sensitive topics, every effort was made to make participants feel comfortable. This ensured women could speak confidently without fear of identification.

39 *see Poynting (2004) for a discussion of issues with such terminology*

Stage 2: Non-Muslim Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women

The second stage of the data collection involved a telephone survey in July 2005 of 600 non-Muslim Victorians by The Social Research Centre. The aim of the telephone survey was to:

- document the perceptions of Muslims and of Muslim women held by non-Muslim Victorians;
- identify variables associated with anti-Muslim sentiment; and
- identify non-Muslims' views on how to improve and strengthen community relations between non-Muslim and Muslim communities.

In October 2004, the Council had originally run three focus groups with non-Muslim participants. The focus group questions were designed to fulfil the above aims. Many participants reported feeling uncomfortable expressing their views and this was reflected in the quality of the focus group data. It was decided that this format was not appropriate for collecting personal views of non-Muslim Victorians and that a format where data could be collected anonymously would be more effective. As a result the Council approached The Social Research Centre, a Victorian based social research company, to conduct a telephone survey of Victorian residents' personal views of Muslims anonymously.

The telephone survey included a range of quantitative and qualitative questions in relation to non-Muslim Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women. The survey questions were pre-tested on a small sample to ensure that they were easily understood by respondents and elicited the required information.

Telephone Survey Questions

The telephone survey consisted of three sections.

Section 1: Associations and views of Muslims by non-Muslim Victorians

This section featured a series of mainly open-ended questions that sought to elicit the views and associations held by non-Muslims of Muslims in general and Muslim women. Victorian residents were asked what images and words they associated with Muslims and Muslim women in particular, and whether their views of Muslims were mainly positive or negative and why.

Section 2: Context for community relations

This section consisted of a number of questions seeking to contextualise the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslim Victorians. In this section survey participants were asked about how much contact they had with Muslim people, where they sourced their information on Muslims, their views on the accuracy and fairness of media representations of Muslims and the impact of media representations on Muslims living in Victoria.

Section 3: Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Victoria

In this section the survey asked respondents to what degree they endorsed a number of statements and asked about ways to improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Victorians. Survey participants were read a number of specific statements about Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Victoria and were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement. One statement focused specifically on Muslim women while seven other statements asked more generally about Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Victoria. Respondents were then asked whether they had any suggestions for improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

There were 13 questions including demographic questions in the survey. It took approximately 10 minutes to complete and respondents were reassured that their responses would remain totally confidential. The 600 phone surveys were completed over a period of a week in July 2005. Survey results were provided in summary reports to the Council for analysis.

Telephone Survey Respondents' Profiles

A sample of 600 people was randomly selected from the Victorian White Pages. The proportion of metropolitans and rural respondents were selected according to Victorian population's patterns of residency. All respondents were screened to ensure they were not Muslim.

Nearly half of those surveyed were aged between 35 and 54 years of age. They were mostly born in Australia or had lived in Australia for more than 20 years. They mostly resided in metropolitan regions and had hardly anything to do with Muslims, having gained most of their information about Muslims from the media. Interestingly, young people (below 25 yeas of age) were the only age group with a majority (66.25 per cent) using non-media sources for information about Muslims.

Figure 1 Phone survey respondents age and gender

More women (57.3 per cent) than men (42.7 per cent) took part in the telephone survey. For around 20 per cent of respondents, the highest level of education achieved was Year 11 or below and almost 40 per cent had some form of tertiary education. A great majority (78 per cent) of residents were Australian-born.

Survey respondents' level of formal education

- Post Graduate qualifications (10.3%)
- Degree or Graduate Diploma (28.5%)
- TAFE, trade, certificate (16.7%)
- Year 12 (22.3%),
- Year 11 (6.7%)
- Year 10 or below (14.5%)

Table 1 Phone survey respondents' level of formal education

Survey respondents' country of birth

- Australia (78.3%)
- Great Britain/Ireland (6.7%)
- Europe/Italy/Greece (4.7%)
- East & Southeast Asia (2.8%)
- New Zealand (1.5%)
- Africa/Lebanon/Middle East (1.5%)
- South Asia (1.2%)
- China (1.0%)

Table 2 Phone survey respondents' country of birth

Stage 3: Follow-up Focus Groups

Stage three involved conducting follow-up focus groups from March 2006 to November 2007. These focus groups were to be conducted with a representative sample of the women who were involved in stage one of the research. As there were no means available to locate participants from the original focus groups, it was decided to use different participants but the same questions from the initial focus groups. A total of 96 women participated in 12 follow-up focus groups.

The aims of the follow-up focus groups with Muslim women were to:

- provide a broader view of the impact of September 11 and subsequent events on women's lives; and
- examine whether the impact had changed over time, and if so, how.

The follow-up focus groups allowed for the examination of the longitudinal impact of events on racism directed at Muslim women in Victoria. In particular, these focus groups aimed to explore the quite concerning trends reported in the initial focus groups. This included the way women were responding to racism, such as limiting their movements and remaining at home and curtailing their activities in the community and whether these trends had continued or subsided. The objective then of the follow-up focus groups was not to assess individual shifts in perception but to assess collective changes and to identify emerging themes.

The procedure in the initial focus groups was used in the follow-up focus groups. Muslim women were again recruited through a range of community groups and again every effort was made to ensure that the diversity of Muslim communities was adequately represented.

Stage 1

Focus groups with Muslim women

Focus Groups with Muslim women

"When you know people are being mean, you [are] thank[ful] ... that you don't understand English." [40]

Lebanese woman

This section summarises the data collected from the initial set of 12 focus groups with Muslim women. The focus groups provided a wealth of information on the existence and impact of racism against Muslim women living in Victoria.

We have tried, where possible, to quote participants' own words to accurately reflect the experiences of Muslim women. This section is organised along the key issues women focused on, or were primarily concerned with, during focus group discussions.

Racism against Muslim women

"Sometimes I would be happy just to be safe, I would forget about my other rights."

Focus Group Participant, background withheld

The significance of the issue and the extent to which racism was an issue for Muslim women was reflected in their ability to respond in great detail about specific experiences (related to themselves, to their friends and family and other community members). For most participants it was not only the greatest threat to their feeling of safety but was singularly the most frightening issue they faced.

"I believe it's [racism that is] the biggest issue in this country at this time."

Somali Participant

Although participants' views might have varied about the degree of threat to themselves and their community, there was consensus across all 12 focus groups that racism was prevalent and that women were particularly at risk.

"It has increased. It has increased. Too much! Everyone is complaining, everyone is unsafe, especially the ladies and who is looking after them?"

Turkish Elder

The focus groups were the first opportunity many participants had to share their experiences in a meaningful way. During focus group discussions women's sense of community isolation and powerlessness was palpable.

40 *All quotes in this section of the report have been made by participants in the focus groups.*

"… I didn't speak to anyone about it, just people in my community. Didn't know who to go to. Besides, it's not as if it happens once in a blue moon, it happens all the time, and they spit at us, and pull our hijabs and call us black."

Somali woman

Women feeling targeted and alone in their experiences of racism was pervasive across the 12 focus groups. We found a great deal of commonality in the incidents women reported.

Muslim women's experiences of racism

The experiences of racism described by Victorian Muslim women in focus groups included an extensive range of incidents. These incidents, reported here under the general heading of racism, are arranged in order of prominence. They include: verbal abuse, incivility, physical assaults (threatened and actual) and discrimination

Verbal abuse

By far the most common experience of racism reported by women was verbal abuse. Almost half of the focus group participants had been verbally abused and many others were aware of their family and friends' exposure to it.

Some verbal abuse aimed to threaten and intimidate:

"I was having coffee with my friend [who is Macedonian] at a TAB venue when, suddenly, this middle aged Australian man started yelling and screaming at her about why Muslim women wear the hijab."

Turkish woman

Some verbal abuse aimed to insult and ridicule:

"One day I was walking when I was approached by an old lady who called me Osama Bin Laden. I kept walking and I didn't answer her because my English is not good."

Horn of Africa Elder

Incivility[41]

Women reported receiving unwanted attention from the general public, including people staring at them, monitoring them and generally treating them with suspicion. Women were repeatedly told to "go home" and asked to answer for overseas terrorist attacks by complete strangers.

"You are treated as oppressed and dangerous!"

Background withheld

"Once I bought a home in this neighbourhood, and I was scared of a dog nearby. His owner said to me: "Why are you scared of the dog? He's more Australian than you!"

Background withheld

"It happens everyday; people say to me why [are you] wearing that? And is your husband forcing you?"

Somali woman

Generally, women felt that they experienced incivility on a daily basis in ways they could not easily address because it was often related to everyday behaviours and did not involve explicit remarks:

"I went to the bakery to buy bread on the day after a terrorist attack had been on TV. The lady at the bakery made me wait for a very long time. Finally she served me but ... threw the bread in front of me and went."

41 *Poynting and Noble used the term to describe some of the experiences reported by participants. We have separated out the verbal abuse component of their definition because we think it is a category in its own right.*

Physical Assaults – threatened and actual assaults against women and their property

Threats

"My son, who has a sensory disability, was wearing gaubi. A man approached and asked if I was dressing and training my son as Taliban. My son answered: "I don't know about Taliban, this is my traditional dress. You are a mature man, you should not ask us these questions'. The man replied: ""I know you are trying to organise something here but you won't succeed. You attacked America, we will get revenge!"

Somali woman

"One day, when I went to my friends home on the tram, a man came and asked where I come from. I said Somalia, he yelled at me to go home: "Go back to your country! He threatened to cut my throat and then told me we should get out. At that point the tram driver called me to sit next to him. But the man got out at my stop, then I got back on the tram. The driver apologised."

Horn of Africa young woman

Assaults

"My mother [was] at Flinders Station [when a] man yelled "You terrorist' ... and hit her on the head and pulled her hijab."

Horn of Africa young woman

"One girl pushed me on the ground and pulled my hijab. She did it three times. I called the police but I didn't know her name, so the police didn't help."

Background witheld

"I was walking and a car.... turned ... round to me and tried to run me over. [It] ... came up on to the footpath. When … I ran into a pub, they started yelling "Fuck Muslims, fuck blacks, go back to your country". There were three men ... they opened [the] car doors, came at me and swore and yelled. I was furious, but also worried, and afraid."

Somali woman

"Yesterday, while I was waiting for public transport, someone driving his car spat on me. I was very angry but he drove off before I could do anything."

Lebanese woman

Attacks or threats against women's property

"We had eggs thrown at our house when they found out we are Muslim."

Turkish woman

The vast majority of incidents were never reported as victims could not identify the perpetrator/s or the attack was swift, leaving no room for women to respond.

Discrimination

All women reported experiencing some level of discrimination and prejudice. For some it was a feature of their daily lives, profoundly influencing how people responded to them and how they saw the world. It determined the quality of the service they received or whether they received a service at all.

"When I go shopping with my Mum, she gets different treatment because she is wearing the hijab."

Young Turkish woman

Focus group participants with complaints of poor quality and lack of service indicated their complaints related primarily to police and public transport staff. Many women stated that police failed to fulfil their duties and respond in a timely or appropriate manner.

"In my experience, if we go to police, and if we are the victim, they don't do anything, but if a white person is victimised, then they take action."

Somali woman

Women cited many instances in which police were perceived to be indifferent or minimised incidents that women felt were quite serious. In one instance, a participant called the police after being verbally abused by her neighbour. The police attended, but warned the complainant herself.

"She told them I was Muslim and [that I] was abusing her because I hated all Christians. But I was the one that called them for help."

Background information withheld

For the most part women felt police could neither provide adequate ways of addressing issues, nor could they offer women any meaningful form of protection. Some of the incidents women shared in focus groups were particularly concerning. In one case, a police officer refused to take a report made by a Lebanese woman whose neighbour frequently verbally assaulted her and her family. This left the entire family uneasy about coming in and out of their home and spending time in their garden. The police officer advised the woman to ignore her neighbour because "he was drunk and probably didn't mean what he said." However, other incidents, such as police not attending, may say more about limited police resources than discrimination on their part.

Public transport featured strongly in women's stories of discrimination and abuse, with many claiming that public transport staff acted inappropriately and, at times, with prejudice.

"Public transport workers, such as bus and tram drivers, discriminate whenever they get a chance. My Mum wears a hijab and uses public transport a lot. More than half the drivers won't stop for her."

Turkish Young woman

"I got on the bus and the driver handed me a blank ticket. I said, "Is this okay?' He said, "Yes." I sat down and he kept looking at me. At first, I thought he was being nice. When I went to use the ticket, it was unacceptable. That's when I realised he was insulting me and making fun of me."

Background information withheld

Although there were instances where public transport staff assisted women requiring support or protection, there were many instances where they failed to protect women who were clearly in need:

"One time I was sitting on the tram, and in front of me there was a veiled woman sitting. It was about two months ago...the veiled woman was sitting by herself. There were two Australians that were eating sandwiches, and I'm positive it was on purpose, they started spitting food out of their mouths at her. The poor thing looked like she was a non-English speaker because she said to them "Don't rubbish, No Rubbish'. They only started laughing and continued spitting on her. She ran to the tram driver and said to him "please police, please police'. The tram driver said to her that "It's not my business; you want to call the police, you do it yourself." She started crying and got off at the next stop but they followed her and started harassing her and spitting on her. It was unbelievable. Incidences like that have increased so much."

Lebanese woman

The final area of discrimination concerning women was employment and the potential impact this held for their future prospects. In every focus group women were concerned about discrimination limiting their and their children's ability to find employment. This related directly to the wearing of the hijab and Muslim sounding names:

"I have a friend. She was attending an interview ... and when she got into the interview itself, it was very interesting when they saw her in the hijab … So much negativity."

Palestinian young woman

"Women are unable to find work easily at the moment because they are wearing a hijab or even just because they are Muslim."

Turkish woman

Women's experiences of racism have been extensive and include a vast array of racist acts, including verbal abuse, incivility, violence and discrimination. The reported incidents make apparent disdain and contempt for Muslim women, as well as a desire to engender fear in Muslim women. All of the incidents reported have occurred in the public space and generally by people unknown to women. The reported incidents of discrimination suggest that women's experience of racism extends beyond the individual stranger on the street. Women feel discrimination in the treatment and lack of protection offered by police and public transport staff. Women also clearly feel that discrimination has the potential to lock them out of the workforce.

Impact of racism on Muslim women

The most commonly stated grievance throughout the consultations with women was the restrictions to their independence and curtailment of their freedom of movement.

"A lot of us don't walk around so much. Just so that you know, lots of us have spent at least some time at home scared, you know, a couple of months at home here and there, when you need to."

Lebanese woman

Statements such as the one above were very common throughout focus group discussions and were elicited with little prompting from focus group facilitators. Many participants felt their lives had become severely restricted and their freedom of movement curtailed. Many women spoke of reducing their movements and of never travelling alone when it could be avoided. This was a common response of every victim of attack we interviewed apart from one:

"…I am a single mother, and I have lots of children, and I have to go to lots of places. I have no choice. I can't stay inside hiding. I have to look after my children."

Somali participant

Limiting travel and not travelling alone were strategies employed by women regardless of the severity of the victimisation or the frequency of attack:

"It just happened once, when a woman came up really close to me and said "Why don't you take that thing [hijab] off? What are you trying to prove?' she said. It really scared me at the time. When I got home, I got very angry at myself for not thinking about something to say back to her. Maybe why she thought she had to wear so much make up or awful shoes. But you don't think do you?…I know, I have avoided going to the [name of shopping centre] without my husband or children."

Background information withheld

"When I go shopping, I have to take a friend with me, otherwise I am [too] scared to go by myself."

Iraqi woman

Avoiding public spaces and travelling alone were also the responses of women who had not been directly victimised. The vast majority of women who participated in the focus groups indicated that whilst they themselves had not experienced violence, hearing about violence perpetrated on women they knew had significantly impacted on their decision making and generated considerable fear:

"Before, we used to go out feeling safe. We used to go for our daily walk. We used to go anywhere, even early in the mornings. But nowadays, we are afraid to walk alone. We go as groups and we walk where a lot of people are present."

Horn of Africa woman

"I never go anywhere new without my husband now. I don't feel well if I go with my toddler in my pram."

Background Information withheld

Women reported a growing reliance on their husband or families as an impact of ongoing experiences of racism, and spoke at length about no longer venturing out without their husbands or delegating tasks they would otherwise do themselves to their husbands. Participants were clear that prior to September 11 they had travelled independently with little concern for their personal safety. It appeared in most instances that since September 11 husbands willingly obliged to accompany their wives in public because of concern for their wives' safety. However, there were also instances in which husbands encouraged their partners to stay home, especially in the period immediately following the September 11 terrorist attack. At that time, advice such as the following was not unusual:

"After September 11, community leaders sent a message to all of us and we stayed home for a couple of weeks."

Afghan woman

Many focus group participants had also grown reticent about residing in public housing tenancy. Many women no longer felt safe and did not posses the resources to move into the private rental market. Many of these women were older women, sole-parent families or more recently-arrived migrants who had long-term plans to move out of public tenancy but had no choice in the short term:

"Living in public housing is not safe anymore. Our living conditions are not good in the high rise. We can't feel free to go out. My daughter can't wash clothes if her husband is not home."

Background Information withheld

"I had an incident in the lift in the high rise flats. There were three of us and my five-year-old son. When we got in the lift, there were two old, rough looking Australian ladies. We were speaking in Turkish and they started to get angry because they thought we couldn't speak English."

Turkish woman

The strain caused by the possibility of abuse and discrimination was quite palpable in all focus groups with the exception of those held with young women. Young women felt that the environment was difficult and many young women reported experiencing personals attacks. However, despite their distress and frustration at continually being linked to Muslim terrorists overseas, they saw opportunities for people to start meeting across religious and cultural lines.

The women in other focus groups were able to recognise these opportunities, but for the most part they felt their lives had been radically altered by forces completely outside their control. For many women, the action of terrorists overseas had generated within Australian society an aversion to and apprehension of Muslims, leading inevitably to the marginalisation of Muslims from the rest of Australian society. The possibility of this exclusion greatly distressed them. Muslim women in this set of focus groups felt that it was no longer within their power to integrate or be accepted into Australian society. This sense of powerlessness was most evident in participants who were temporary visa holders. They believed that they would be denied permanent residency in Australia because of the actions of terrorists overseas:

"Someone else did the damage, but we suffer. We escaped from those people but now we suffer because of them here."

Afghani woman

"People should understand, we have suffered enough. Terrorists don't suffer like we did. They come to Australia by plane with dignity, not in a leaky boat like we came to face the humiliation of the world."

Afghani woman

This research did not seek to explore or document the experiences of children in the post-September 11 environment, but many women were concerned for their children's wellbeing. Women themselves did not generally expect that the new environment would impact on their children, but gradually came to understand that their children were profoundly affected:

"It's pressure on the children, not just the adults and the veiled women."

Background Information withheld

"It affects the little ones much more than the adults."

Lebanese woman

Women's relationships with their children also suffered as a result of children trying to find their own ways of coping in the new environment. For the most part, this related to children becoming apprehensive about accompanying their parents publicly. This concerned women greatly, not only because the children themselves no longer felt safe associating with any identifier that might be perceived as Islamic, but also because it undermined the level of intimacy they previously enjoyed with their children:

"My son wanted to go to the city, so I told him I'd come with him but he said "No way you're veiled, it's not safe. What if someone were to harass us?' I'm even afraid to go to the city myself because there [is] a lot more trouble there'."

Lebanese woman

"My son wanted to go to watch the football but his brother didn't want to go with him because he doesn't like football. So I offered to go with him instead. My son was horrified. He said, "Yeah, I'm really going to take a covered woman with me'. I only offered because I didn't want him to miss out but he refused because he said they'd all harass me."

Lebanese woman

As alluded to in our own focus group discussions with young women, there were also generational differences in how women understood and responded to the changed environment. This placed significant pressure on women as they related to their children:

"We are under stress; this is causing us to scream at our children more often."

Background Information withheld

"My daughter is 14 years old. She wants to wear the hijab and she wants to walk back from school by herself! But I am too fearful to let her because she is wearing the hijab and something might happen to her. They are too young to understand our concerns and they think differently than us. This causes problems between mother and children, so then there are more problems."

Turkish woman

A small number of participants stated that they had ceased wearing the hijab, or modified the way they wore it, as a result of either being directly abused or attacked, or after hearing of attacks:

"My friend stopped wearing the hijab because she was treated differently after September eleven and she was scared of being attacked."

Lebanese woman

"If I wear my scarf half way across my head and show my hair, people don't mind so much. But if I bring it forward fully, then they don't like it. It is very strange really."

Afghan woman

But removal of the hijab was not an option for most of the women consulted, as they explained:

"Without the hijab, I feel naked."

Turkish Elder

A small number of women said they now avoided identifying as Muslim:

"I don't deny being a Muslim, but I don't go around telling anyone that I'm a Muslim."

Lebanese woman

"I don't feel safe or comfortable to talk in Turkish, because of fear of being identified as Muslim. I am scared to talk in Turkish with my own daughter. I either stay silent and not answer her or say it in English."

Turkish woman

Women feel under threat and the consequence of this experienced threat has been to curtail their movements, restrict their lives and limit their independence and freedom. Women are now mindful of how they move in the public space and no longer travel independently to areas which are unfamiliar or 'white'. Public housing, previously a source of support for women, has now become a source of apprehension.

Women have been deeply affected by ongoing experiences of racism. In addition to feelings of despondency about their inability to protect themselves, participants stated that they had persistent feelings of fear and apprehension which they could neither resolve nor escape. For many Muslim women this was not the first time that their lives had been negatively impacted on by forces completely beyond their control. For humanitarian and refugee entrants this was a particularly bitter reality. Terrorism had necessitated the flight of many humanitarian entrants from their country of birth, but it had continued to impact on their lives because it made their acceptance into Australian society far more difficult.

Young women are troubled by some of these concerns regarding their safety, but they also see opportunities to promote community discussions about intercultural and religious co-existence. This revealed generational differences in how Muslim women responded to and were affected by racism. The impact of racism on children also concerned Muslim women. They reported that experiences of racism by children generated tension and pressure in families and in women's relationships with their children.

Why Muslim women think racism occurs

All focus group participants believed that the increase in racism was a direct response to the September 11 terrorist attack. For them this was a turning point in their lives in Australia:

"After the events of September 11, some people started to blame Muslims and we don't feel safe anymore."

Eritrean elder

"The discrimination and racism were always there, but September 11 gave people the reason to discriminate. They don't like Muslims anyway and this was an opportunity that motivated them. It's just fear. They are using religion to discriminate."

Lebanese woman

However, with the passing of time and ongoing terrorist attacks against westerners, women developed a more nuanced understanding of their position. They came to understand that any act of terrorism carried out against western countries in the name of Islam inevitably increased their vulnerability to abuse and violence in Australia. Participants felt that for many Australians Muslim women have come to not only represent all that they consider unpalatable about Islam, but have also become acceptable targets for anger over terrorist attacks by Muslims:

"I think Australians get angry and want someone to blame and that's us."

Palestinian young woman

"Feelings of hatred are renewed with every anniversary [of an event like September 11 and Bali bombings]"

Lebanese young woman

"Every time something like that [Bali] happens, you know you are going to get it."

Palestinian young woman

"During Bali, I used to cry because I was forced to go to work and I always thought what have I done to deserve this?"

Afghani woman

Equally detrimental to women's safety was media reporting of international events and terrorism by Muslims. This was a source of much bitterness for women who felt that media outlets were irresponsible and primarily interested in attracting audiences, while demonstrating little consideration for the consequences of their reporting. Women felt that media reporting consistently placed Islam and Muslims at the centre of news reports rather than the actual incident itself. These factors inexorably resulted in the increased vulnerability of women. Participants were clearly of the view that media coverage of terrorism or a sensationalist story of individual Muslims behaving badly increased women's chances of being assaulted:

"If the media reports on terrorism, it always becomes bad for us."

Iraqi woman

"But if something happens in the media, we are smart enough to stay at home".

Eritrean woman

"The media has a lot to answer for. We are only ever represented in negative ways, or they really like to make use of images of women wearing the niqab or burqa. How about representing the full diversity of Muslim women?"

Turkish woman

"The [name of newspaper] is really bad. I can't read it anymore. How come when a non- Muslim commits a crime, then there is no reference to their religion. I mean … how often do you see spread across the front page, "Christian commits rape'?"

Lebanese woman

It is difficult to do justice to the degree to which women felt that Islam and Muslims were misrepresented by the media. For women, distorted media representations were pervasive and affected people's views and treatment of them. Women felt powerless and paralysed by the capacity of media representations of Islam and Muslims to become 'truths and facts' for mainstream society.

Many women also expressed the belief that the Commonwealth Government's "Alert Campaign"[42] had also contributed significantly to generating suspicion and in some instances hatred of Muslims. Some participants believed that the government's campaigning specifically sought to target Muslim communities and did not contribute to public safety. Many women felt that their sense of self-consciousness, unease and, at times, fear in public spaces, increased as a result of the campaign:

"The alert campaign made me more alert of being attacked because of it."

Iraqi woman

"It was a good excuse to "do in' a Muslim."

Malaysian young women

42 *Put explanation for international audiences*

"The message seemed to be look out for suspicious looking Muslims, so I walk down the street thinking how many people are trying to work out if I am the person they should be suspicious of."

Palestinian young women

Participants viewed the increase in racism against Muslim women as a direct consequence of September 11 terrorist attacks. Other factors did contribute to women's vulnerability, but September 11 and subsequent acts of terrorism by Muslims overseas rendered women vulnerable to racism and abuse. Media reporting on terrorism or events associated with Muslims also left women susceptible to racism. Muslim women believed that the federal government's 'Alert Campaign' left the Australian community suspicious and anxious about Muslims and this in turn increased women's vulnerability.

The vulnerable among the vulnerable

It was immediately apparent in holding the focus groups that some women more likely to be attacked than others. This was also the view of women who believed that the more they embodied or carried common identifiers of Islam, the more likely they were to be attacked.

Hijab

A significant number of participants reported that wearing the hijab increased a woman's chances of being discriminated against due to her public visibility and also in terms of employment opportunities. Women wearing the hijab were vulnerable to public derision and racial abuse:

"There is no respect for women who wear the scarf and there is some harassment, even for us old women."

Horn of Africa woman

"If you put the scarf on, how can I feel welcome? If I take the scarf off, I am welcomed quickly, but not if I wear it."

Lebanese woman

"My sister was crossing the street and there were some schoolgirls at the crossing giggling at her. When the light turned green, one of the girls put her foot out and tripped her. She fell. She grabbed one of the girls asked why she did it. She said that the other girls told her to do it because she was Muslim."

Lebanese woman

"A friend of mine was abused by other parents when she was walking her children to school. She stopped wearing the scarf, now she only wears a hat. Some of us now wear these hats, but the really racist people still find us, they know why we wear hats."

Palestinian woman

Skin Colour

It became clear from the focus group discussions that women from the Horn of Africa were far more likely to report attacks in the focus groups than women who came from other countries. This was reported by women from both the Horn of Africa and other Muslim communities. In half the attacks against women from the Horn of Africa, their appearance/skin colour was signalled out:

"My girlfriend and I were walking to the shops … This man … filled his mouth with saliva … spat at us and got us, and he was a white man. He started swearing at us, "We don't need you here, go back … You are Taliban'. I said to him, I had never heard of the Taliban before I came here. I came from Africa; he told me, we were filthy people and wore ugly robes. "You look like a monkey, look at your nose you look like Zimbabwe[an]s! You are a terrorist, this is our land, you're an animal, you take our jobs, you live off our money!' We couldn't stay because we were very scared, and so we ran for our lives."

Women with dark skin clearly faced discrimination on the basis of gender, religious belief and skin colour:

"They discriminate against people who wear a hijab, in particular dark skinned Muslim people. Even though we have the same religion, we are treated differently."

Horn of Africa woman

Children

It was not possible to establish whether children were more likely to be targeted because the research did not seek to explore their experiences or vulnerability. However, the exposure of children to racism and discrimination worried women. The status of children clearly left them susceptible to abuse and its potential emotional and psychological impacts:

"My son's friend was picking on me once because of my hijab saying "Look at that piece of cloth she is wearing on her head!', and so my son hit him and was then taken to the principal."

Background information withheld

"It is our children that we are most worried about. We can face them [attackers], but our children need to be protected."

Turkish woman

From this anecdotal information, it is difficult to establish the impact of racism on children. While women sought to protect their children, they did not directly engage with their children about their experiences or understanding of discrimination and racism.

Language

Language as an indicator of vulnerability was extremely difficult to categorise. Many women were of the view that limited English language skills definitely left them vulnerable to abuse. However, for others it was entirely unrelated and they felt it was 'all about if you looked Muslim'. It was very clear, however, that once women were attacked, the capacity to speak English was critical to how victim and perpetrators reacted and behaved in the context of an assault:

"A lady I know was at the shopping centre with her friend. An Australian lady started yelling at them, "Pigs, fat cows, you are all terrorists." They spoke to each other in their language to say, "Let's go home' and the Australian woman became even more angry and actually punched my friend."

Horn of Africa young woman

"Maybe if [a woman] spoke English she could have defended herself and told them off and they wouldn't have felt they could have taken advantage of her."

Lebanese woman

"No, not necessarily, I speak English and it's happened to me as well but I don't want trouble … I was walking with [a friend] and there's a man who also used to jog at the same time. When he would see us, he would spit on us and also when I go to buy milk in the morning for breakfast, he would spit on me as well. Now I could have easily confronted him because I speak English but … I'm a woman alone on the road, what if he tried to physically harm me and no one came to help?"

Lebanese woman

In many situations, women felt that the capacity to speak English greatly increased their chances of stopping abuse. However, this was not borne out in the evidence. For the most part the capacity to speak English gave many women a sense of agency over their experience, reduced their sense of powerlessness, and reduced their fear in an actual situation of attack or abuse. There were, however, only three incidents reported by women where speaking English halted the attack.

Muslim women believed they are vulnerable to racism by virtue of their gender. Beyond gender two factors increased women's susceptibility to abuse: the hijab and skin colour. This was a consistent view across all the focus groups, and was borne out in women's experiences. Women believed that limited English language

proficiency increased the likelihood of experiencing racism but, as stated above, there was little evidence to support this claim.

The vulnerability of children and young people outlined in this section highlights the need to investigate children's and young people's experiences further.

How women have responded

In addition to women removing themselves from public spaces during the risky period immediately following an overseas terrorist attack, or on anniversaries of terrorist attacks, there is also the question of what redress, if any, women sought in relation to their victimisation.

The majority of women could not identify where to go for help with regards to many of the incidents they had experienced. Police were the most often mentioned source of support, but in most instances the police would not have been the appropriate service to call. Additionally, women themselves stated that they would not call the police because they "wouldn't show up anyway".

A very small number of women identified the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission as possible places to seek redress. With the former, women often could not identify the organisation by name but had recently received an information session about how to lodge a complaint. All participants were of the view that they would not use any of the statutory bodies because lodging a complaint was a confusing, difficult, and lengthy process and simply too arduous.

Many women reported that there was a community taboo about speaking out. There was the general feeling that these issues should not be made public and that Muslims should not be attracting more attention to themselves. Other women whilst sympathetic strongly disagreed:

"There is a big per centage here who are simply too embarrassed to speak about what is happening. All sorts of discrimination is happening to them. We don't want to shame ourselves in front of the rest of Australia as if there is something wrong with us as a community, but I think we should speak the truth."

Iraqi woman

Many relied on community organisations or a local community/group leader (paid and unpaid) for support on these issues. However, while community workers were sympathetic and tried to assist, many women did not feel that workers were able to help. The failure of community organisations to meet their needs was primarily attributed to a lack of funding and limited staff. Many women also felt that workers were not sufficiently informed about racism and options for redress, and that in many ways workers were as disempowered as the women themselves:

"My worker is great; she helps by taking me places I'm too scared to go. But she has to make time for me, it is impossible to get help sometimes."

Iraqi woman

"[Name of worker] does what she can. I don't fault her, but the government keep a dog chain around her neck. If I ring her now to say I've just been beaten up

and I need you to take me to the police to help me make a complaint. First I won't get her because she will be in an appointment; second her boss won't let her come because the government won't let her do just any work. If I ring and say that I need help with my Centrelink form, the government will let her do that … it is all very upsetting!"

Lebanese woman

In addition, the absence of female workers to address issues made it difficult for some women to report incidents:

"If I complain to a man that my hijab was pulled off, he says "Oh sister it's an attack on Islam'. But in truth it is me they are attacking."

Lebanese woman

"Always they say things you cannot repeat … like the fuck word and they say things about your body, how can you say this to a man?"

Background information withheld

Some women also spoke of their increasing cynicism and disenchantment with established members of 'ethnic' communities who tended to gloss over their victimisation:

"How does it help me when Bracks [former Victorian Premier] and [an] imam have lunch together and shake hands? An imam with a full stomach doesn't help me. I need someone to help me when they spit in my face and pull my hair."

Eritrean woman

On an individual level, women did not generally respond with assertiveness when attacked. Generally they withdrew from the situation whenever possible because of fears for their safety, a desire to maintain the peace, limited English skills and a desire to avoid attracting further bad publicity for Muslims. But for many women, it was also about their dignity – they did not want to reduce themselves to the perpetrator's level:

"… because I respect myself and I don't want trouble. I was hurt but I took [it] in my stride. Because I didn't want trouble I went back home."

Palestinian woman

"One day, I was shopping and an old lady approached me. She said, "Are you Muslim?' I said, "Yes." She said, "Osama Bin Laden." I kept walking. I didn't answer her because my English is not good and she left me alone."

Eritrean Elder

However, there were some women who felt it was well within their rights and power to respond when attacked:

"When they say you are black, and that you are not wanted here, I say: "Black people own this country."

Somali woman

Women's responses demonstrated that they are limited in their capacity to respond to racism on a multitude of levels. Limited confidence in the public authorities and lack of awareness of and faith in state and federal commissions meant that Muslim women had a very narrow set of options. In addition to this, community and individual values meant that many women were deterred from speaking out. Community organisations could perhaps build a bridge between Muslim women and the responsible organisations to assist women, but they appeared to lack the necessary resources to assist in this regard. Participants clearly appeared to be most receptive to the role their community organisations could play in this regard.

Women's view on improving intercommunity relations and combating racism

It is vital for Muslim women to first secure their safety before they are able to contribute to efforts of community building and improving intercommunity relations. Many participants expressed the need to be supported and educated about where to go for help. Further that help should be appropriate and meaningful and would assist the women themselves to become more proactive:

"Because we don't know, we say nothing. But if other Muslim women could help us it would be different. It wouldn't have to go outside the community and you wouldn't have to complain to white person about another white person."

Turkish woman

"Muslim women are not voicing our concerns. We are not complaining to anyone. We are passive. Muslim women are expected to be quiet and obedient to males. Many believe we are unable to answer back or to fight for our rights. We have no voice."

Lebanese woman

Very few participants felt that they had a true sense of belonging to their local community, although many had made efforts to be accepted. The desire and need to belong to the broader community was evident in every focus group. Despite having had some terrible experiences and being repeatedly told they were not wanted in Australia, women nonetheless felt that this was their country and belonging to it was important. At no point in any of the focus group did women express a desire to segregate or hold themselves separate from the rest of Australian society. Several were keen to highlight their belief that not everyone in the broader community was discriminatory or racist.

It is important to note that when women were specifically asked to make suggestions in relation to improving community relations and combating racism, women overwhelmingly referred to 'State and Commonwealth' levels of government. Women were not optimistic about government taking action, and this primarily related to perceived inaction on both the Federal and State levels since the September 11 terrorist attacks. Interestingly, women did not think there was a significant difference in how the State and Federal levels of government perceived or responded to the Muslim community. Many women felt both levels of government had specifically chosen not to protect them:

"After all this time, I don't believe they care about us. They probably think it serves us right. They can't get to the terrorists overseas so they make do with us."

Lebanese woman

"If we were white and didn't wear the hijab what is happening to us would be a national emergency. It not like we are white people, when they vote it's different."

Horn of Africa woman

The level of alienation among women from the federal and state levels of government was significant and concerning. For the most part, women felt that the lack of response from the Australian governments was to be expected. Women were of the view that it was probably the position of most governments in western countries and that the Australian government could not be blamed for its pragmatic approach. However, as a matter of principle, women felt that the Australian government should protect them just as they would care for and protect Australia.

Community Education was seen as the second most important strategy in improving community relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. For women, providing correct and appropriate information about Islam was important but not more important than community education that sought to promote the notion that all citizens are equal.

Women wanted the opportunity to be involved and participate in community education and inter-community activities aimed at improving relations. Many felt they lacked the confidence and skills to participate, but wanted very strongly to be involved.

Recommendations

In consideration of the above issues, woman made the following recommendations for combating racism and improving intercommunity relations:

- All levels of government should take a strong anti-racism stance;
- State and federal governments should fund programs to protect and support women who have been victims of racism and violence;
- a specific office for women to go to for all types of violence against Muslim women, which is confidential and can facilitate appropriate follow up support;
- improved confidence that public authorities respond seriously to reports of discrimination. This means greater enforcement of anti-discrimination laws with a focus on the vulnerability of women and improved accessibility to complaints mechanisms when discrimination has occurred;
- increased communication between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as well as education on Islam and Muslim women;
- programs to increase mutual respect and acceptance;
- increased interaction between diverse groups of people through events and activities; and
- improved media representation – more balance, with a focus on the positive and not just the negatives.

Summary

The focus groups conducted with Muslim women provided proof that racism against Muslim women in Victoria extended beyond a handful of random incidents. The numbers of attacks recorded were far greater – and their impacts on women more serious – than previous indications provided to the Council through anecdotal reports.

The experiences related by participants in these focus groups demonstrated conclusively that Muslim women experienced significant levels of racial violence, abuse and discrimination in a post-September 11 environment characterised by incivility and inhospitability. The women made it clear that racism against them had increased and that the judgement and perceptions of non-Muslims towards them had become particularly negative. Women provided numerous examples of being subjected to racist taunts, discrimination and in some instances physical abuse because they were Muslim. It appears that women became vulnerable to racism by virtue of being in the public space – the streets, public transport and shopping centres have become more perilous for Muslim women in Victoria.

Many of the women recognised that the 'visual identifiers' of Islam, such as the hijab, increased their visibility and consequently their vulnerability to abuse. It is unclear what role visual identifiers played in attacks against women. In most instances, it would seem that they were the single most important factor in determining who became victim to violence or abuse.

Women from the Horn of Africa were over-represented as victims of racism and in many instances they were attacked because of their 'blackness', as distinct from their religion or culture or their association to Islam. This was very clear both to African and non-African Muslims and both groups appeared to understand that it was the notion of 'blackness' that rendered those women particularly vulnerable.

Children also constituted a particularly vulnerable group, although the nature of their vulnerability is still to be established. It was clear that Muslim children, or children of a Muslim parent, had been victims of racism and in some instances violence. However, what is unclear is the extent of racism experienced by children and how children and young people have understood and been affected by the post-September 11 environment.

The focus groups have provided some indication that young people's response to that environment is very different to that of their parents – some see opportunities for discussion and openness, others see the need to maintain distance from any Islamic identifier which might risk their safety, whilst others still insist on their right to carry Islamic identifiers and continue life as usual. As indicated by women, this will result in substantial family and intergenerational differences possibly resulting in conflict.

The consultations have highlighted how discrimination and social exclusion can lead Muslim women to withdraw from participation in broader public life and social activities. In addition to the curtailment of basic rights, Muslim women face negative health implication as a result of either the direct experience of racism, or the perception of living in a racist society. Women clearly articulated experiences of generalised anxiety over their vulnerability in the current environment, and also expressed fear in situations where they had been attacked. One can expect negative health effects as a result of the curtailment of freedoms and movement. Extended periods at home 'hiding' from the perceived risk of violence is likely, in the long term, to affect women's wellbeing, particularly from the perspective of their mental health. Research has already provided a solid argument linking racism to poor health outcomes[43].

Issues of agency and loss of control over their lives were crucial to women, particularly for those who had fled civil strife or war in their countries of birth. Women wanted to be included in Australian society, but now felt this was completely outside their control. Muslim women do not see themselves as outsiders and did not want to be considered so – they wanted to be seen as 'Australian'. It was clear that the experience of being racially targeted generated a sense of marginalisation among women, but this did not cause them to waver in their conviction that they belonged in Australia and were a legitimate part of its social fabric. In fact, women became most distressed when their children were treated as if they were not Australian.

Women also spoke at length of the perceived limitation in their opportunities because of discrimination. This was highlighted in a discussion over employment opportunities for themselves, and particularly for their children. For women limited work opportunities inevitably results in limited life chances and quality of life and their concerns about this issue was evident. If discrimination in the employment sector is as pervasive as women's experience of it suggests, then the health impact for the Muslim community will be substantial, not only today but also for future generations.

Put simply, the women in our focus groups did not feel safe within their local communities, particularly following the September 11 and Bali and London bombing events. They conveyed having a heightened level of apprehension for their physical safety and that of their children, and for some, there was almost an expectation that they would be the target of abuse in public areas, or subject to discrimination in areas of employment and in public services. The capacity of women to respond is severely limited if the public authorities charged with the role of protection and redress are perceived to be discriminatory or entirely absent from women's lives.

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There were many incidents in which the police could have provided a more meaningful response but did not. It is difficult to understand the causes for this failure in process, but such findings are also cited in other research. Women's experience of the lack of response from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, and the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now the Australian Human Rights Commission) was also a concern. The failure of the police to respond and the failure of both the Commissions to provide any sort of assistance beyond the information sessions on the complaints process, raise questions about who is ultimately responsible for providing Muslim women with education, support, options, and redress for experiences of racism and violence.

The vast majority of the participants felt it was the role of state and federal governments to address the issues of racism and violence. Many women felt that if governments took a strong position on racism and spoke of the value Muslim communities brought to Australia, this would go a long way towards limiting the free expression of racism against them. In addition to this, women felt that they were not supported in any practical way to deal with racism directed at them nor have they received any sort of support to assist them to deal with the ongoing nature of racism in the post-September 11 environment.

Community initiatives and education was an important strategy for combating racism. Appropriate education about Islam and Muslims was essential to dispelling the myths about Islam that the media was responsible for circulating. Anti-racism and anti-discrimination community education was thought to be crucial by women. Many clearly wanted an opportunity to participate in community initiatives with many recommendations focusing on intercommunity strategies.

Women also felt that they required more education and support to address the issues they confronted. Importantly they felt that community workers and community organisations already providing support to women should be better supported to do so. Clearly the foundation for support is already there and needs to be resourced and refined to better meet the needs of Muslim women.

Finally, women recommended and felt it was crucial to their sense of belonging in Australian society that the mechanisms established to protect people from racist violence and abuse be accessible to them. Currently women do not think these processes are accessible or functional. Women lack confidence in public authorities and do not feel they can use them. It is clear that women generally lack the confidence to utilise public authorities, separate from the capacity of the public authorities to respond to women's needs.

Stage 2

Non-Muslim Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women

Stage 2: Non-Muslims Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women

A telephone survey of 600 Victorian residents was conducted in July 2005 to gain an understanding of non-Muslim Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women. What follows is a description and analysis of the data from this survey in two sections: Non-Muslim Victorians' associations and views of Muslims, and Community relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Section 1: Non-Muslim Victorians' associations and views of Muslims

In the first part of the survey, non-Muslim Victorians were asked open-ended questions to elicit their views and associations of Muslims and Muslim women.

Victorian residents' views of Muslims

The first question sought to establish non-Muslim Victorians' overall view of Muslims.

'Do you hold mainly positive or negative views of Muslims?'	
Positive	**62.3%**
Negative	**10.2%**
Neither	**23.8%**
Don't know	**3.7%**

Table 3 Non-Muslim Victorians' views of Muslims

A majority of Victorian residents reported holding a mainly positive view of Muslims. Nearly a quarter of respondents were undecided, while one tenth held mainly negative views.

Respondents holding positive views on Muslims were more likely to be female, young and to have had a little or a lot of contact with Muslims, whereas those holding mainly negative views tended to be less educated. Respondents who were undecided were more likely to be male, people who sourced their information from media, and people who had little contact with Muslims.

Reasons for positive views

Survey respondents were asked why they held positive views of Muslims. A variety of reasons were offered in response to this question.

Positive views regarding Muslims were attributed to:	
Beliefs that all people should be treated as equal	**33.2%**
Perceptions that Muslim people have done nothing wrong to them personally	**25.1%**
Experiencing personal and working relationships with Muslim people	**21.7%**

Table 4 Reasons for non-Muslim Victorians holding a positive view of Muslims

Interestingly, the majority of respondents with a mainly positive view of Muslims did not form this view on the basis of any interaction with Muslims. Instead, their views were formed on the basis of principles of fairness and equity:

"I don't really judge people on their religious beliefs".

"Because they are just like everyone else … they are still people."

Some respondents stated that while they may have heard negative things about Muslims, Muslims had never done them any harm personally:

"I think there has been a lot of bad press about a handful that could colour the attitude about their faith, but in general I feel very positive about them."

The group that attributed their positive views to their being engaged in personal or working relationships with Muslim people tended to be older (above 35 years) and had higher levels of education:

"I don't think negatively about them. I've worked with Muslim parents and children as a school teacher."

"I know a couple of Muslim people … good friends with one … and formed my opinions through that."

Respondents who attributed their positive views to the fact that Muslims had never done anything negative to them personally were more likely to be younger and to have a lower level of education.

Other reasons given by respondents for holding positive views about Muslims included Muslims being ordinary people (13.1 per cent), Muslims behaving in a friendly and respectful manner (9.1 per cent), respondents approving of Muslim religion and customs (8.3 per cent), Muslims being misrepresented by the media (8 per cent), Muslim women deserving sympathy (4 per cent), and Muslims being strong and worthy of respect (3.5 per cent):

"The few I have come into contact with have been friendly, respectful and hospitable."

"They've got a fantastic culture that's been going on for thousands of years."

Victorian respondents derived their positive views from principles of justice and equity, from personal contact with Muslims and from favourable perceptions of Muslims as a group. Interestingly, it was respondents' beliefs and principles and not contact with Muslims that mediated their positive views.

A larger proportion of women (one and a half times the rate of men) attributed their positive views on Muslims to Muslims being ordinary people, while older people more often referred to Muslims behaving in a friendly and respectful way. Many more men than women, and respondents who were well-educated, were more likely to relate their positive view of Muslims to their approval of Muslim religion and customs.

The group asserting the belief that Muslims are misrepresented by the media as a reason for holding positive views of Muslims included a large proportion of people with higher levels of education and twice as many women than men.

Reasons for negative views

Survey respondents who claimed to hold mainly negative views of Muslims were able to offer a range of reasons for these views.

Negative views regarding Muslims were attributed to:	
Disagreeing with Muslim religion and culture	**34.4%**
Negative portrayal of Muslims through the media	**23%**
Perceived associations with war and terrorism	**19.7%**
Improper treatment of women	**18%**

Table 5 Non-Muslim Victorians' reasons for holding negative views of Muslims

The reason most often given by residents holding negative views of Muslims was disagreeing with Muslim religion and culture:

"I don't like their religion."

"Religion in general is stirring up so much trouble that we could do without it. Where you've got religion you've got trouble."

The negative portrayal of Muslim people through the media and perceived associations of Muslims with war and terrorism were cited almost in equal measure as the reason for holding mainly negative views. This implies that media sources of information on Muslims appeared to have had a significant impact on respondents' views. For example, respondents associating Muslim people with war and terrorism were twice as likely to derive information about Muslim people from the media than from non-media sources:

"With everything that's happening in the media … what's happening in Iraq and with the terrorist attacks, based around Muslims."

"I can only go by what I've read and seen in the media; it doesn't portray their life as something I'd want to live."

"If you had asked me before September 11 I would have said positive, but now it's negative."

"Recent current events … world trade centre … Afghanistan …"

The perception of improper treatment of women by Muslims was also an important reason for holding negative views:

"The way they treat women is bad … no women's rights."

More men than women based their negative views of Muslims on their disagreement with Muslim religion and culture. In contrast, the proportion of women referring to the improper treatment of women was almost triple that of men.

Other reasons given by respondents for holding negative views on Muslims included negative personal experiences (14.8 per cent), Muslims exhibiting negative behaviour such as being rude, unfriendly or aggressive (9.8 per cent), respondents not trusting or liking Muslims (9.8 per cent), and Muslims being viewed as fanatical extremists (8.2 per cent).

"Because there's Muslim people that live near me and the men are very aggressive."

"I just think they seem to have a mischievous way about the way they operate … things don't seem clear."

"With all the terrorism going on … I think they're fanatical."

Respondents charging Muslims with exhibiting negative behavior (such as being rude, unfriendly or aggressive) mostly drew their information from contact with Muslims. Conversely, twice as many men said they didn't like or trust Muslims and this group was more likely to use media sources for information on Muslims.

In summary, Victorian residents' negative views of Muslims came from disagreeing with the religion, using media to source information on Muslims, and personally having negative experiences of people who they identified as Muslim. More men disagreed with the Muslim religion and culture than women but this appeared to contradict the previous finding that more men identified the reason for their positive views of Muslims as Muslim customs and religion. This suggests that men, more than women, are willing to judge Muslims on the basis of their culture and religion regardless of whether the view they form is positive or negative.

Victorian women were clearly concerned about a perceived improper treatment of women by Muslim culture and this was a significant reason for women holding negative views of Muslims. This practical assessment of the impact of the practice of Muslim religion and culture can be contrasted with men's a less practical assessment by men of the Muslim culture as a whole.

Words and Images associated with Muslims

In the telephone survey non-Muslim Victorian respondents were asked about any thoughts and associations they held for Muslim people in general.

Main thoughts and images associated with Muslim people

Traditional clothing and food	**26%**
Religious beliefs and practices	**22%**
Muslims being ordinary people	**15.8%**

Table 6 Non-Muslim Victorians' thoughts and images associated with Muslims

The most common images and thoughts associated with Muslim people related to Muslim culture and customs, like traditional clothing and food.

"The scarf … very family oriented … a lot of kids."

"Good friend I had in high school. Religion, food, clothes they wear, countries they come from …"

"Their dress is distinctive. I have worked with some who wear the full garb."

Male beards, kaftans, and turbans featured heavily amongst non-Muslim residents' responses. Interestingly, women were one and half times more likely to provide custom and culture-related associations. Also, respondents providing these associations were well-educated.

Religious beliefs and practices were the second most frequently mentioned theme in relation to Muslim people in general.

"Mecca … lots of people praying … Koran … Ramadan … Burqa … Allah"

"Very intelligent to their God. They have a strong belief"

"Idiots … weird ideas … weird religious ideas."

"Just people with another religion … a few different beliefs."

References to Allah, the Koran, Ramadan, mosques, prayer times and Muslims being extremely religious featured amongst the responses. The residents providing these references tended to be younger, used non-media sources, and had higher levels of education.

Other terms respondents associated with Muslim people generally included Muslims being ordinary people (15.8 per cent); different and isolated (10.8 per cent); positive (8.3 per cent); Middle Eastern or Arabic (7.8 per cent); autocratic (7.5 per cent); sexist treatment of women (5.8 per cent); war, conflict and terrorism (5 per cent); physical appearance (4.7 per cent); treated poorly and misunderstood (4.2 per cent); extremists and fundamentalists (4.2 per cent); and family, friends and neighbours (2.8 per cent).

The majority of those referring to Muslims as ordinary people were female, older people, and people with low levels of education, as well as respondents who had contact with Muslims.

Those referring to the sexist treatment of women in relation to Muslims in general had hardly any association with Muslims but were far more likely to be women (four times the response rate recorded for men). Interestingly, respondents having a lot to do with Muslims did not associate Muslims in general with sexist treatment of women. Younger people (below 25 years) were much less likely to associate Muslims with sexist treatment of women.

Respondents who referred to the Middle East or Arabia in relation to Muslims were predominantly male (more than double females), had little contact with Muslims, and had a high level of education.

Those who described Muslims as treated poorly and misunderstood were more likely to be middle aged (35–44 years, more than double all other age groups), and highly educated (triple those with low levels of education).

Of those who listed 'autocratic' in association with Muslims, females doubled males and the well-educated tripled those with a low education level.

Younger people (below 25 years) and people with low education were more likely to refer to physical appearance in association with Muslims.

A greater proportion of people with lower levels of education associated Muslims in general with war, conflict or terrorism, while a greater per centage of people with a high level of education referred to Muslims as extremist or fundamentalist. This group was also predominantly male (doubling females) and had some contact with Muslims.

An important finding of this survey was that Victorian residents did not generally associate Muslims with terrorism or with fundamentalist extremism. This suggests that associations of September 11 were not uppermost in the minds of Victorian residents when asked to think of Muslims. However, the survey was completed several days before the London train and bus bombing on July 7, 2005. If the survey had been conducted immediately after instead of prior to this event, the results may have been quite different.

Images and thoughts relating to Muslim women

Telephone survey respondents were also asked about what images and thoughts they held specifically for Muslim women.

Main thoughts and images associated with Muslim women

Cultural and custom related associations	**31.8%**
Poor treatment of women	**26.7%**
Oppressed and controlled	**11.7%**

Table 7 Non-Muslim Victorian's thoughts and images associated with Muslim women

When respondents were asked about what images and thoughts they associated with Muslim women, they mostly offered terms relating to Muslim culture and customs like traditional clothing and food. References to hijabs, burqas, shrouded women, long dresses, head scarves, white veils, women dressed in black and women covering their faces featured heavily amongst residents' responses.

"The women with faces veiled."

"Traditional Muslim women … head dress. Non-traditional woman … no head dress, but still strong beliefs."

"Women wearing hijab."

"The veil over the face … We don't really get to see much of them; they're covered."

"Dressed with a shawl."

"Shrouded women."

"Ladies wearing head cloths."

The well-educated and those who used media to source information on Muslims were more likely to link Muslim women with cultural and custom associations. A significant number of respondents also associated Muslim women with images of women being subjected to sexist and poor treatment within their communities:

"Lack of equal opportunity … they mainly stay at home … less educated than men …"

"I think it's wrong that they're primitive and have to wear all their garments, but it is their life, their choice."

Those referring to Muslim women as having less freedoms and rights were predominantly female and people with little or no personal contact with Muslim people. Interestingly, no residents with a lot of personal contact with Muslim people associated Muslims in general with poor or sexist treatment of women:

"Voiceless."

"Neglect … lack of freedom … suppressed."

"They need more liberation; freedom to speak. Men should not make women like a doormat."

"They're poorly treated by Muslim men."

"Lack of equal opportunity … they mainly stay at home … less educated than men …"

Some respondents highlighted their reluctance to rely on information sourced in the media:

"I sometimes feel sorry for them because they don't appear to have the same rights as Western women, but I've read reports that our perception is tainted by what is reported in the media, which may not be the truth. They appear to be very happy in their role, and we may have it wrong."

Respondents who associated the terms 'oppressed' and 'controlled' with Muslim women were much more likely to be younger:

"I think they're very much downtrodden under the control of their men unless they are very highly educated."

"Over-powered, downtrodden."

"Muslim women walk behind men... [they are] treated as second class citizens. Men have no respect for them."

Similarly, other terms respondents associated with Muslim women included: particular behaviors such as being submissive or traditional (10.2 per cent); different, isolated and a minority (5.7 per cent); sadness and sympathy (5.5 per cent); Muslim women being ordinary individuals (5.2 per cent); religious beliefs and practices (3.7 per cent); community and family oriented (3.7 per cent); intelligent and educated (3.7 per cent); and strong and worthy of respect (3.7 per cent). Noticeably, no respondents associated Muslim women with either war or terrorism, or extremist and fundamentalist behaviour.

The respondents who referred to Muslim women as 'different, isolated or a minority' were older (55–64 years), had some contact with Muslims (triple those with hardly any association with Muslims), and were well-educated (more than double those with a low education).

Those who referred to sadness and sympathy in relation to Muslim women had hardly anything to do with Muslims (double those with a little to do with Muslims), and included greater proportions of women (three times more than men), and people living in rural areas. No respondents having at lot to do with Muslims gave this response.

A large proportion of respondents associating Muslim women with intelligence and education, and being strong and worthy of respect, had contact with Muslims (triple those having hardly anything to do with Muslims) and a high level of education (more than triple those with low levels of education).

Nearly a half of the Victorian residents surveyed mentioned the 'poor, unfair and autocratic treatment of women'. This applied to both Victorian men and women. Victorian women also associated poor treatment of women with Muslim culture in general. The primary associations are of women being treated poorly, being controlled, and being traditional and submissive. This finding suggests that non-Muslim Victorians hold a fairly negative view of the role of Muslim women in Muslim culture.

Importantly, however, the survey data strongly suggests that negative judgements about the poor treatment of women by Muslims was significantly reduced when respondents had contact with Muslims.

Response to the statement 'Muslim women are treated fairly by their societies.'

Less than a quarter of respondents endorsed the statement that 'Muslim women are treated fairly by their societies,' while half disagreed. Another fifth said they did not know or could not say. Of those who disagreed, more than a third strongly disagreed.

Are Muslim women treated fairly by their societies?

22.0% agreed

51.5% disagreed (19.3% strongly disagreed)

22.2% did not know

Table 8 Response rates to the statement 'Are Muslim women are treated fairly by their societies?'

Respondents agreeing with the statement included a lower per centage of people aged 25 to 34 years old, and a higher per centage of those having contact with Muslims (almost double those with hardly anything to do with Muslims). Generally those disagreeing with the statement were mostly aged 16 to 54 years and had hardly any association with Muslims. The residents disagreeing that Muslim women are treated fairly by their societies (51.5 per cent) were mostly aged 16 to 54 years and had very little or hardly any association with Muslims. In contrast, those agreeing had either a little or a lot of contact with Muslims.

This appears to support the previous finding that non-Muslim Victorian respondents viewed the role of Muslim women in Muslim culture in a fairly negative way, unless they had had some contact with the Muslim community.

Section 2: Community Relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Victorians

This section describes the results from four questions that seek to explore the context for Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Victoria. After this section, the results from the level of agreement or disagreement with seven statements about Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Victoria are described, which is then followed by a description of suggestions to improve relations between the two made by non-Muslim Victorians.

Personal contact with Muslim people

The survey indicated that a majority of Victorian residents surveyed had hardly any contact with Muslims. Some respondents reported having a little contact with Muslims, but only a minority reported having regular contact.

Contact with Muslims	
hardly any	**61.7%**
a little	**31.3%**
a lot	**6.7%**

Table 9 Survey respondents level of contact with Muslims

Respondents having hardly any association with Muslims were more likely to be women, older (above 55 years of age), and living in rural areas. They were more likely to use media sources for information and had lower levels of education. Respondents with some contact were more likely to be men, living in a metropolitan region, using non-media sources, and to be well-educated. Similarly, those having a lot to do with Muslims also tended to reside in a metropolitan region and to use non-media sources, and were slightly more educated.

Information on Muslims

It is clear that survey respondents used media as the main source of information on Muslims. This is not surprising considering the previous finding that a majority of Victorian residents have little or no contact with Muslims.

Information sources*

Media:	**Personal contact:**
television **59.5%**	relatives and friends **17.5%**,
newspapers **48%**	co-workers and clients **13.3%**
radio **16.2%**	community and cultural groups **8%**

*Respondents could nominate more than one source

Table 10 Survey respondents' sources of information on Muslims

Survey respondents using television as a source of information on Muslims consisted of far more people with little (54 per cent) or hardly any (66 per cent) contact with Muslims compared with people with a lot of contact (19 per cent). This group also included far fewer young respondents (aged 25 and below) and television was far more popular with less educated respondents. Respondents listing radio as a source were older (45–64 years) and lived in metropolitan regions.

Respondents listing relatives and friends as sources of information were younger (16–34 year olds) and tended to live in a metropolitan region, while respondents listing co-workers and clients as their source were predominantly male, had a lot of contact with Muslims, and had high levels of education.

Other less used sources of information included books (11 per cent); academic and religious study (8 per cent); community and cultural groups (8 per cent); travel (4 per cent); personal observation (e.g. *seeing them in the city*) (4 per cent); and films (2 per cent).

Media treatment of Muslims

The majority of residents viewed the media's portrayal of Muslims to be unfair and biased. This is an important finding as the previous finding indicated that Victorian residents relied heavily on media sources for their information on Muslims.

Of those charging the media as unfair and biased, one third said they strongly agreed this was the case. Only a quarter of Victorian residents surveyed said that the media provided fair and unbiased treatment of Muslims. This suggests that Victorian residents continue to gain their main source of information about Muslims from the media even though a clear majority hold a belief that this information is unfair and biased.

Portrayal of Muslims by the media

59.0%	unfair and biased (22.2% hold this view very strongly)
26.8%	fair and unbiased
9.5%	could not answer

Table 11 Respondents' views on the media's portrayal of Muslims

The group of respondents viewing the media's treatment of Muslims as unfair and biased were more likely to be neither young nor old (25–54 years), to have had contact with Muslims, and had a high level of education.

Respondents viewing the media's treatment of Muslims as fair and unbiased included a higher per centage of younger (16–24 years) and older (55–65+ years) people and people with lower levels of education. While younger people (below 25 years) tended to believe that media portrayals of Muslims were fair and unbiased, they were the only group where a majority (66 per cent) relied on non-media sources. Thus, young people did not rely on media sources for information on Muslims but did not intentionally avoid media sources as they perceived them to be generally fair and unbiased towards Muslims.

The effect of the media on non-Muslims' treatment of Muslims

Victorian residents clearly saw a link between reports in the media about Muslims and the way Muslims were treated and viewed by non-Muslims. Of those that saw this link more than half said they strongly agreed that media reports had an impact on non-Muslims' views and treatment of Muslims, that negative representations led to negative impacts and positive representations to positive impacts.

Effects of media representations on treatment of Muslims

84.7%	agreed (53.3% hold this view very strongly)
5.8%	did not agree
7.3%	did not know

Table 12 Respondents' views on the affects of media representations on treatment of Muslims

Respondents agreeing that the media affects the treatment of Muslims were more likely to have a high level of education. The small group (5.8 per cent) that disagreed were mostly younger (16–24 years) and older (55 years and above) and had lower levels of education.

Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Victoria

Response to the statement 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are friendly.'

More than half of the respondents surveyed agreed with the statement that 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are friendly in Victoria.' One sixth disagreed with this statement, and another sixth said they could not give an answer.

'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are friendly'

60.5% agreed

16.8% disagreed

16.3% did not know

Table 13 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are friendly

Respondents agreeing with this statement included a higher per centage of males, a lower per centage of older people (55–64 years), and more people who have had contact with Muslims. Respondents disagreeing with the statement included a higher proportion of females, and a far greater per centage of people with low levels of education.

Response to the statement 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are difficult.'

Just over one third of respondents agreed with the statement that 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are difficult.' Almost half disagreed with this statement, and a smaller group said they could not give an answer.

'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are difficult'

36.7% agreed

43.2% disagreed

14.7% did not know

Table 14 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are difficult'

The number of respondents who endorsed this statement included a higher per centage of people residing in rural areas. Those respondents that disagreed included a higher per centage of people aged 35 to 44 years old, people who resided in a metropolitan region, people who had contact with Muslims, and people with a higher level of education.

Response to the statement 'Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the non-Muslim way of life'

Almost half of the respondents surveyed agreed with the statement 'Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the non-Muslim way of life.' One quarter disagreed and another quarter answered that they did not know or could not say.

'Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the non-Muslim way of life'

43.5% agreed

26.0% disagreed

26.8% did not know

Table 15 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the non-Muslim way of life'

The respondents who agreed with the statement included: a higher per centage of younger people (16–24 years old), people who resided in a metropolitan region, people who gained information from non-media sources, and people who had a lot to do with Muslims. Respondents who disagreed with the statement included a higher per centage of people aged 35 to 44 years old, and people living in rural areas.

Response to the statement 'Non-Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life.'

One fifth of respondents agreed with the statement 'Non-Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life,' while more than two thirds disagreed. Interestingly, more than one third of those who disagreed said they strongly disagreed, suggesting that Victorians were aware that their knowledge of Muslims could be improved.

'Non-Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life'

19.3% agreed

68.5% disagreed (26.3% strongly disagree)

10.0% did not know

Table 16 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Non-Muslims in Victoria have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life'

The number of respondents agreeing with the statement were more likely to be male, older (55 to 65+ years of age), and residing in a metropolitan region.

Response to the statement 'Australians need to be more tolerant of Muslims.'

Over two thirds of respondents agreed with the statement 'Australians need to be more tolerant of Muslims.' Almost one fifth disagreed with this statement. Notably, more than a third of those who agreed said they strongly agreed.

'Australians need to be more tolerant of Muslims'

- 70.8% agreed (27.7% strongly agreed)
- 18.5% disagreed
- 5.3% did not know

Table 17 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Australians need to be more tolerant of Muslims'

The number of respondents agreeing with the statement included: a higher proportion of females, people aged 25 to 34 years old, people gaining information on Muslims from non-media sources, people having a lot to do with Muslims, and people with trade certificates or a degree or diploma. The group of respondents disagreeing with the statement were more likely to be male and aged 35 to 54 years old.

Response to the statement 'Muslims in Australia need to integrate more in to Australian society.'

Almost three quarters of respondents agreed that *'Muslims in Australia need to integrate more in to Australian society.'* More than one third strongly agreed with this statement. One sixth of respondents disagreed with this statement.

'Muslims in Australia need to integrate more into Australian society.'

72.5%	agreed (27.8 strongly agreed)
16.8%	disagreed
6.7%	did not know

Table 18 Respondents' responses to the statement 'Muslims in Australia need to integrate more into Australian society'

The group of respondents agreeing with the statement included: a higher per centage of people aged 45 to over 65 years old, people living in rural areas, people with hardly any association with Muslims, and people with lower levels of education. The group of respondents disagreeing with the statement were mostly aged 16 to 44 years, had a little or a lot to do with Muslims, and were more likely to be well-educated.

Response to the statement 'There is a high level of trust between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia.'

Less that one fifth of respondents agreed that *'There is a high level of trust between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia.'* More than half the respondents disagreed with this statement, and one fifth said they could not answer this question. Of those that disagreed one third strongly disagreed.

'There is a high level of trust between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia

17.8%	agreed
56.2%	disagreed (20.3% strongly disagreed)
20.3%	did not know

Table 19 Respondents' responses to the statement 'There is a high level of trust between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia'

The number of respondents agreeing with the statement included a higher per centage of males and a lower per centage of people aged 55 to 64 years old. The group of respondents disagreeing with the statement were more likely to be well-educated.

Suggestions for improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims

Many suggestions were offered by respondents for improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. The most common included: schools educating young people about related issues, fostering awareness and understanding of Muslim and non-Muslim ways of life through other forms of education, and the media publicising and promoting positive aspects of Muslim life. Examples of individual responses given under each of these categories are included below:

- **Introducing relevant school education (27.5 per cent)**

"More understanding of customs and beliefs by Australians … an education process can be introduced at school or by media representation."

"Education between both groups. (We) should make a lot more effort to learn and understand culture and traditions. Through schools we learnt to tolerate each other from an early age."

"Education should have a more religious component of various faiths … documentary that would help young people … narrow-minded … to understand the situation of Muslim people."

- **Increasing relevant community education (22.3 per cent)**

"More community information on a local council level; citizen clubs, printed information and guest speakers at different functions."

"Education at workplace … reinforcing laws already existing on anti-discrimination."

- **Promoting positive images of Islamic life through the media (17.7 per cent)**

- **Encouraging the Islamic community to become more prominent and active within the wider community (13.7 per cent)**

"More Muslims taking on more prominent roles outside of their own sectors."

"The Muslim community could try and participate at fundraisers, cultural events, sporting events, be more visible at national [Australian] days of remembrance and celebration."

- **Encouraging greater interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims (12.5 per cent)**

"Councils organising community functions and the Muslim leader getting together with different religious leaders and organising discussion groups and get togethers with non-Muslims."

"More interaction [between] Muslim women and non-Muslim women … Muslim women should not be kept separate by their husbands. We don't know what to think because we can't associate with them."

- **Active integration (11.3 per cent)**

"If they want to do their religion at home that's fine, but as they are in this country they should be following all the non-religious rules of the land."

"[Muslims] need to try a little harder with English and to try and fit in more."

"Further integration of Muslims in the community … Imagine if there was a Muslim AFL star for example."

Other popular suggestions for improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Victorians included: allowing for natural integration over time (e.g. *'…eventually it will naturally happen …'*); changing government policy; changing Muslim women's appearance; and encouraging unbiased treatment of Muslim women. Only a small number (3.8 per cent) said nothing could be done. A larger number of respondents (12.7 per cent) said they could not suggest ways to improve relations.

The suggestions made by non-Muslim Victorians to improve relations with Muslim Victorians acknowledge that both groups have a role to play and expresses a desire for more interaction and information exchange between groups. Only a small number of respondents made suggestions that sought to improve relations by reducing cultural diversity and limiting the expression of Muslim culture.

Summary

In our survey, a majority of Victorian respondents held positive views of Muslims (62 per cent), which is similar to the survey of Australian residents in a recent 2008 PEW Global Attitudes Project poll (60 per cent)[44]. This was slightly higher than in America (57 per cent) but significantly lower than Great Britain (72 per cent)[45] in a similar PEW Global Attitudes Project poll in 2005. The recent 2008 poll also indicated that while American's positive views of Muslims (56 per cent) dipped marginally since the 2005 poll, it had decreased more dramatically in Great Britain (63 per cent). Therefore, by 2008 the positive view of Muslims held by the publics of America and Great Britain was at comparable levels with the views of Victorian respondents in the current study and the 2008 poll of Australian residents.

The application of principles of equity and justice was the main factor for why Victorians held positive views of Muslims. Interestingly, this finding implies that many respondents did not rely on media sources or personal contact to form their views.

The proportion of Victorian residents holding negative views of Muslims (10.2 per cent) was far less than the 22 per cent of United States residents, and less than the 14 per cent of Great Britain residents with unfavourable views of Muslims in 2005[46]. For both countries this figure had increased to 23 per cent by 2008, while 29 per cent of Australians surveyed in 2008 held unfavourable views of Muslims[47]. Importantly, the Victorian figure was significantly less , suggesting that Victorians generally held a positive view of Muslims.

Respondents holding mainly negative views of Muslims tended to be less educated, in contrast to respondents holding positive views who tended to be well-educated. This is partly consistent with the Pew Global Attitudes Project report which found that, overall, negative views of Muslims tended to be held by people who were older and less-educated. Dunn[48] discussed the impact of education on Australians' understanding of Islam, and suggests that those with a higher level of education may have experienced more opportunities to travel and be socially mobile, and as a result to have had more contact with Muslims resulting in a better knowledge of Islam.

A large per centage of Victorians held neither positive nor negative views of Muslims. This might indicate that Victorians were reluctant to make judgements of Muslims on the information available, or it may reflect either a neutral view of Muslims or that residents did not have enough information to form a view.

Overall, Victorian residents had little or hardly anything to do with Muslims and relied primarily on media sources for information on Muslims. This mirrors Dunn's findings that Australians have low levels of contact with Muslims and are either ignorant or have only partial knowledge of Islam.[49] A majority of Victorian residents did not feel that the Muslim way of life was well understood by Victorians.

While the majority of residents thought that the information they sourced through the media was biased and unfair, and that this biased and unfair information would have a negative impact on how Muslim communities were viewed and treated by non-Muslim Victorians, it did not appear to stop them from

44 *PEW, 2008*

45 *PEW, 2005*

46 *Ibid*

47 *PEW, 2008*

48 *2005*

49 *Ibid, 2005*

continuing to use the media as an information source. This may have had something to do with the reason why the majority of residents felt Muslims were mainly negative: the principle of equity, giving everyone a fair go, and that they have not done anything harmful to me. This would imply that many respondents put off judging Muslims on the basis of information they had solely sourced through the media.

To summarise, these results indicate that a more sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of Islam would improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that this understanding could be achieved either through greater personal contact between Muslim and non-Muslim communities or an emphasis in the media on more positive representations of Muslims.

Victorian residents associated culture and customs with both Muslims and Muslim women. There was little association of Muslims with terrorism and extremism by non-Muslim Victorians. The association with terrorism and extremism and Muslims is portrayed on a regular basis in the media and, thus, it was surprising to find that Victorians, whilst exposed to these associations, understood that it might bias their view of Muslims and chose not to rely or solely rely on information sourced through the media when forming their views of Muslims.

Survey respondents also thought that while Muslims could do more to integrate into Australian society, Australian society could be more tolerant of Muslim communities. This suggests that non-Muslim Victorians clearly saw that improving relations relied on both non-Muslim and Muslim Victorians doing more, particularly by increasing the interaction between both communities and increasing school and community education to ensure a greater exchange of information.

Young non-Muslim Victorians

The findings of the current survey suggest that there are distinct differences between the perceptions of Muslims among young people (those under 25 years of age) when compared with those over 25 years of age. Young people were more likely to hold mainly positive views of Muslims, and to have derived these views from information sourced from personal contact with Muslims rather than media sources such as television. They were not concerned with the representation of Muslims in the media as they did not see a strong link between how Muslims were represented in the media and how they were viewed and treated by non-Muslim Victorians, unlike those aged over 25 years of age.

Young non-Muslim Victorian respondents associated oppression and being controlled with Muslim women much more than any other group, suggesting that they held quite a negative view of Muslim women's position in Muslim culture. This appears to contradict the conclusion that greater contact with Muslims leads to a more positive view of Muslim culture and the treatment of Muslim women by Muslim culture.

Views on Muslim women

It was clear from the analysis that Victorians and Victorian women, in particular, held a negative perception of how Muslims treat women. What this analysis showed, however, was that a majority of female respondents holding this view sourced their information from media sources. The proportion of Victorian women respondents who held this view significantly decreased if they had had contact with Muslims. This is in contrast to the finding that those under 25 years of age continued to hold negative views despite having contact with Muslims. This supports the conclusion that non-Muslim Victorian women's views were influenced by the media's portrayal of the restrictions of Muslim women's rights.

The reliance on media sources by non-Muslim Victorian women changed when asked about their associations with Muslims in general. In relation to Muslims in general, respondents seemed less inclined to trust media sources concluding they were biased and unfair. Therefore there were few associations of Muslim culture with terrorism or extremism. In contrast, however, survey respondents appeared more inclined to trust media sources when making judgements about Muslim women and their treatment by Muslim culture, with almost one in every two respondents mentioning the '*poor*', '*unfair*' or '*autocratic*' treatment of women by Muslim culture. Thus, the deferral of judgement exercised for Muslims in general was not exercised when judging associations for Muslim women. This indicates that survey respondents had a very negative view of the place of women in Muslim culture, far more negative than their associations and views of Muslims in general as a group.

Community relations

While Victorians felt that they could know more about Muslims, they also expressed the view that Muslims could also improve relations with non-Muslim communities by integrating more and participating in society. These views acknowledged that both Muslim and non-Muslim communities could do more to improve community relations.

Stage 3

Follow-up focus groups with Muslim women

Stage 3: Follow Up Focus Groups with Muslim Women

"Ten years ago in Australia there was no discrimination, now we expect it and accept it."

Horn of Africa woman

Introduction

The following section reports on a second set of focus groups held between 2006 and 2007, in which 96 Muslim women participated. As in the initial set of consultations women's experiences of racism were complex and varied. We have tried as much as possible to represent women's experiences meaningfully, using their own words whenever possible.

The purpose of this set of consultations was to:

- establish whether or not women continued to experience various forms of racism;
- to assess the changes, if any, since the first set of consultation held between 2003 and 2005;
- provide a broader view of the impact on women's lives post-September 11; and
- examine whether the impact had changed, and if so how. More specifically, we were concerned with whether Muslim women continued to remove themselves from public spaces as a means of protection.

Racism continues

This set of focus groups was not characterised by the exasperation and urgency that so typified the first set of focus groups. However, all participants stated that racist attitudes continued to be expressed regularly towards them. Many felt that this was still a major issue confronting Australian Muslim women and their children, as well as the general community:

"For my generation, as mothers, we do understand the discrimination and the context of it, but our children don't. When they hear people shouting "Go home' it is confusing for them because Australia is the only home that they have known and it **is** *[participant's emphasis] their home. It is impacting on our children and coming generations."*

Lebanese woman

"There is a lot of discrimination especially given the current political situation."

Background information withheld

"They don't know us personally and yet they hate us."

Turkish woman

At the same time, however, women expressed the view that the level of racial discrimination and violence had decreased, particularly in the last two years. They felt that it had been at its worst immediately after September 11 and the Bali bombings, and was still liable to increase every time there was an attack in Western countries by Muslim terrorists:

"These troubles started after September 11. But I think now things have calmed down a lot. I was very fearful at that time and we all were and we didn't go outside for a long time and now we have changed the way we live … "

Eritrean woman

"It only takes on incident in the world concerning terrorism before Muslim women are attacked again"

Turkish woman

Muslim women's continuing experience of racisim

As in the first set of focus groups, women reported a vast array of racist behaviour, including xenophobia, discrimination and prejudice based on women's perceived race or religion, with differing levels of incivility, abusive and physically violent behaviour. We have listed them below in order of prominence.

Incivility and Everyday Racisms

The majority of incidents continue to be unwanted attention such as being stared at, and generally being treated disrespectfully. Women cited many incidents in which they were stared at, pointed at, and/or laughed at. Women found this to be embarrassing and humiliating.

"Sometimes we get worried the way they stare at us … we wonder what they are going to do."

Background information withheld

One participant, who was a young woman and a newly-arrived immigrant, was frightened and shocked by people regularly pointing at her. Other women described experiencing the opposite:

"About one per cent make you feel welcome and the rest ignore you."

"When most customers come to the register they greet them, smile and say "Hello, how are you?' However when I go there they just look through me and don't say anything."

Horn of Africa woman

For the most part, women saw this type of behaviour less as an issue of discourtesy, and more as a silent way of communicating to women that they were not wanted in Australia:

"Even myself … I was queuing up at the supermarket and a woman told me to move out of the way. I was in front of her, why should I move? Then I went

to another register, the girl said it was closed … I should go to another register. I am sure it was because I was Muslim because this has happened a few times."

Horn of Africa woman

"… a man was distributing pamphlets and he gave one to everyone except us. He ignored me and made it clear that he didn't want to pay any attention to me."

Other incivilities appeared to be deliberate efforts to insult and ridicule women. Indeed, participants have come to accept that they will be treated with incivility and disdain. It is important to note that women did not generally define this as racism, but as behaviour that nonetheless targeted them because they were Muslim and that affected their confidence and self worth:

"When I was in TAFE, people asked me questions like about the cleanliness of my scarf as I was wearing it everyday and also whether I washed my hair."

Turkish woman

"They treatment now is very cold. People look at you and sometimes question you; "You are in Australia, why do you dress like that?""

Verbal Abuse

In a number of groups it became obvious that women had adapted and become desensitized to certain types of abuse. In speaking about verbal abuse from passing cars, women stated that it occurred so frequently they no longer considered it when speaking about violence or discrimination. Many women were of the view that if they didn't answer back and make 'more trouble' the perpetrator would move on and they wouldn't have to worry about it:

"There are lots of young men who shout at us from their cars but it is only words not actual physical violence. Although I must admit it makes me scared sometimes. I just keep walking and don't look them. So at my age, as a Muslim woman I think I shouldn't have fear."

Horn of Africa woman

However, at least in one instance, a woman disagreed that racist incidents could be shrugged off so easily:

"I don't agree with the other women. We are often scared walking on [street name]. I have had lots of people staring at me and often yell and swear at me … I am afraid to go out on my own."

Lebanese woman

Women continue to face a significant level of verbal abuse in similar numbers to that cited in the first set of focus groups. The vast majority of incidents continue to be in public spaces, and usually by people unknown to the victims. Women in this set of focus groups repeatedly stated that they have come to expect a certain level of abuse and are not as affected as they might have been in the period immediately following September 11. As with incivility, verbal abuse aimed to insult and ridicule women:

"My friend has terrible trouble with her neighbours. When the man is drunk he starts yelling at her because she is Muslim, he yells "Why are you covered, you bloody wog?"

"Once we were on a day trip and a group of older men asked us if we had bombs in our bags … "

Many women were yelled at and intimidated:

"My friend came to visit me on Saturday by train and she was verbally abused by a man all the way from the city to Broadmeadows. She was by herself and everybody on the train just watched and listened to the man abusing her and no body came to her aid. She was very scared and was crying by the time she got to my place … "

Pakistani woman

"I was on the bus the other day and there were two young Muslim girls on the bus at well. Two men got on and one had a seeing eye dog. The girls were not used to a dog and they quickly moved away from the men. An old lady got up and starting shouting at the girls saying "You stupid girls, the dogs are better than you, go back to where you came from' … The girls were just crying because of what she said."

A small group of women expressed the view that they felt quite safe. These were either elderly Muslim women who said that they rarely ventured outside their homes without being chaperoned, or some refugee women (especially women from Afghanistan), who reported that they felt safe here compared to the countries that they had fled. However, Afghan women were concerned that if Australian forces were injured in Afghanistan in the future, public opinion would change and their community would again be vulnerable to racism.

Discrimination

"Discrimination is a problem everywhere but what worries me most is when it infiltrates … government, schools and the workplace."

The most common form of discrimination reported was the difficulty associated with finding work if women wore the hijab. One woman cited not getting a job because the employers believed that the hijab was an inappropriate dress for work in a kitchen of a restaurant.

"When I wasn't covered (hijabed) it was easier for me [to get a job]."

Turkish woman

Many women felt that work that involved answering telephones or being cleaners was easier to come by than work that involved meeting people face-to-face. This was demoralizing for both themselves and for the ambitions they held for their daughters' education and careers. Other women spoke of those who were literate and able to undertake training, who were being forced into childcare or aged care service when they might have preferred other professions. Others complained that:

"Some of our girls now can get jobs at Safeway but that is all they can get."

Somali woman

Threatened and actual physical assaults against women and their property

It was very evident from the focus groups that the number of assaults against women had dropped. Clearly this had contributed to women feeling safer because the worst of it appeared to be over. However, women were unequivocal that this did not mean that they were safe, nor indeed that violence had ceased to be an issue:

"We get a lot of complaints from young people particularly coming home from school and wearing hijab. They have been [spat] at … "

Background information withheld

"… yes in some cases as you know there has been physical abuse of members of the community and of course the most vulnerable are the women so we are usually the target."

It appears that driving or being in a public space has also become a source of vulnerability for women. Many women cited being verbally threatened with violence on the road and even being yelled at not to park outside houses and businesses despite the fact that they were legitimate parking areas:

"If we make a mistake on the road while driving we seem to be verbally abused double once they see we are Muslim women. I always find that. There is definitely more road rage against Muslim women than any other group on the roads."

For others, the attacks were more threatening:

"My friend was hit by a man on the grounds of her flat [public housing complex] and when she complained to the police, all they did was tell her to make sure she didn't walk around alone, to go with other women in a group, but you can't do this all the time."

Somali woman

"It's not even safe now; two months ago my daughter was in the TAFE library. A couple of people went by and called her terrorist and said fuck you. I always tell her if people speak to her badly not to answer back. But then they, these two big Australian girls started pulling her hijab off and hit her. My daughter responded by hitting back and she got a cut lip."

Iraqi woman

Three women described being harassed while driving because they were Muslim and were forced off the road. In another incident:

"An old woman in a car was being followed by a group of young men. This was an attack on her. She went into a side street and they followed her. Two cars with young men going to gang up on her … She felt so threatened she crossed a red light to feel safe."

Some women reported attacks and damage to their property:

"My neighbours know I am a Muslim …[they] threw stones at my car and things over the fence because of what was happening overseas … "

"My husband is a taxi driver and at Tullamarine airport they have been provided with a room to pray in. Recently the room was vandalised with urine and poo all over the place and worse still, they tore up the Qur'an and threw it into the mess."

Impact of racism on women's lives

"We came to this country for its safety. But as a Muslim maybe that can't be guaranteed."

"When we find out of any crime overseas we check to see if he is Muslim or not. If [he's] not Muslim we relax [because] we won't be attacked."

Iraqi woman

"I have had many people yell at me and call me names and in the end you decide that you don't want to go out anymore. We are becoming prisoners in our own homes in this country."

Turkish woman

All women expressed varying levels of distress about the ongoing occurrence of racism and abuse in their lives and that of their community. Despite this, on an individual level many women did not think racism was a serious problem. Even some of those directly affected did not think racism and abuse were serious problems. In speaking with women it became increasingly evident the assessment of their situation was based on comparing their current situation to the period immediately following September 11 and the subsequent terrorist attacks. Against this benchmark '*everything is peaceful*'. In a number of groups it was identified that women had adapted to racism and, in some cases, become almost impervious to certain types of abuse.

While the women from Afghanistan stated that they felt safe in Australia, this safety appeared contingent on the safety of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. This renders their notion of safety flimsy in the current international climate, and completely out of their control. In this regard, the situation of Afghani women had not altered significantly, despite the fact that they did not consider racism to be a problem. It is important to note that for women who migrated to Australia from regions marked by civil strife and war, such as parts of Africa and Afghanistan, the current issues they faced in Australia are compared with the lives they lived in their worn torn countries of birth. In this context, Australia is in fact safe. In addition to this, women from Lebanon and Turkey also felt that no matter how difficult life in Australia became for them, it would nonetheless be easier than back home:

"I came to Australia as a divorced woman … and the government here helped. This would not have happened overseas. I picked myself up and regained the assurance to start again. This would not have happened in Turkey … Terrorism was an issue in Turkey, now it is an issue everywhere."

Turkish woman

In more than one group, participants stated that during the past five years their lives in Australia had dramatically changed. A number of women stated that there are still people in the wider community who take every opportunity to make them feel uncomfortable. Many who first arrived in Australia prior to September 11 felt that, back then, mainstream Australians were not concerned about religious identity. However, this has changed radically and they now mourn the loss of freedom this anonymity once gave them.

Women stated, and fully understood, that their social reality and position in Australia had changed. While extreme incidents of discrimination, violence and abuse had decreased, ongoing low levels of verbal abuse, discrimination, incivility and everyday racism continued. In this new reality, they understood that any event or media report would swiftly change the '*quiet environment*' of low grade incidents to something much harsher. As a result, many reported feeling generally fearful and hypervigilant about their safety. Ongoing stress and worry about what might happen was not uncommon among participants:

"My daughter is fifteen. She wants to walk to school by herself, but I am too fearful to let her."

"I have no rest. I think about going to Iraq, but how is that an option?"

Iraqi woman

Importantly, the strategies that women had listed in the first set of focus groups continued to be used by women as a means of protecting themselves. These strategies appear to have become permanent and entrenched ways of being in the world. Women continued to avoid travelling alone and did not spend time alone in public spaces, such as streets, parks and shopping centres. Some women did not leave the home even for necessities, including food and paying bills. The changes to women's lives have been significant:

"I don't walk by myself in the streets anymore; I always have to take someone with me. I am scared to walk alone."

"I don't like to go anywhere now. I used to travel a lot but now I don't. Even when my husband says "let's go somewhere' I try and avoid it."

Many participants also stated that they no longer travelled to unfamiliar areas or areas with only 'white' Australians because they did not feel safe to do so. Many women felt unsafe without men as chaperones because they largely relied on men for protection whenever possible. This restricted their movements and activities to the availability of their partners/male family members. While this had many disadvantages for women who had previously enjoyed higher levels of independence, it was particularly problematic because it was the only method women knew to protect themselves. This has proved to be particularly challenging for the many Muslim women who are sole-parents or single mothers without male relatives to chaperone them. In addition, many women cited becoming far more dependent on their husbands because they were too frightened to travel or undertake activities on their own. Repeatedly, women stated that they waited until their husbands/male family member came home if they wanted to go out. For women with partners, the men usually assisted when they could. However, this was impractical and difficult to negotiate for both sides. It also appeared to further entrench women's fear of going out alone. Generally, the assistance and advice of men was not always helpful to women. For example, when women complained to their husbands of verbal abuse or their fear of venturing out, they were advised to stay home:

"I don't feel safe so I don't want to go out. My husband also does not give permission, so I stay inside."

Lebanese woman

In more than one focus group, women reported that community leaders advised them to stay at home if they feared for their safety. Women believed that they must accept this curtailment of freedom because it is necessary for their safety, and that there were simply no other options. One woman felt that restricting activities was the only advice men could offer because it was the only option they knew:

"Once this man abused my husband and me. We didn't go out for one month! My husband said so."

Background information withheld

Many participants spoke at length about remaining at home to ensure their safety if there were terrorist attacks or anniversaries of incidents. The length of stay at home varied from a few days to a few weeks, depending on their level of fear. Other women assessed the situation by monitoring their immediate community for reports of attacks and abuse. Many applied the same protective procedures for their children. In these situations women could keep their children from attending school for up to three weeks.

Participants also spoke about how changing their behaviour included more protective measures for their children. Across a number of groups, participants stated that it had been very difficult for young women as they had experienced many incidents on public transport and in the streets. This had resulted in many parents escorting their children to school, whereas previously young women would have been expected to travel independently. Women believed very strongly that violence was a significant threat to their children and that they did not want to risk their children's safety. This sentiment was very pronounced among participants. They felt the need to compromise their children's independence for the sake of their children's safety:

"We used to let our children walk to school by themselves but now we are worried about their safety so we now take our children to and from school."

Horn of Africa woman

This 'compromise' could take quite severe forms as demonstrated by one woman whose daughter was physically assaulted:

"I was hurt and upset for my daughter. I couldn't tell my husband. I couldn't even tell her brothers, they might stop her from going to TAFE."

Iraqi woman

For other women, their children's response to incidents greatly concerned them. Many felt that their children could not exercise the judgment or restraint needed to remain safe in incidents of abuse or attack:

"My eighteen year old daughter who is in the hijab, was waiting for the bus and some people started swearing at her but she was born here and speaks English so she just started swearing back at them."

Other women felt that their children had become withdrawn and uncomfortable about their identity:

"The other day I was shopping with my son and I was speaking in Arabic and my son whispered to me, "Mum, don't speak in Arabic, don't let them know what we are!' Our children shouldn't think like this. They never used to say this."

Lebanese woman

Some young people made major life decisions based on the concerns about racism:

"Somali girls at the state schools have been harassed and had lots of issues so that is why I have chosen to go to an Islamic school … I live in an area where the other schools treat me different and I don't need their crap! So I'd rather go to a school where I am comfortable to be myself … "

Eritrean young woman

How Muslim women understood experiences of racism and violence

Participants felt that racism had been at its worst immediately after September 11 and Bali, and was still liable to increase every time there was an attack in Western countries by Muslim terrorist groups. Since the first set of focus groups, women's understanding of racism and discrimination had developed and become more refined. For the most part, Muslim women now speak of an entrenched cycle or pattern to their vulnerability, characterised by a 'lull' or periods of low grade abuse (ie. men yelling abuse from cars), and then periods of increased vulnerability to abuse because of a 'trigger'. All women indentified global events of violence involving Muslims as the most common trigger to more serious attacks or an increase in the level of racism and violence. The recurring feeling was that all Muslims, especially Muslim women, were associated with and having to answer for acts of violence committed by Muslims overseas. This put them at significant risk:

"The thing is, every time there is an incident overseas then we are affected here. People start looking at us differently, staring at us and yes in some cases you know there's been physical abuse of members of the Muslim community and of course the most vulnerable are the women so we usually are the target."

Background information withheld

"What other Muslims do is not my fault and anyway they are not acting in a "Muslim way' so we shouldn't have to pay the price for their actions."

Eritrean woman

The influence of negative statements about Muslims made by Australian Government officials was reported as generating tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. Women cited a number of government ministers, but the most frequently cited minister was the former Immigration Minister's recent statement about the capacity of the Sudanese community to integrate into Australian society made in 2007. These statements were interpreted as a direct attack against African Muslims:

"The government and the media have left Muslims alone for a while, and [are] now picking on "black' people."

Background information withheld

"…the comments were provocative and this is what happens, the media picks it up and again people think they can abuse us."

Somali woman

For women, this was part of the overall approach of the Federal Government's distrust of Muslims, demonstrated by the "Alert Campaign". They felt that the Commonwealth's campaign had continued to generate suspicion of Muslims:

"I feel they are saying that so that people keep an eye just on us Muslims. Often when we are doing normal things, we stop and think, "will this look suspicious to someone and will they think I am doing something wrong?"

"I know many Muslims who get stopped in middle of shopping centres to show what is in their bags (by security staff)."

Background information withheld

Women considered the negative media coverage of Australian Muslims as the most critical factor in shaping the reaction of Australian society. This included news coverage, current events shows and statements made by various politicians, which served to fuel further division in the community through promoting 'inappropriate' and 'misconceived' ideas about Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular. This representation was clearly something that was very upsetting for women, who felt the media had "a lot to answer for" in terms of how Muslims were represented and, as a result, perceived and treated by wider society:

"The media writes articles that bring in the money for them and sell newspapers. They don't care what harm they are doing to the communities involved."

"I think they are scared of us because of what the media and other people tell them. When they see us on the streets they worry about what we are going to do."

In addition, however, an increasing number of women also felt the ongoing low grade levels of abuse and racism could be connected to mainstream Australians' perceptions of Muslims, especially women. They were distressed at the constant stereotyping of Muslims and their association with terrorism, violence, oppression and backwardness:

"People think we are people who love war and blood."

"Oh my God, you should hear what they say about you (on talk back radio programs). We are very bad people, Muslim people are all bad."

Vulnerable Among the Vulnerable

The same sets of factors have continued to render some Muslim women more vulnerable to abuse than others. It must be noted, however, that women saw themselves as vulnerable primarily because they are women:

"With Muslims it is always against women."

Hijab and other forms of veiling

The hijab and other forms of veiling were again the most commonly cited factor increasing women's vulnerability to racism. It was reported by many women as the main factor that increased their likelihood of being discriminated against or being targeted:

"We are suffering more because we are very visible and we are wearing the hijab, most of us … "

"It's a great system in Australia, but I see a different side of it now that I am covered [hijabed]."

Turkish woman

A number of women who were fully covered (wearing the burqa or niqab) participated in our second round of focus groups, unlike the first set of consultations. They believed that they faced greater levels of discrimination and marginalisation than other Muslim women. Some felt that their exclusion extended to the Muslim community, where they were treated as outsiders and different from other Muslim women. This belief appeared to be validated in at least some instances with some Muslim women participating in the focus group discussions stating they were frightened by the burqa and that it should be banned in Australia. In this round of focus groups, it did appear that the daily lives of women who adopted face covering as part of their hijab was marked by racist comments.

In addition, a number of Muslim women who do not wear the hijab rejected the proposition that they were less likely to be attacked. These women felt that if one 'looked like an Arab' it left them vulnerable to abuse. Three women stated they knew Arab Christian women who had been abused racially because of terrorist attacks overseas. In three focus groups, women agreed that race was as important as religion to being targeted. Some women stated that being of Arabic descent 'was hard work' in Australia, while other women spoke about the impact of colour on their vulnerability to racism. Linked to this is the number of women who reported experiencing discrimination within their immediate community because they did not wear the hijab. Very often these experiences amounted to subtle forms of exclusion. Again, this was born out in at least

one focus group where participants felt that Muslim women who did not wear the hijab were not devout and did not care about their faith/community. Another stated it was '*covered verses uncovered*'.

Skin colour

"We suffer double discrimination, we are Muslim and we are black."

Somali woman

Many women reported that darker-skinned Muslim women faced more discrimination and abuse compared to fairer skinned Muslim women, suggesting that for some women their treatment was a result of the intersection of race and religion. This view was expressed by both by African and non-African participants. Women from African backgrounds repeatedly stated that they felt more vulnerable:

"…and we are black women so I think we suffer more from these issues."

Horn of Africa woman

In this second set of focus group consultations, women from India and Pakistan participated and they reported similar experiences to those reported by women from African backgrounds.

Children

To remain consistent with the first set of focus groups we did not explicitly ask participants about the safety and welfare of children. However, several participants in a number of different focus groups spoke about violence directed specifically against their children, particularly the potential harm children were constantly at risk of:

"My eight year old daughter and my twelve year old son were walking back from school and had something thrown at them. Luckily it was just something with milk in it. But what if it was glass? It could damage them or worse."

Background information withheld

Women also stated that their children were being increasingly marginalised and separated from other children:

"I took my daughter to the Royal Children's Hospital to the emergency and we were waiting to be called. My daughter, who is six years old was playing with other children on the play equipment there. One woman saw my daughter and called her daughter over to her and told her in a loud voice, "Don't play with that girl, she is Muslim." I was shocked... I never told my daughter don't play with other children no matter what their religion."

Pakistani woman

"There are parents who advise their children to stay together on the school ground and to look out for each other."

Background information withheld

In all focus groups women stated that their children were likely to experience abuse because schooling necessitated travel. But in addition to this, women also cited discrimination by teachers:

"At the local state high schools, the Muslim girls are made to feel unwelcome by the teachers themselves. They're always picking on them and commenting on their scarves. However, the parents discussed it but don't want to do anything about it. Now the problem is that the girls have started to hate the school and don't want to go back … What will I do if my daughter doesn't want to go to school any more?"

Syrian woman

Language

Limited English language skills again proved to add another layer to women's sense of vulnerability to racism. Many felt that women who could speak English did not experience the same level of racism as their non-English speaking counterparts. However, as in the first set of focus groups, this did not bear out in the stories women reported. Speaking English clearly appeared to assist women to feel safer in the sense that it improved their confidence:

"I think it is much better for us Muslim girls who have been born here … no one would dare say anything to us because I think they can see we are quite confident in ourselves, we speak English and basically we would talk back."

Lebanese woman

There was nothing in any of the women's reports which might have suggested that the capacity to speak English prevented a potential incident or impeded it once it had commenced.

How women responded to racism and discrimination

"I have learnt to do things myself as no one really helps you."

Discussions again brought us to ask how women themselves responded to incidents of abuse and violence. Most women were still unable to identify where they could go for help if attacked, other than the Police. After some prompting, a small number identified the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and their community centres. Not a single participant mentioned the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now the Australian Human Rights Commission). Lodging complaints or reporting an incident of discrimination or violence was not considered an option, except for in extreme cases which generally would have required police intervention rather than complaints to state or federal Commissions. Participants expressed a general lack of satisfaction with, and faith in, these institutions. The

general perception amongst participants was that it was futile to make a complaint or report an incidence of discrimination or abuse because nothing would be done about it:

"I know about the Equal Opportunity Commission, but people don't go there because it is mostly because of the hassle, and you need to prove it and it takes so long, so we have heard stories of people getting nowhere when they complain, so we don't bother. We think no one is going to do anything, so we just leave it."

No complaints were made of police discrimination in the second round of focus group discussions, but it is important to note that women rarely sought police protection. This was based on the expressed belief that the police would not attend if called:

"I know people who have called the police when they have been very seriously verbally abused in the street and from the front of their houses but the police don't come so they don't bother ringing them anymore. We know the police have a lot to do but many of us are scared and where do we go for protection?"

However, there were a number of positive accounts of police responses, including the protection of mosques and other community centres.

Many women felt frightened by incidents targeting them and felt in need of protection, but they did not believe that they could call on police attendance for the types of incidents they were victim to. For example, verbal abuse from passing cars and so forth. Again, some women dissented from this view. All women agreed that in the event of a serious incident, they would contact police but were pessimistic about the potential for redress. There was a very strong feeling among the participants that police did not really understand how difficult it was for Muslim women in their daily lives and how threatened they felt by incidents police described as 'minor'.

Women continued to face abuse on public transport and have not received any form of support or protection. The failure of public transport staff to intervene or provide protection was a very important issue for women:

"Yes, of course there is violence. Particularly for those women travelling on public transport. No one is there to protect them."

"I was on the bus, there was a woman sitting very far from me. I wasn't aware of who she was talking to. I wasn't aware she was talking to me. But she was talking about Islam."

Iraqi woman

Women's views of community workers and organisations had not significantly changed. They relied heavily on their community workers, particularly those that facilitated weekly support groups. Many felt that community organisations could not do 'very much' about ongoing racism. Consistent with the views expressed in the initial set of focus groups, women viewed community workers as disempowered on issues of race and faith:

"…what can she do? Probably when she goes to the shop people also yell abuse at her too. For Australians, she is not a professional social worker she is a Muslim."

Turkish woman

"People are fighting to see her and she can't get herself a full time job. How can she stand up to the police and tell them to do something about racism?"

Iraqi woman

It appeared, however, that group leaders were very active in the protection of women in the sense that they escorted women to places they might otherwise not go.

On a community level, women still felt that there existed an unspoken rule of not speaking out. For the most part women agreed with the sentiment of not wanting to attract further attention to the community:

"Really we don't want to cause a fuss. That is just what the media wants us to do so that they can portray us again in a bad way."

"As Muslims … we have to make ourselves calm and show friendliness."

Lebanese woman

On an individual level, most women reported that they did not react assertively, choosing instead to ignore or withdraw from the scene:

"A woman was walking her children to school just this morning and a man in a car started screaming abuse at them. Her children got upset and she just told them, "When people yell at you, don't look at them, just keep walking."

"Lots of people stare at us, but I just keep walking and never answer people back."

The women linked this typical lack of response to five main reasons:

- a fear of what might follow if they answered back;
- not wanting to 'make trouble';
- limited English language skills because of which they were unable to formulate a fitting verbal response, even though some tried at times;
- a lack of awareness of, satisfaction with and faith in support services; and
- acceptance of the abuse, especially as some women from refugee backgrounds have an attitude that some abuse is their fate and that they are, in fact, treated better in Australia than the countries they migrated from.

As in the first set of focus groups, some women did report incidents. Typically, they were women who had either grown up in Australia or were sufficiently fluent in English to communicate their response:

"I had an incident where someone swore at me because of my hijab. I told him I could take off my hijab, but he couldn't take off the shit in his brain. He kept

swearing at me so I went and called the security guard … because the incident scared my children … and the security guard was great."

Background information withheld

"Just last week a car alongside was stationary at the lights. From his window he gave us the finger and yelled "You are terrorists. You are animals'. I told him to shut up and wound up the window and I stuck my tongue out at him. I drove off quickly, he was upset. I was scared he would come out and hit me."

Iraqi woman

Sense of belonging to the community

Throughout the focus groups, whether or not they were asked directly, many participants expressed sensing a lack of acceptance. Their capacity to belong was contingent on their acceptance. Many felt that they had made a concerted effort, but still felt marginalised:

"It means being part of the community. I want people to see me as a human being, not just as a Muslim woman."

"They are not telling us get out, but you can just see and feel them not friendly."

A significant number of respondents stated that feeling welcomed or feeling that you belong was associated with a feeling of safety:

"I think if you feel safe in the community you live in, then you feel welcome and you feel that you belong. You know that if you are robbed one day, then your neighbour will come to help you because they see you as part of the whole community and that we should help each other."

Factors that block or facilitate belonging

Women were encouraged to reflect on what they thought were factors that either blocked or facilitated their sense of belonging.

The most commonly cited barriers to belonging were discrimination, racism, and verbal and physical attacks. Women also cited 'fear' as the biggest issue confronting them in their daily life. This included the inability to wear the hijab without feeling worried about their safety, and worry about leaving their homes. All of the focus group participants yearned to 'feel safe' and associated this with a sense of acceptance and belonging to the broader Australian society. It was very difficult for women to provide recommendations for this section. Many were of the view that very little could be done beyond providing more support to women through a women's centre, countering myths and stereotypes about Muslims, and organising opportunities for intercultural meetings. Interestingly, women did not suggest interfaith meetings, because they felt that this would narrow the spectrum of Australians they could meet. A number of the groups agreed to the previous recommendations provided by participants from the initial set of focus groups:

- increased communication/education;
- improved mutual respect;
- increased interaction between diverse groups of people;
- improved media representation – more balance with a focus on the positive and not just the negatives;
- greater enforcement of anti-discrimination laws;
- improved accessibility to complaints mechanisms when discrimination has occurred;
- improved confidence in public authorities responding seriously to reports of discrimination; and
- Governments refraining from extremist or inaccurate representations of Muslims in the public domain – responsible politics should override populist approaches.

Some women reported already feeling a sense of belonging, welcome and support from Australians. They placed enormous value on these positive experiences. Participants felt that this had to do with an increased awareness and acceptance among the general public about Islam, Muslims, and diversity. They gave examples of schools that showed an interest in supporting their Muslim students and helping them integrate more fully. For example, by having discussions on Ramadan and other Islamic events and festivals:

"Often people smile at us on the street and I think they want to show us that not everyone is racist against Muslims."

"I didn't mix with Australian people until I had my disabled son. However, I am amazed at how great people working with the disabled are to me and my son. They show me and my son a lot of respect and talk to my son like he understands even though he doesn't. At the school and at his respite they are great. I also have a wonderful case manager. She understands our religion and customs, she is Australian. I respect them so much because they respect me."

Taking up the challenge: Recommendations for challenging the misconceptions and corresponding discrimination and attacks

Many of the women identified that the Government should act in response to the racial discrimination and violence that Muslims and Muslim women, in particular, were facing:

"If the important politicians and the media started saying positive things about Muslim people, then it would filter down to the every day person on the street and we may find it more welcoming in the community."

"It is everyone's responsibility, but the government and the politicians have the main responsibility."

As in the first set of focus groups, women were not optimistic about the government's willingness to provide support. For the most part they felt that Muslim women were not a priority for both Federal and State governments:

"They have let us come to this country. I think they believe they have been generous enough. They are right, it is better to be here than Iraq."

As before, community education and interaction were considered essential by women. Many felt that educating the wider Australian public about Muslims and Islam, as well as creating opportunities for interaction would help improve the situation:

"…there are many people who are making an effort to get to know us personally and I think that is the answer. They need to see us as women, mothers, daughters, who feel all the same things they do … we love our children and value our lives here just like everyone else."

"They don't know us personally and yet they hate us."

The role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes and abuse was also raised in every consultation:

"The media reaches so many people and has so many outlets – radio, TV, magazines. They have a big influence and a big role to play. They can label us as terrorists or see us as normal Australians."

A number of participants felt that Muslim women also needed to play a more proactive role in improving the situation for themselves, whether this meant participating more actively in the community, seeking help when needed or learning English. They felt that community sector organisations needed to support women in this process:

"We need to also take some action. We need to be more visible and get out into many groups in the community so that people get to know us and realise we are just like them except we wear a scarf because of our religion."

"Also, many of the Muslim community even today don't know about the things that are available for them as part of the community. It is hard to get information and many people don't know where to start looking."

"Well if your kids are at school, for example go and do all the things that other mothers do. Volunteer for the tuck shop, go on excursions with the kids and teachers, be part of the school community. Not many Muslim mothers do that. They all tend to just drop their kids off at school and that's it. We need to be more visible in situations that we can make a difference in and that we are safe in, such as the school."

"It is also up to us as Muslims to do something, not just stand around waiting for someone to do something for us. Last year my kids were involved in the sausage sizzle at their school … So I went and bought halal sausages and cooked them there and told the school where to buy them for the future. So they agreed and I was happy I had made the effort."

Participants who stated that they were making efforts to participate more actively in the community also shared that this was helping them adjust better and feel better about their place in Australian society:

"Yes, I know that now I speak much better English, my life has changed. I recently got my driver's license and I go out much more … "

Summary

The follow-up focus groups demonstrate that racism and anti-Muslim sentiment continued to be expressed at concerning levels against Muslim women in Victoria. The nature of that expression has altered and women are no longer experiencing physical violence and verbal abuse at the rates reported between 2003 and 2005; physical assaults particularly had decreased. Women continued to be distressed by incidents of abuse and incivility, but equally they had come to accept that they will be victims of racism on a regular basis, and that from this perspective racism no longer constituted 'a problem'.

The vast majority of incidents reported by women are incidents of abuse, racialised incivility and expressions of anti-Islamic sentiment. Women do not feel themselves to be in danger but they are sufficiently anxious about being in the public space to have altered their way of life. For many this change has been extensive. Women clearly felt that the majority of abuse and different forms of incivility communicated two messages above all else: they are not safe and they are not wanted in Australia. For some women the level of racism present in their lives has remained consistent but its expression has changed. Vulnerability to racism still amounted to putting oneself in the public space: walking on the streets, taking children to school, being on public transport and in shopping centres.

As in the first set of focus groups, some women continued to be more vulnerable to racist abuse, taunts and incivility than others. Women continued to believe that for non-Muslims there are 'visual identifiers' of being Muslim and that the hijab is the most universal identifier. The experiences of women wearing the burqa goes some way to supporting the idea that the act of veiling itself renders women more vulnerable. The Women wearing burqas and niqab's reported higher levels racism than other Muslim women; however, this study only included six women who wore the burqa's/niqabs and so generalisations were not possible.

In addition to this and unlike the original set of focus groups, a number of women reported feeling marginalised and isolated within the Muslim community because they did not wear the hijab.

African, Pakistani and Indian participants in the group reported higher levels of racism than other Muslim women. This demonstratesd that the notion of 'blackness' continued to increase women's vulnerability to racism. For many African participants, their vulnerability increased because of comments made by the previous Federal Government Immigration Minister which they believed served to single them from out from the rest of the Muslim population. This singling out not only increased their vulnerability to racism but, they believed, had also marginalised them from other Muslim communities.

Pakistani and Indian participants in this set of focus groups all wore the burqa or the niqab. This means that while their colour was visible to perpetrators, it was only in a very limited way. It is difficult to draw conclusions about whether it was women's colour or their dress code that increased their vulnerability, or perhaps both. We have presented their victimisation in the context of their veiling rather than their colour because that is how women have understood it.

Children have remained one of the most vulnerable groups among the Muslim community and it was clear that six years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, children and young people continued to be targeted. The extent of targeting is still unclear; it also unclear whether there has been a drop in racism against children since the initial set of focus groups.

Six years after the terrorist attacks against America and five years after the Bali bombings, Muslim women are still spending time at home with their children 'hiding'. Their basic right to live in safety, to have freedom of movement, to participate and enjoy all the benefits of living in a peaceful, stable western society appeared

to be compromised. Despite their ongoing anxieties and the significant self-imposed curtailments of their freedom for the purposes of securing their safety, women stated that racism is not a problem.

Women appeared committed to adapting to the current environment of low-grade everyday racisms, incivility and anti-Islamic sentiment. Many believed it is their individual responsibility to deal with racism, partly because they see no alternative (as no help was available) and partly because of their own value system and personal experiences.

International terrorism and events associated with it have created a cyclical pattern to women's lives. Creating periods in which women 'stay in' and periods they 'come out' (however limited that might be). This pattern does not appear to include lull periods of no racism; rather these were periods of incivility and daily trivial expressions of racism. The crisis periods are those that immediately followed terrorist attacks by Muslims, negative comments by government and a significant media coverage or event. This pattern, evident in the first set of focus groups, had now become a way of life for women. However, Muslim women appeared unaware of the psychological and emotional consequences of this way of life.

Women's coping strategies included reducing their autonomy, curtailing their movement, and not travelling or being in the public space alone, including not undertaking the necessary chores of life such as shopping for food. These are all disturbing indicators for women's wellbeing and their basic rights. Their growing reliance on husbands and male family partners reduced their independence and also risks significantly diminishing their life skills. These would be concerning signs for any group of women living in a free, stable and safe society.

Muslim women appeared not to consider public authorities endowed with responsibility to protect women from racism as an option. With the exception of Victoria police, women in the follow-up focus groups appeared less aware of their options than women interviewed in the first set of focus groups.

While women believed it was the responsibility of government to address racism, they did not have the expectation that it would. In this set of focus groups, women were less forthcoming in their recommendations to government and saw the role of government as limited. This appeared to be based on the limited role the government had played to date in protecting women, but was also connected to negative statements made by Federal parliamentarians.

Women clearly felt the need to be better supported and resourced to deal with racism and anti-Islamic sentiment. They clearly required further support not only to access their rights and services, but to actually understand their rights and entitlements within the Australian system. They appeared to have the most faith in their community workers and organisations; this would provide an opportunity to offer information to women through these existing structures.

Community education was very important to Muslim women, for themselves and for the broader Australian community. It was extremely important to women that the mythology and negative stereotypes surrounding Islam be dispelled. Many participants felt this would go a long way towards improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. As in the first set of focus groups women wanted to be involved in inter-cultural initiatives and programs. They saw a significant role for themselves. Anti-racism and anti-discrimination community education was thought to be crucial by focus group participants.

Key Findings and Discussion

Key findings and discussion

There has been very little research on Muslim women's experience of racism. This is despite the fact that it has often been noted in research literature that Muslim women wearing the hijab were specifically targeted and more vulnerable to racist attack.

The findings of this report substantiates that racism against Muslim women in Victoria extended beyond a few isolated incidents after the events of September 11. The range and frequency of incidents of racism experienced by Muslim women in Victoria has incrementally impacted on their sense of safety and belonging, their freedom of movement and their capacity to participate in Victorian society. It has significantly undermined their sense of control and agency over their lives.

Several Australian studies after September 11 have documented the impact of terrorism and international tensions on racism against Muslims. This report documents the specific impact on Muslim women in the post-September 11 environment. Importantly, this report identifies that the events of September 11 have continued to impact on women almost six years later. The response to these events has created a social environment where Muslim women live with significant levels of anxiety and concern about the possibility of becoming the target of racial abuse.

There is now an unsettling and disturbing cyclical pattern to Muslim women's lives. The pattern emerged in the first set of focus groups, but was an established way of life for women by the second set of focus groups. This pattern consists of periods in which women 'stay in' and periods they 'come out' (however limited that might be). From the perspective of women, this pattern does not include lull periods of no racism; rather these were periods of incivility and daily trivial expressions of racism. Crisis periods are those characterised by an increase in racism and violence. To date, they have immediately followed terrorist attacks by Muslims, negative comments by government and significant media coverage of events involving Muslims.

The psychological and emotional consequences of this new pattern which women live by are not fully cognisant to them. One can expect the effects to be profound. In the experience of the Council there is something about the cyclical nature of what women describe, and their vigilance about their safety that resembled the experience of living in a conflict situation. Many Muslim women who have arrived in Australia as refugees and humanitarian entrants appear to be responding to experiences of racism through the lens of conflict and civil strife. They take shelter in their homes during periods of volatility and venture out during periods of calm. Women appreciated that the situation in Australia cannot be compared to the conflict situations women have fled from, indeed many stated that no matter how terrible racist experiences become in Australia their situation is still far better than in their mother country. Nonetheless, in the experience of the Council, the adaptive measures appear the same. That is, during periods of volatility, women are living and raising their children as if they were living under occupation.

By the time the second set of focus groups were held, women's experience and perception of their environment and racism had changed and become quite complex. In the first set of focus groups, women were extremely upset by the racism directed at them. Participants from the second set of focus groups stated that racism was not a problem, despite some hiding in their homes for months at a time, waiting out angst over terrorist attacks. To deal with this new environment, most women had significantly altered their lives and that of their children. Many participants stated that they experienced a consistent sense of low-grade fear and vulnerability. They were anxious and preoccupied with issues of safety and increasingly fretted about their children's prospects in this country.

Women perceived a shift in Victorian attitudes to Muslims. This shift principally related to an increased awareness of Muslims, and some women would say, aversion to Muslims as people of 'blood and war'. For women, this shift decreases their chances of belonging to the broader community. As in the first set of focus groups, women were extremely worried by any suggestion that they were not part of Australian society. They did not wish to be identified as separate, and much of the angst over negative government comments and media representation was that it set Muslims apart from the rest of the community.

The majority of women in our focus groups did not appear fully aware of the enormous psychological and emotional consequences inherent in the confined lifestyles they had established for themselves, and the general fearfulness they carried with them almost all the time over the potential for abuse.

Participants outlined in great detail their growing reliance on husbands and male family members to assist them in carrying out daily tasks, reducing their independence and living skills. These would be concerning signs for any group of women, but for Muslim women these are particularly pessimistic and disturbing indicators. The right to freedom of movement, the right to travel alone without monitoring, and without a guardian or chaperone, and the right to be in the public space, are all rights that have either been contested, controversial or were simply denied to Muslim women in different geographical and historical periods. All such restrictions on women were justified culturally or religiously on the grounds that women needed 'protection'.

The current situation allows for such restrictions to be placed again on women through the back door. Women themselves have self-imposed these restrictions and men and community leaders have followed this up by recommending to women that they remain at home for their safety. Whatever the motivations of male community leaders or husbands, the outcome is the same for women. Gradually, with time it will be the norm not to travel alone. One particularly concerning outcome might be that children and young people raised with these practices may confuse travelling alone for a cultural value rather than a safety strategy. This has been one way in which the more restrictive cultural practices on Muslim women have developed.

For a significant number of Muslim women, it was the first time in their life that restrictions had been placed on their freedom. This was a source of much distress. Women felt that they were being punished for the actions of Muslims overseas –something that was completely outside their control.

The majority of women expressed the view that their gender rendered them more vulnerable to expressions of racism and anti-Muslim sentiment. Dreher and others[50] have made similar observations, noting that women may indeed be more vulnerable to abuse than men. However, this study also highlights that within this population there are groups who are at even greater risk to racism. These groups included women who wore the hijab and darker-skinned Muslim women.

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It remains unclear what role the hijab or other forms of veiling play in attacks against women. However, it appears to be the single most significant factor in rendering women vulnerable to attack. It is unclear whether the hijab itself is the basis for the abuse rather than simply acting as an empty visual identifier of Muslims. There is scope to suggest that it is the hijab itself that is the source of perpetrators anti-Muslim sentiment. This of course does not exclude the hijab from acting as an identifier to perpetrators angry over terrorism, or Iraq and so forth. It must also be considered whether terrorism by Muslims and overseas tensions have given license to racist/sexist attacks against women because of an existing abhorrence of the hijab. Whether this is a reasonable proposition to put forward will require further research and investigation.

Reports by women in the follow-up focus groups suggest that the greater the veiling the more women were susceptible to abuse. This was definitely the experience of Pakistani and Indian women who wore the niqab and burqa. It would be important that research further explores this issue because our sample of women who wore the burqa/niqab was too small to allow generalisations. A better understanding of this dynamic will contribute to our capacity to protect women in future crisis periods.

In addition, the ideas, feelings and perceptions about the hijab within the Muslim community may be in the process of changing. It appears that among Muslim women themselves, and possibly wider Muslim communities, tensions have developed around the act of veiling. There was no evidence of this in the first set of focus groups. However, by the second set of focus groups it became apparent that the most commonly understood form of hijab; veiling the head, neck and shoulders, is now the established community norm. Friction seems to exist around those who fall short of that norm or those who exceed it. Again our sample of women is small, but the level of disquiet over the hijab in the broader community, and the increased targeting of women who wear it, might indeed have led to the elevation of the issue within the community. This has led to the establishment of the hijab as the expected norm for women within the community.

African, Indian and Pakistani women reported experiencing higher levels of racism and abuse than any other group. Many appeared to live with higher levels of trepidation than other groups. This was especially evident when speaking about their children. In the first set of focus groups African women reported being directly attacked about their 'blackness'. In the second set of focus groups, women did not report any incidences of racism specifically targeting their colour but they continued to report higher levels of racism than other women. This demonstrates that old forms of racism which viewed ethnic groups as inferior because of their biology continues to render some Muslim women more vulnerable to racism. It is ironic that the very diversity of Muslim women, as immigrants, non-white, Arab and Muslim, is what leaves them vulnerable to the full spectrum of racism, sexism, prejudice, discrimination and xenophobia.

Perhaps the most disturbing and unexpected finding is that children have also been victims of racism, and in some instances violence. It is an area of research and public discourse that has received little or no attention. The importance of specific research on children was reinforced by women's limited ability to represent their children's experiences, and to fully understand and respond to the impact of racism on their children. Women were very clearly concerned about the impact of racism on their children, but their energies, however, were entirely consumed by the practical aspects of protecting them. The experience and impact of racism against children must be understood, including how women might be better assisted to cope with the victimisation of their children and how best to support them. Children's and young people's experiences need to be further investigated. This is particularly important given that many young Muslims have spent a considerable part of their childhoods in the post-September 11 environment.

We know that even by the second round of focus groups, children and young people continued to be victims of racist abuse and violence, in addition to marginalisation and exclusion. The impact on children will be profound and multidimensional because children and young people will not only be affected by their external experiences of racism, but also the response of their parents to racism. We know from women in the focus groups that their parenting practices changed post-September 11. Many women reported becoming vigilant around their children's safety, generally monitoring their children's movements and curtailing their independence. This was especially the case for young women who wore the hijab. It is important to know how children and young people have understood the restrictions placed on their lives, how they have understood the curtailments of their mothers' activities, and if they have felt the marginalisation by the broader community as their mothers have. In the first set of focus groups, women spoke at length about the impact of racism on family life and intergenerational relationships, and how it was causing a great deal of tension and stress within the family. In the second set of focus groups, women appeared less affected by these matters. This might relate to the family home having become a haven from an ostensibly hostile external environment. Whatever the precise impact on family, it is crucial to explore children's and young people's experiences in their own right.

Throughout all the focus groups, from 2003 to 2007, women repeatedly stated that they had been left alone to contend with issues that are far beyond their capacity to control as individuals. They felt that they must protect themselves because public authorities and the State would not protect them. Indeed, by the second round of focus groups, many women believed racism was their personal burden and responsibility. Public authorities mandated to protect and support women failed to do so. Participants generally did not view these authorities as viable options for support, protection and redress. Across both sets of focus groups women were aware of the role of Victoria police but lacked any confidence that they could be relied on for issues of racism. The majority of Muslim women were unaware of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) and the Australian Human Rights Commission. The small number of Muslim women who were aware of VEOHRC stated that access to the Commission was difficult and their complaints process arduous and lengthy.

This research clearly demonstrates that the current system to deal with and protect women from racism is not working. Women stated that they needed to be better supported and resourced to deal with racism and anti-Muslim sentiment. Women clearly articulated a need for support to access their rights and services, but also to better understand their rights and entitlements within the Australian system.

Currently women appear to have most faith in their community organisations, but these organisations do not have the resources and expertise to assist women if they are victim to racist abuse or violence. Clearly they have been unavailable in ways that address women's need in relation to racism. However, they continue to be the first point of call for women and appear to have the most awareness of women's experiences and the types of support women require.

Community organisations possess both the structures and linkages with women to provide information and support. If women's assessment of their community organisations was correct, it may well be that community organisations need support themselves to better represent important issues. Currently, women feel that community organisations and community workers have no capacity to be responsive to community issues, instead many organisations appear to be confined by set government directions. The affect of racism on community organisations themselves on the individual and institutional level has not been explored at all in this research. The insights of women suggest a certain level of structural organisational disempowerment of community organisations at the level of service delivery. Clearly the capacity of community organisations to contribute to the eradication of racism has yet to be fully recognised because according to women no community organisation had been funded to work with women on racism.

Women believed it was the responsibility of the State and Federal levels of government to address racism. However, participants generally viewed both levels of government as apathetic to the concerns and experiences of Muslims, and generally ambivalent about the Muslim presence in Australia. Women felt alienated from governments because of their silence and inaction on racism. Women wanted, indeed needed, governments to take a strong anti-racism position and lead on issues of intercommunity harmony. Alongside this, women wanted support in very practical ways to deal with racism, especially during volatile periods associated with international terrorism.

The level of alienation among women from government was significant and concerning. It increased their sense of isolation from the rest of Australian society and increased both their fear and the sense that racism was their very own private responsibility to contend with.

Gender dimension to racism

The overwhelming majority of Victorians surveyed had hardly any or little contact with Muslims. They relied on media for their information about Muslims, although they did not trust the information provided by the media.

A superficial look at the data would lead one to believe that there is significant disparity between the experiences of Muslim women and non-Muslim Victorians' views of Muslims. However, Victorian views of Muslims are complex and warrant further investigation. Surveyed Victorians generally perceived themselves to hold positive views of Muslims but a significant proportion associated Muslim women with poor treatment, oppression and submissiveness. Just over half of those surveyed did not believe that Muslim women are treated fairly by their community and just over a third of respondents surveyed associated Muslim women with varying degrees of veiling or being shrouded. The associations Victorians held for Muslim women compared poorly to those held for Muslims in general, and this goes some way to explaining Muslim women's experiences.

While views such as oppression and poor treatment may be considered to be sympathetic rather than negative, these notions are nonetheless inextricably linked to notions of Muslim women's docility and Muslim men's misogyny. These views are negative because they project the experiences of some Muslim women onto the identity, experiences and reality of all Muslim women living in Australia. In essence, such views of Muslim women rely on the idea of Muslim women being passive and lacking in human agency. The notion of Muslim women as oppressed requires that they be oppressed by someone; which in this case would be Muslim men and Muslim culture. This idea of oppressive Muslim men and culture contradicts non-Muslim Victorians stated belief that they do indeed hold positive views of Muslims.

This is supported by the finding that Victorians who held positive views or were neutral about Muslims generally, did so because of principles of equity and justice or by not forming a view altogether. This suggests that how Muslims are generally perceived does not accurately reflect how Muslim women are perceived. While Victorians identified that they had little contact with Muslims, this did not stop them forming negative associations of Muslim women and the treatment of women by Muslim culture. This finding points to the impact of the stereotype of Muslim culture as sexist and misogynistic has had on Victorians' views of Muslims women.

The view of Muslim women as lacking and deficient in agency cannot be said to cause racism against Muslim women. However, it appears to be an important element of the cultural context for Muslim women experiencing greater vulnerability. Muslim women are correct in their views that Muslims are not looked upon highly, and that generally speaking non-Muslim Victorians do not understand Islam or Muslims living in Australia. This is further substantiated by the findings on the media.

While non-Muslim Victorians did not use media sources or personal contact with Muslims to form views on Muslims in general, they were much more swayed by media sources of information when forming associations of Muslim women. The view of Muslim women as poorly treated, oppressed and submissive reduced significantly when respondents had contact with Muslims. This suggests that media portrayals of Muslim culture as sexist and misogynistic have had a significant impact on what non-Muslim Victorians associate with Muslim women.

Non-Muslim Victorians did not strongly associate terrorism with Muslims, suggesting that the series of events associated with September 11 was not an influential factor for their views on Muslims. This was despite the fact that non-Muslim Victorians on the whole had little contact with Muslims and relied on media sources for their information on Muslims.

The findings of this report suggest that while non-Muslim Victorians utilised media as their main source of information, they were sceptical of its true and unbiased nature. Also, non-Muslim Victorians believed that the biased and unfair portrayal of Muslims was adversely impacting on their treatment and perceptions of Muslims in Victoria. Just over half of non-Muslim Victorians surveyed held this belief, and one in five surveyed held this belief very strongly.

Despite this, non-Muslim Victorian's generally felt that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria were friendly. Well over a third, though, felt that relations were difficult. Rural Victorians were over represented in this category.

These are interesting findings given that only one fifth of Victorians surveyed knew or had any personal contact with Muslims.

Possible solutions

Fundamental to all other strategies to eradicate racism and improve community relations is the need to create a sense of safety for Muslim women in the public space and to assist them to regain their sense of belonging to Australian society. Muslims want to be part of Australian society. Also, it would need to prevent their marginalisation and victimisation because they are Muslim and not curtail the independence of their children.

Both Muslim women and Victorians held very similar views on what they both could do to improve relations.

Muslim women expressed a strong desire to become involved in intercultural activities, and to participate in a dialogue to develop a better understanding of Islam and Muslims by non-Muslim Victorians.

Both groups mentioned education because they both viewed Victorians as typically not knowing enough about Muslims. Victorians suggested that education in high school to improve understanding of Muslim culture was very important, while both Muslim women and Victorians highlighted the need for community education. Other strategies mentioned by both groups included increasing interaction of both groups through events and activities, improving media representations of Muslims with more balanced and positive images of Muslims, and Muslims becoming more prominent and active in the wider community. Both groups identified that the government needs to be more proactive in promoting diversity and improving relations. Muslim women noted the need for politicians to refrain from making sensationalist and inaccurate comments about Muslims, as well as the need for politicians to take a strong anti-racist stance.

Muslim women made a number of recommendations regarding how to reduce the incidence of racism. These suggestions included that Muslim women need to become more vocal about their experiences of racism,

improve women's confidence in and access to public authorities, and strengthen mechanisms to respond to Muslim women's complaints. Muslim women wanted a specific service that could provide support to women who have experienced racism and or violence.

Community education was very important for these women, for themselves and the broader Australian community. It was extremely important to women that the mythology and negative stereotypes surrounding Islam be dispelled. Many participants felt this would go a long way towards improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. As in the first set of focus groups women wanted to be involved in inter-cultural initiatives and programs. They saw a significant role for themselves. Anti-racism and anti-discrimination community education was thought to be crucial by women.

The way media represented Muslims constituted a significant issue of concern for the majority of those who have participated in our research. Both groups surveyed believed that the media does not appropriately represent issues connected with Islam and Muslims. Both groups feel that media representation does have an effect on how Muslims are treated. This is an area of important consideration, and requires further investigation and action.

Conclusion

Muslim women want to be part of Victorian society; and it is well within their right to belong and participate in all aspects of Victorian civil and political life.

Racism and its effects, however, prevent women from exercising this right. Discriminatory attitudes have caused suffering and worked against the inclusion and the protection of Muslim women's human rights. Responsible politics, in the view of many Muslim women interviewed, should be working to promote unity and respect in the community, and implement measures to eradicate racism instead of inadvertently reinforcing them.

The experience of racism undermines efforts to promote equality, and further increases the vulnerability of Muslim women and their communities to human rights violations and marginalisation. This impacts profoundly on Muslim women's participation in Australian civil and political life, and erodes their confidence in political and public authorities.

Our research confirmed that non-Muslim Victorians and Muslim women feel a growing divide in relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslim women feel it through a growing sense of marginalisation and non-Muslim Victorians feel it in the unfair treatment they perceive Muslims to receive. For Victorians on both sides of the divide, there is a strong desire for contact and exchange of ideas, information and common experiences.

Victorians have negative and incorrect views of Muslim women, taking the stereotypes of oppressed, submissive women as true and factual. Community education would go a long way in shifting these beliefs and contributing to positive community relations.

Muslim women repeatedly stated that they were willing to assist in promoting positive intercultural relationships to improve the perceptions of Islam and Muslims, and participate actively in the political and civil life of this country. However, engagement and participation are best facilitated through encouragement and support, and an environment that promotes recognition and respect.

Stage 4

Strategies for Improving Perceptions and Promoting Inclusion

Stage Four: Strategies to Improve Perceptions and Promote Inclusion

This report makes the following recommendations to improve social inclusion and reduce racism:

- Implement a community education strategy for the general public on Muslims and Muslim women;
- establish a Centre Against Racism that researches the impact of racism and designs education programs for the general public and targeted communities;
- a support program that provides information, support, and counselling to Muslim women and their children who may be affected by racism;
- a community awareness strategy, developing awareness within the Muslim community of the incremental impact of racism, and supporting the community's capacity to challenge and contextualise experiences of racism;
- improve accessibility of racism and discrimination complaints mechanisms;
- provide training for police and public transport staff to better understand, identify and deal with mundane and everyday racisms; and
- the implementation of mentoring initiatives that promote Muslim women in community roles in broader society.
- survival kit that provides information and empowers Muslims when these incidents occur.
- capacity building, leadership and mentoring initiatives that promote Muslim women in community roles in the broader society.
- counselling and support services be made available to address the impact of racism on Muslim women.
- develop awareness of screening by health professionals for the effects and impacts of racism on Muslim women and their children.
- empathy training and a pamphlet to make bystanders aware of their options in situations of racism.

Appendix A

Table 1: Sample group by Ethnicity, Location of Focus Group and Age

Ethnicity/Group Identity	Number of Participants	Age Range
Horn of Africa- Collingwood TAFE 12- Horn of Africa 1- Lebanese 1 - Bosnian	12	18–22
Afghan-Collingwood-	12	29–57
Turkish; Collingwood	6	18–62
Turkish; Campbellfield	19	18–65
Eritrean – Carlton	18	55–75
Elders Horn of Africa Group- Flemington	19	18–30
University of Melbourne: Mixed group: Malaysian = 6, Palestinian=2, Indonesian= 2,Lebanese = 3, Turkish = 1	14	17–32
Somali- Carlton	10	32–40
Eritrean- North Melbourne	9	24–36
Arabic Women's Group- Coburg	25	25–55
Shepparton Young Women's Group: 10- Iraqi young women and 6- Albanian	22	13–14
Arabic Women's Group-Brunswick	26	22–45
Assyrian and Arabic Women's Group	14	40–61

Table 2: Sample group by Ethnicity, Location of focus Group and Age

Ethnicity/Group Identity	Number of Participants	Age Range
Mixed women's group; Fawkner Pakistan=3 Afghanistan=1 Lebanon=2 Syria=1 India=1	8	24–45
Somali Women's Group; Carlton	7	30–37
Turkish-Roxborough	10	31–58
Arabic Women's Group- Coburg	11	Average 55
African Women's Group; Carlton Ethiopia=2 Eritrea=2	4	27–38
Seniors Horn of Africa Women's Group; Kensington Eritrean= 17 South Sudanese=4	21	57–75
Mixed Group; Fawkner Lebanese = 6 Turkish = 1 Syrian=1 Pakistan=2	11	17–32

Ethnicity/Group Identity	Number of Participants	Age Range
Mixed Group: Hoppers Crossing Indonesia=1 Albanian=1 Somalia=2 Malaysia=1	5	17–58
Mixed Group; Collingwood Iran=3 Afghanistan=2	5	30–59
Arabic Speaking Women's Group; Brunswick; Lebanese	4	31–52
Arabic Women's Group: Northcote Iraqi=10 Lebanese=4	14	35–59
Eritrean Women's Group; Flemington	7	24–36