SUPPORTING MUSLIM FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN DEALING WITH ISLAMOPHOBIA

A RESEARCH STUDY BY

THE AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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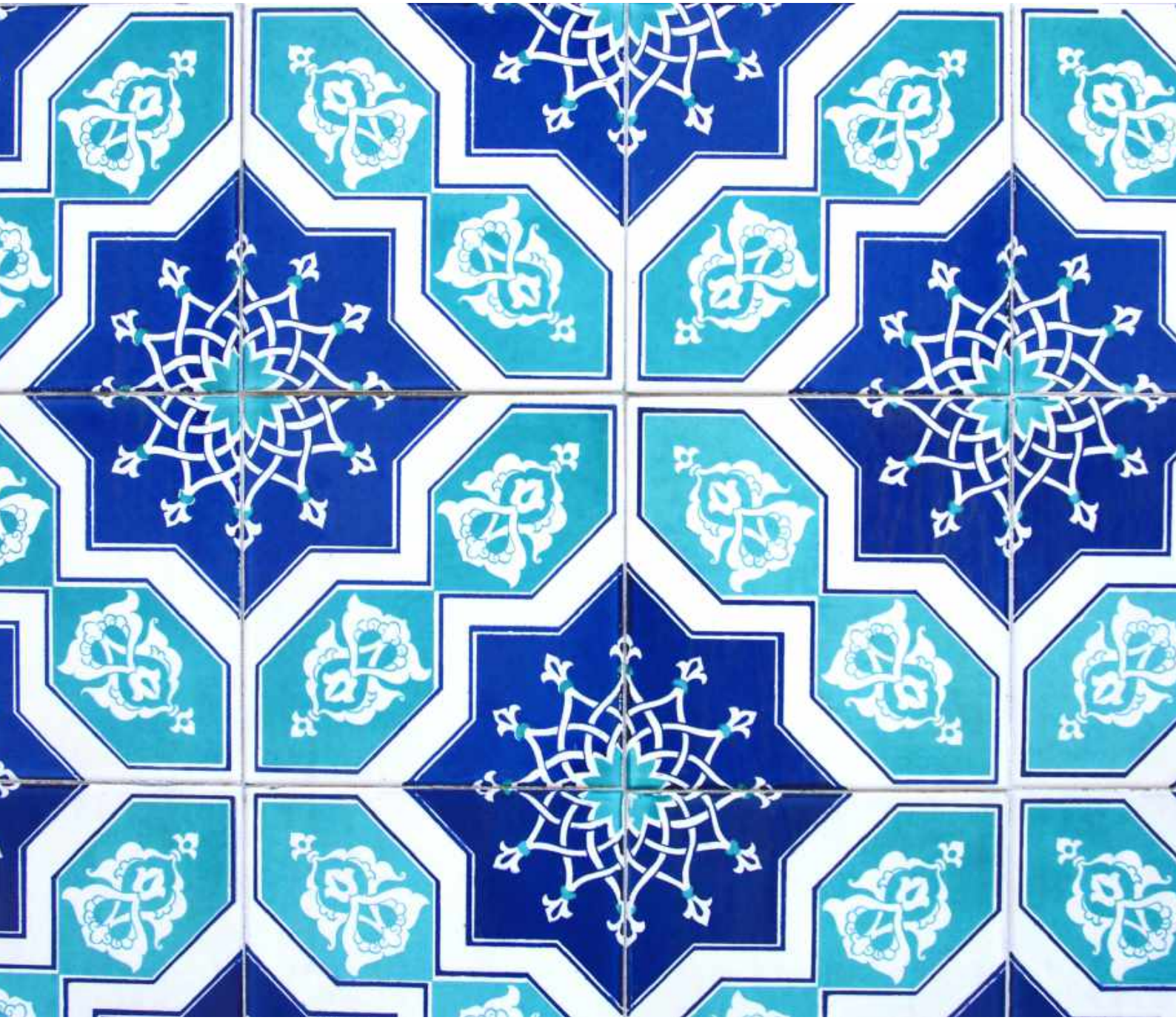

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

Equality without Exception

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The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is an organisation of Muslim women working to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

We take a non-religious, non-sectarian approach to our work and adopt a social justice lens to Islam when it is used to justify any violation against women. We believe that there is not one view of Islam that represents all Muslims in Australia and further that the diversity of Muslims in Australia is a strength. Since our inception, the AMWCHR has created and contributed to the development of programs, services, advocacy and research initiatives that aim to elevate and amplify Muslim women's voices in Australia.

AMWCHR would like to thank all the young people, parents and professionals for trusting us with their stories and sharing their lived experience through the many consultations and workshops throughout this research study. Their invaluable contribution has been fundamental to the development of this publication.

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our centre is located and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. AMWCHR is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the findings of a recent study, conducted by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, that focuses on grassroots perspectives on Islamophobia and its impact on Muslim families and children in Australia.

These perspectives are drawn from sixty-three members of the Australian Muslim community, including youth, women, educators and practitioners engaged with Muslim youth and communities.

The key aims of the study were to:

- explore how Muslim families discussed experiences of Islamophobia
- examine the impacts of Islamophobia on the day-to-day lives of Muslims; and
- identify what support Muslim children needed, in order to understand and navigate Islamophobia and media reporting of Muslim terrorism
- identify strategies for enhancing the capacity of Muslim parents and families to support their children understand and navigate experiences of Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism.

In the study, Muslim youth reported direct or indirect Islamophobia as a 'reality' of life in Australia and identified a lack of avenues to have conversations of their experience. Most reported they were unable to receive meaningful advice from family on these issues. Consequently, many remained silent, and tried to ignore upsetting and hurtful experiences relating to Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism. This experience led to feelings of frustration and exclusion, compromising their sense of belonging and identity in Australia.

Muslim mothers highlighted that parents felt ill-equipped to navigate difficult conversations with their children around identity, belonging and safety. While they acknowledged that children often feel alienated and isolated by constantly having to explain and defend their religious beliefs and practices, parents felt ill-equipped to support their children navigate these challenges. Instead many choose to ignore or minimise the issue. A majority of Muslim mothers described experiences of direct or indirect Islamophobia and subsequent feelings of vulnerability. Women expressed fear regarding Islamophobia yet were largely unaware of how to access support services.

Key findings from the research study were used to inform the development of a pilot parenting program, designed to respond to the challenges identified by Muslim children and mothers who participated in the study.

The program was delivered to thirty-two Muslim mothers from Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian and Syrian backgrounds. Evaluation data collected from the pilot groups indicated promising changes, such as positive attitudinal shifts, an improved understanding of ways in which mothers could enhance the support to their children in navigating Islamophobia and public discourse. And an increase in parental confidence in communicating with children on Islamophobia.

This report concludes with a number of recommendations including:

- the development of resources to assist Muslim families and children navigate Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism;
- creating greater access for Muslim families and children to relevant support services;
- developing greater resources and strategies in education, community and health services sectors to assist educators and practitioners with understanding Islamophobia and supporting Muslim families and children; and
- fostering greater cultural awareness in the education, community and health services sectors to assist educators and practitioners with providing safe and inclusive learning and social environments for Muslim youth.

INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia has far-reaching consequences for individuals, families and communities of the Islamic faith. In the Australian context, several studies suggest that most Australians have low levels of Islamophobia. [1] However, the pervasiveness of Islamophobia is evident in the fear mongering tactics of right-leaning politicians, groups and the media, which contribute to the normalisation of Islamophobia through conflating terrorism with Islam and portraying Muslims as the enemy within. Moreover, increasing reports of incidents of Islamophobia, including verbal and physical abuse, online harassment, and high-profile attacks against Muslims, such as the 2019 Christchurch attack, deepens perceptions of Muslims as threats which increases Islamophobia. The seemingly unabated presence of Islamophobia – almost two decades on from 9/11 – continues to have a tremendous and multifaceted impact on the lives of Muslims living in Australia and the West.

The short- and long-term impacts of Islamophobia on Muslims has been well documented. However, in the Australian context, few studies have broadly focused on Muslim families and youth and the impact of Islamophobia on their day-to-day lives. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by families to support their children navigate and build resilience to experiences of Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism. This report investigates these issues through a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with Muslim youth, Muslim women and educators and practitioners engaged with younger Muslim communities. Distinct themes emerged across all focus group discussions and interviews; these include, but are not limited to, the following: 'frustration and helplessness', 'alienation and isolation', 'safety' and 'need for strategies and greater resources'. After a review of the literature and an overview of the methods, this report presents three parts.

Part One of this report is informed by focus group discussions with Muslim youth. It first explores the experiences of Muslim youth living in Australia. Evidence put forward reveals growing frustration among Muslim youth towards the level of ignorance or lack of knowledge about Islam in mainstream Australian society. Second, the section examines the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim youth, particularly within school environments. It reveals the prevalence of discriminatory behaviour towards Muslim students at non-Islamic schools, which manifest in name-calling and bullying.

In light of this, this section investigates the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Muslim youth to mitigate Islamophobia. Evidence presented suggests that Muslim youth often feel helpless in addressing and combatting discrimination directed towards themselves and their Muslim peers.

Part Two of this report relates to focus group discussions with Muslim women. It first explores the lived experiences of Muslim women as real or potential victims of Islamophobia. Anecdotal evidence presented in this section shows that Muslim women feel more visible due to their Islamic clothing and subsequently fear being targeted for verbal abuse and physical assault when seen in public. Particularly in the aftermath of terror incidents, Muslim women feel elevated levels of insecurity and vulnerability, which often hinders their willingness to leave the home and integrate into wider society.

Furthermore, the data shows that many of the women were largely unaware of their rights and ways to access support services regarding these experiences and/or fears of Islamophobia. Second, this section investigates how Muslim women support their children to navigate their Islamic identity, particularly in non-Islamic schools. It highlights how experiences of discrimination have given rise to feelings of isolation and alienation among Muslim youth, which, in some cases, leads to Muslim youth dissociating themselves from their Muslim heritage to avoid discrimination. Finally, this section illustrates the tremendous difficulties Muslim women face in explaining public discourses on terrorism and political violence to their children. Indeed, data reveals that most women rarely speak to their children about these issues because they find it difficult to initiate such conversations and feel ill-equipped to support their children. These difficulties have generated feelings of inadequacy among Muslim women. A key finding of this study is the need to equip Muslim parents with resources and strategies to support their children with understanding and navigating Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism.

Part Three of this report is informed by semi-structured interviews with educators and practitioners engaged with Muslim youth. It first explores the impact of Islamophobia on the daily experiences of Muslims. It points to a perception within the younger Muslim community that Islamophobia is a 'reality of our time', which has given rise to feelings of isolation, particularly in the absence of support.

[1] Riaz Hassan and Bill Martin. Islamophobia, Social Distance and Fear of Terrorism in Australia: A Preliminary Report. University of South Australia, 2015.

This section then investigates the impact of public discourses on terrorism and political violence on Muslim youth. Anecdotal evidence shows that Muslim youth often feel alienated by this discourse, particularly in classroom discussions. Muslim youth often feel anger and resentment over how they are depicted by their teachers and non-Muslim peers when discussing issues related to Islam, the Middle East and terrorism.

Significantly, this section illustrates how this can lead Muslim youth to withdraw from such discussions due to fears of being seen as validating acts of terror. Finally, this section points to a need for greater resources in education, community and health sectors to assist educators and practitioners to support Muslim youth.

Finally, included as an appendix to this report is an introduction to the pilot parenting program designed to address the findings of the study, by building the capacity of Muslim mothers to support their children more effectively in dealing with their experiences of Islamophobia. This contains an outline of the program that was conducted by AMWCHR and a summary of the evaluation findings.

This paper provides insights into the challenges confronting parents and their children who experience Islamophobia in Australia, highlighting that countering Islamophobia, discrimination and bigotry continues to be urgent and essential for the mental welfare of Muslim families and the wellbeing of society.

METHOD

This study was sponsored by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety and received approval from Human Research Ethics at Deakin University. Data presented in this report is drawn from five focus group discussions with Muslim youth and women and eleven interviews with educators and practitioners engaged with younger Muslim communities in Melbourne (63 participants in total). Youth group discussion one comprised seven Muslims between the ages of 16 and 20. Youth group discussion two comprised of twelve Muslims between the ages of 13 and 15. The discussions primarily focused on: a) experiences of being Muslim in Australia; b) strategies to mitigate discriminatory behaviour; and c) long-term coping mechanisms to deal with Islamophobia.

The first group of Muslim women comprised thirteen Afghan women who had lived in Melbourne between 10 months and 12 years. The second group comprised nine Arabic-speaking Muslim women who had lived in Melbourne between 1 and 8 years. The third group comprised of eleven Urdu-speaking Muslim women who had lived in Melbourne between 11 months and 14 years. The group discussions primarily focused on: a) experiences of being Muslim women in Australia; b) how mothers support their children when experiencing Islamophobia; and c) how they explain and educate their children about public discourses on terrorism and political violence. Throughout this report, focus group participants will be referred to by the group they belong to.

The report's discussion on Muslim women is also informed by data derived from a questionnaire completed by all thirty-two women.

The questionnaire invited participants to respond on a Likert scale to questions that assessed the following:

- Their understanding of the concepts of discrimination, racism and Islamophobia
- Their knowledge on the laws and legal rights on discrimination in Australia
- Their awareness of community support services and resources
- Their knowledge on techniques and skills to engage children in conversation on these issues
- Their confidence in engaging children in these conversations
- The degree to which they had engaged their children in conversation on these issues

Concerning educators and practitioners, eleven interviews were conducted in total, with three youth workers, two welfare coordinators, one community leader, one community worker, one council staff, one college staff, one teacher and one counsellor.

The interviews primarily focused on: a) observations on how Muslim youth experience Islamophobia; b) challenges Muslim youth face in responding to and navigating Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism; and c) strategies employed by professionals to support Muslim youth understand and build resilience to Islamophobia and discourses on terrorism.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ON THE IMPACT OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

The extent and prevalence of Islamophobia in Australia is contested. A recent study found that 'most Australians display low levels of Islamophobia'. According to this study 'almost 70 per cent of Australians have a very low level of Islamophobia, about 20 per cent are undecided and only 10 per cent are highly Islamophobic'.[1] On the other hand, several studies point to the normalisation of Islamophobia in Australia.[2] For example, Scott Poynting and Linda Briskman contend that Islamophobia 'is booming' in a manner that 'discrimination against Muslims has been increasingly normalised, made respectable, and presented as prudent precaution against violent extremism'.[3] A more recent study similarly found that 'Islamophobia is turning into a normalised political rhetoric as the anti-Islamic far-right groups become louder in the political arena'.[4]

Significantly, most of the literature on Islamophobia focuses on the role of media as an 'amplifier' in the normalisation of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred.[5] Almost all studies agree on the media's role in bolstering and shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam.[6] This is particularly the case with some mainstream, right-leaning media. In a 2017 study, Jacqui Ewart, Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy found that Australian Muslims are highly critical of news media coverage of Islam and Muslims because of the perceived biases, stereotypical representations of Muslims, the portrayal of Muslims as the enemy within, and the conflation of terrorism with Islam and Muslims.[7][C1] In another Australian study, Jacqui Ewart and Halim Rane found a general consensus among their Muslim study participants that the news media coverage of 9/11 and some of its anniversaries, was responsible for the prejudice they experienced and tension they felt from wider society.[8] More importantly, numerous studies have shown that news media misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims has contributed to occasional acts of physical and verbal abuse.[9]

As noted, the increasing prevalence of Islamophobia and the rising rate of Islamophobic incidents against Muslims and Muslim families have destructive effects on communities and individuals. Such effects manifest both in the short and in the long term.

The Islamophobia Register Australia and Charles Sturt University noted that 'Islamophobia affected Muslim victims' daily routines to such an extent that some women were afraid to leave their homes, use public transport or go out in public on their own'.[10] In addition to such immediate impacts of Islamophobia, there is an abundance of research that focus on the mid- and long-term impacts of Islamophobia on Muslim communities and individuals, in particular women. Another study on Muslim youths found that the increasing pervasiveness of Islamophobia 'feeds the narrative of not belonging and the alienation of Muslim youths'.[11] This study argued that evidence 'points to a positive correlation between the rise of Islamophobia and a feeling of being excluded amongst young Muslims'.[12] This finding is corroborated and well supported by numerous other studies.[13]

There are several international studies focusing particularly on the impact of Islamophobia on children and youths.[14] These studies note that Islamophobia has an even greater and more direct negative impact on Muslim children and youths, ranging from stigmatisation, discrimination, and unfavourable images of their own group.[15] For example, in their research on American Muslim youths, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and The Family & Youth Institute (FYI) point to the significant role of family, alongside school and the Muslim community, as key contexts that can enhance and strengthen the capacity of youths to better cope with the enormous challenges of adolescence, including the challenges of racism, discrimination and Islamophobia.[16]

In the Australian context, there are very few studies that focus on Muslim families and youths. Indeed, Islamophobia and its impact on Muslim families and youth is not an area that attracts public policy. Within government measures towards racism and religious intolerance, Islamophobia is often overlooked or noted only in very generic terms. For example, in 2017, the Australian government appointed an expert panel to examine whether Australian law adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion. Within the 140-page report, Islamophobia is briefly mentioned twice in regard to Islamophobic attacks and the prevalence of negative attitudes towards Muslims in Australian society.[17]

Among the few Australian studies that cover Islamophobia and Muslim families is a 2010 report by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, produced for the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship. This study takes a broad approach to the manifold challenges Muslim families and migrants face in settling in Australian society. The report has direct relevance to Muslim families and youths. It highlights the role of parents and family as a primary source of support for children and youths. According to this study,

Young people commonly identified family, friends or trusted community members as their main sources of support… This was true regardless of participants' cultural/linguistic backgrounds or length of residence in Australia.[18]

A more recent study, launched in 2019 by the Australian Human Rights Commission, specifically points to the 'vulnerability of women and children' to acts of Islamophobia in public spaces, such as shopping centres and public transport.[19] It also points to the way the public narrative about Islam and Muslims in the media and by public figures 'contributes to Islamophobia and appears to create a license in the broader community to engage in acts of hate against Muslims'.[20] Yet, the study does not explore how Muslim families, especially parents, could counter Islamophobia and navigate negative experiences to increase their children's resilience.

In this regard, an initiative by the Canadian Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) and National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) stands out. They have developed a guidebook to help students deal with trauma related to political violence and Islamophobia. The book is designed to help teachers and educators provide support to 'students dealing with grief, fear and confusion as a result of Islamophobia and geopolitical issues' as well as 'to foster empathy that can assist affected youth in finding a successful and productive way of life'.[21]

There has been scant attention to Muslim children and parents contending with low-risk but common issues like the impact of Islamophobia in their day-to-day lives or how children might be supported during periods of intense media coverage of acts of terrorism. This lack of attention has been identified in numerous studies and literature reviews both in Australia and internationally.

For instance, in several comprehensive studies, Michele Grossman and her colleagues point to the importance of educating and supporting families and parents to help children and youths stay on the right track.[22]

Similarly, in a recent research literature review on Islamophobia conducted by the Haas Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, it is noted that while most research focus on the impacts of Islamophobia on Muslim communities, 'the resilience and coping strategies of Muslim communities in the face of anti-Muslim discrimination' are understudied and largely neglected.[23]

Given the pervasiveness of Islamophobia, the role of families and parents are crucial in building the capacity of their children to navigate the everyday experiences of Islamophobia and discourse around terrorism. This research project seeks to study how Muslim families and youths cope with such experiences and how the capacity of Muslim parents and families might be built to support their children. The following sections present the data derived from focus group discussions with Muslim youth and women as well as interview material with community leaders and professionals covered in this study.

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[3] Scott Poynting and Linda Briskman. 'Islamophobia in Australia: From far-right deplorables to respectable liberals', Social Sciences, 7:11, 2018, doi: 10.3390/socsci7110213.
[4] Derya Iner, ed. Islamophobia in Australia 2014–2016. Sydney: Charles Sturt University and ISRA, 2017.
[5] Michele Grossman and Hussein Tahiri. 'Community perceptions of radicalisation and violent extremism: an Australian perspective', Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism, 10:1, 2015, pp. 14-24.
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[11] Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'The Muslim Question in Australia: Islamophobia and Muslim Alienation', Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 36:3, 2016, pp. 323-333.

[12] Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'The Muslim Question in Australia: Islamophobia and Muslim Alienation', Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 36:3, 2016, pp. 323-333.

[13] See for example: Jacqui Ewart, Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, 'News Media Coverage of Islam and Muslims in Australia: An Opinion Survey among Australian Muslims', Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 37:2, 2017, pp. 147-163; Mario Peucker, 'Islamophobia and Stigmatising Discourses: A Driving Force for Muslim Active Citizenship?' In: John L. Esposito and Derya Iner (eds) Islamophobia and Radicalization: Breeding Intolerance and Violence. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Nahid Afroz Kabir, 'Can Islamophobia in the Media Serve Islamic State Propaganda? The Australian Case, 2014–2015'. In: John L. Esposito and Derya Iner (eds) Islamophobia and Radicalization: Breeding Intolerance and Violence. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Geoff Dean, Peter Bell and Zarina Vakhitova, 'Right-wing extremism in Australia: the rise of the new radical right', Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism, 11:2, 2016, pp. 121-142.

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PART ONE: MUSLIM YOUTH

Several international studies focus on the impact of Islamophobia on children and youths.[1] These studies note that Islamophobia has an even greater direct negative impact on Muslim children and youths than on their adult counterparts, ranging from stigmatisation, discrimination, and unfavourable images of their own group.[2] Within the Canadian context, Siham Elkassem and her colleagues show that exposure to Islamophobia 'may leave children feeling marginalised and disempowered; this could lead to the internalisation of negative stereotypes associated with Islam'.[3] In an American study, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) notes that in an era when '80 percent of all reports on Muslims and Islam are negative' and in an environment where media 'overwhelmingly ties Islam and Muslims to terrorism', the Muslim youths are facing a great deal of extra challenges that have a compounding negative effect when added on the challenges youths already face as adolescents and emergent adults. [4]

As highlighted in the literature review, few studies have explored the impact of Islamophobia on the day-to-day lives of Muslim youth in Australia. Moreover, fewer studies have examined the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Muslim youth to navigate and mitigate their experiences of Islamophobia. While investigating these issues during the focus group discussions, two distinct themes emerged. These include 'frustration' and 'helplessness' which will be used to guide this section's discussion. The majority of participants in both groups expressed feelings of frustration towards ignorant and biased attitudes about Islam among their non-Muslim peers. Additionally, some participants pointed to the prevalence of discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims at non-Islamic schools in the shape of bullying and name-calling. In terms of strategies to address and cope with this behaviour, the majority of participants expressed feelings of helplessness, evident in their claims that it is better to 'just ignore' discriminatory behaviour, based on a belief that there is 'nothing you can do about it'.

Frustration

Participants were asked to compare their lives in Australia to their country of origin. For those born in Australia, their answers were drawn from their experiences overseas or from what they have heard from friends and families. There was unanimous agreement that life in Australia is better due to factors such as greater religious freedom, job opportunities, levels of gender equality and access to education and health services. The participants were then asked if they felt their lives as Muslims in Australia differed to mainstream Australians. Some of the participants stated that they feel no different. However, the majority explained how their religious and cultural practices set them apart from their non-Muslim peers. Within this, most agreed that their religious practices restricted their social lives, in terms of going to restaurants, mixed parties and venues with alcohol. Elaborating on this, one participant from Discussion Group One (Youth) stated:

> *I guess with some things it's like, harder because like you said, you can't go to mixed parties sometimes and like, like your best friend's having a birthday party, she's going to have like, you know guys there and alcohol there and stuff, and if your parents know, they're not going to let you go.*

Commenting on impact, one participant shed light on how social restrictions can lead to distance and feelings of exclusion and loneliness, prompting some Muslim youth to compromise their Islamic identity:

> *That kind of impacts them [non-Muslims] in a way where it's like, they always have to follow what we want and they're like, "Okay" and then they distance themselves from you. And I guess it's either having friends or choosing a religion, like you have to choose. Some people just choose the social interactions over religion because they don't want to be lonely.*

Several international studies highlight the challenges Muslim students face at non-Islamic schools. For example, Naved Bakali's 2016 comprehensive study outlines the experiences of Muslim students at Canadian secondary schools. In this study, many of the participants expressed feeling annoyed at their non-Muslim peers for assuming that Muslims are a 'monolithic group', in which all 'are painted with a broad brush possessing innate qualities or a common mindset'.[5]

Within this, many expressed frustration over constantly having to answer biased questions about Islam, which were evidently informed by media discourses linking Islam with terror and violence. Bakali contends that these feelings of frustration and annoyance can have a 'traumatising' impact on Muslim students.

In their research on Muslim American students, Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine make similar observations. In their study, many participants felt perceived by their non-Muslim peers as 'authorities' on Islam and felt pressure to speak on behalf of all Muslims. Many expressed feelings of discomfort by the attention.[6]

The majority of participants in Discussion Group One (Youth) and Discussion Group Two (Youth) expressed similar feelings of frustration towards non-Muslim students at school. This frustration primarily stemmed from constantly having to explain or justify their religious and cultural practices to their friends and peers or to challenge stereotyping For example, one female participant from Discussion Group One (Youth) stated:

> *The little things, like, that actually affect our social interactions. Like when I don't handshake, they're kind of like, they don't even talk to me afterwards. It's like, "I'm not doing it because of you, I'm doing it because of my religion." You constantly have to explain things.*

Similarly, one participant from Discussion Group Two (Youth) stated:

> *I'm Turkish, but I've got a lot of "Oh, you're from Saudi Arabia." It's like, not everyone who wears the hijab is from the same place... I don't even speak Arabic...I had a friend who for two years thought that I was Iraqi...but like, when it's somebody who's not Muslim, it's like, "Oh, do you speak Arabic" or "Can you speak Koran?"*

To express her level of frustration and explanation fatigue towards biased and stereotypical attitudes, one participant from Discussion Group Two (Youth) provided the following anecdote:

> *You're like, especially in the areas that I go to school and all my friends go to school. I have more friends that don't wear the hijab...you're judged for it so much.... there was this gay kid that was getting beaten. I stopped it, and I got called a fake Muslim because I support gays. I was just stopping a kid from...they called me a fake Muslim because I stopped a kid from dying.*

Significantly, the majority of participants felt that they were treated differently among their non-Muslim peers because of their Islamic identity, evident in their clothing and/or names. Several participants noted that they could sense changes in the body language and behaviour of non-Muslims when engaging in conversations. These changes were identified as: 'the way they look at you', 'the way they speak to you' and 'the tone in their voice'. One participant went further to state that they 'look at you to make sure you're not offended'. Another similarly stated that 'they say something like, "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you offended by that?"' These interactions were reported to deepen feelings of frustration among the participants.

Helplessness

The majority of participants acknowledged the prevalence of Islamophobia in Australia. Most identified the media, right-wing groups and 'what people hear from their parents', as informing discriminatory behaviours towards Muslims. Importantly, both discussion groups primarily discussed Islamophobia in the context of their school environments. Indeed, several international studies demonstrate how Islamophobia in larger society 'filters down into school environments' and 'manifests in teacher discrimination and student bullying'.[7] In the Canadian context, Siham Elkassem and her collaborators report that 'Islamophobia manifests at school in the form of teasing, bullying, name-calling, taunting, and physical assaults'.[8]

Similarly, a study conducted by The Council on American-Islamic Relations found that American Muslim students enrolled at non-Islamic schools were routinely confronted with 'verbal assaults, specifically those referencing bombs or calling American Muslim students terrorists'.[9] In line with these studies, the majority of participants in this report expressed annoyance towards the prevalence of terrorist jokes used by their non-Muslim peers, with one participant claiming that 'there's like, too many'. Moreover, many highlighted the prevalence of name-calling at school, with the most commonly heard terms noted by participants as: 'terrorists', 'Somali pirates', 'Taliban', 'towelheads' and 'barbarians'. In terms of understanding this behaviour, one participant from Discussion Group One (Youth) explained that 'sometimes they just have nothing better to do'. Following on from this, another participant expressed that 'you know, they're just bored'. This behaviour was reported by participants as giving rise to feelings of sadness, anger or fear that 'they might have come up with something else'.

As described, in the Australian context, few studies have examined the immediate strategies used by Muslim youth to mitigate Islamophobic behaviour or their emotional reactions and the long-term mechanisms they employ to deal with their experiences of discrimination.

Participants in Discussion Groups One (Youth) and Discussion Group Two (Youth) expressed similar attitudes and strategies. In terms of immediate strategies, two were primarily discussed. First, many agreed that often it is best to 'just ignore it'.

For example, one participant from Discussion Group One (Youth) noted that:

> *'sometimes you just have to ignore it. There's nothing you can do about it'.*

Second, many participants stated that they used humour to deflect the situation. One participant from Discussion Group One (Youth) described Islamophobia as 'funny'. In agreement, another participant stated that 'it's gotten to that level where people find it funny, rather than being offended'. Building on this, one participant stated that:

> *it's sad. But you turn it into a joke because you're giving them what they want if you react negatively'.*

These strategies point to a perception within the younger Muslim community that Islamophobia is perhaps a reality of the times. As shown, this has subsequently given rise to feelings of helplessness in addressing or combatting discriminatory behaviour against themselves.

Most of the coping strategies employed by youth, whether in terms of an immediate response or longer-term coping, tend to be passive and non-confrontational, aiming at denying, trivialising or deflecting, rather than proactively addressing the issue at hand. Responses included trying to 'forget about it' or to 'get over it'.

While some stated that they talk to friends and family, it is noteworthy that the majority of participants stated that they avoid talking to their parents about their experiences with Islamophobia. Some did not expect their parents' responses to be helpful. One participant from Discussion Group One stated, 'it's the thing where they turn it into lectures'. Building on this, another participant claimed, 'we just want you [parents] to listen to what we have to say, and that's it'. Instead, as another participant reported, 'you just get a bunch of questions...sometimes you can just deal with it yourself'. Another participant asserted that 'there's no point making your parents worried. We can just ignore it'.

Given the high rates of Islamophobia reported, it is significant that parents are not the go-to people for young Muslims, despite the fact that their parents would be able to relate in varying degrees to their children's experiences, and when other channels for reporting and redress are already limited. Yet parents are not viewed as sources of support, understanding or affirmative action. This lack of trust and discomfort with parents is not surprising as several studies observe that young Muslims often prefer not to speak to their parents about Islamophobia.[10] Where the gaps in expectations, understanding and communication between Muslims parents and their children lie, is an important area to further explore and remedy.

As an alternative to talking to parents, reports suggest that mentors close in age to Muslim youth can play a significant role supporting youth navigate social challenges.

For example, Sameera Ahmed and her colleagues contend that young Muslim mentors are 'often able to better relate and engage young people compared to older adults', and 'can help to create safe spaces for young people to explore their religious questions and concerns, model behavioural expectations, and provide moral direction when appropriate'. [11] Significantly, the majority of participants in this report stated that they preferred to talk to Muslims in their 20s and early 30s. Elaborating on this, one participant claimed:

> *I go to her sister all the time and she's the best help I can get…they [young adults] understand what's going on, and so they can help. Whereas with my parents, they'll be fixated on things that happened in their time.*

The above-mentioned perspectives will be elaborated on in Part Three of this report, with the majority of professionals observing that Muslim youth prefer to speak with younger Muslims as opposed to their parents or adults within their community. At the end of the focus groups discussions, participants were asked if they would like to know more about how to respond and deal with Islamophobia. Mental health services and learning about their legal rights surrounding Islamophobia were put forward by the moderator. The majority of participants stated that they would like access to these services.

[1] For example, Siham Elkassem et al. 'Growing up Muslim: The impact of islamophobia on children in a Canadian community', Journal of Muslim Mental Health 12:1, 2018, pp. 3-18; Sunaina Marr Maira, The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016; Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine, 'Hyphenated selves: Muslim American youth negotiating identities on the fault lines of global conflict', Applied Development Science 11:3, 2007, pp. 151-163; and Naved Bakali, Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Racism through the Lived Experience of Muslim Youth, Rotterdam, Boston: Sense Publishers, 2016.

[2] Marlies Maes, Gonneke Stevens and Maykel Verkuyten, 'Perceived ethnic discrimination and problem behaviors in Muslim immigrant early adolescents: Moderating effects of ethnic, religious, and national group identification', The Journal of Early Adolescence 34:7, 2014, pp. 940-966.

[3] Siham Elkassem et al. 'Growing up Muslim: The impact of islamophobia on children in a Canadian community', Journal of Muslim Mental Health 12:1, 2018, pp. 3-18.

[4] Zeba Iqbal, Meeting the Needs of Generation 9/11: Supporting New Muslim Youth, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 2016, available online, https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Gen_911_NewMuslimYouth.pdf.

[5] Naved Bakali, Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Racism through the Lived Experience of Muslim Youth, Rotterdam, Boston: Sense Publishers, 2016, 89.

[6] Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine, 'Hyphenated selves: Muslim American youth negotiating identities on the fault lines of global conflict', Applied Development Science 11:3, 2007, pp. 156.

[7] The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) MISLABELLED: The Impact of School Bullying and Discrimination on California Muslim Students (2016), p. 8, available at https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CAIR-CA-2015-Bullying-Report-Web.pdf ; Marlies Maes, Gonneke Stevens and Maykel Verkuyten, 'Perceived ethnic discrimination and problem behaviors in Muslim immigrant early adolescents: Moderating effects of ethnic, religious, and national group identification', The Journal of Early Adolescence 34:7, 2014, pp. 940-966; and Siham Elkassem et al. 'Growing up Muslim: The impact of islamophobia on children in a Canadian community', Journal of Muslim Mental Health 12:1, 2018, pp. 3-18.

[8] Siham Elkassem et al. 'Growing up Muslim: The impact of islamophobia on children in a Canadian community', Journal of Muslim Mental Health 12:1, 2018, p. 7.

[9] The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) MISLABELLED: The Impact of School Bullying and Discrimination on California Muslim Students (2016), p. 8, available at https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CAIR-CA-2015-Bullying-Report-Web.pdf

[10] Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine, 'Hyphenated selves: Muslim American youth negotiating identities on the fault lines of global conflict', Applied Development Science 11:3, 2007, pp. 151-163.

[11] Sameera Ahmed, Sadiq Patel and Hanan Hashem, State of American Muslim Youth: Research & Recommendations, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and The Family & Youth Institute, 2015, pp. 23, available online, https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISPU_FYI_Report_American_Muslim_Youth_Final-1.pdf

PART TWO: MUSLIM WOMEN

Significant evidence suggests Muslim women are more susceptible to Islamophobic attacks due to their visibility with Islamic clothing, such as the hijab, niqab and burqa, and because of the gendered nature of racially-motivated violence.[1] For example, an Australian study conducted by the Islamophobia Register Australia and Charles Sturt University found that of the 243 registered incidents reported between September 2014 and December 2015, 79.6 percent were female victims.[2] While Muslim women being frequent targets of Islamophobia has been well documented, few studies have analysed the impact of such incidents on these women. As suggested, 'the social and psychological impact of Islamophobia, especially on women and children, needs to be acknowledged and further researched'.[3] Furthermore, Muslim women not only contend with their own experiences of Islamophobia, but also with their children's experiences. Yet, as explored in the existing literature described above, there is limited research on the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by families, especially mothers, to support their children in navigating these experiences.

Three distinct themes emerged in focus group discussions with Muslim women. These include 'safety', 'alienation and isolation' and 'need for strategies and counter-narratives'. In terms of safety, many of the women stated that they feel more visible due to their Islamic clothing and consequently fear for their safety when out in public. Especially in the aftermath of terror-related incidents, many of the women reported elevated levels of anxiety and vulnerability due to their fear of being targeted for verbal abuse or physical assault. In terms of alienation and isolation, many of the women stated that in addition to their own sense of disengagement with mainstream society, their children are in constant need of assistance with managing their religious identities among their non-Muslim peers. This has given rise to feelings of isolation and alienation, and at times, a willingness of Muslim youth to dissociate themselves from their Islamic identity to avoid discrimination. In terms of the need for strategies, the overwhelming majority of women highlighted the immense difficulties they face in supporting their children navigate public discourses on terrorism and geopolitical violence. As a result, many mothers experience a sense of inadequacy when it comes to explaining such discourses to their children, and expressed the need for strategies and counter-narratives to address them.

Safety

When asked to describe life as Muslim migrants in Australia, the majority of women stated that they enjoy life in Australia due to factors such as security and safety, health care and education services and women's rights, which is of great value to many women coming from backgrounds of conflict, war and persecution. In particular, many of the Urdu-speaking women stated that they felt very welcomed when arriving in Australia. However, many agreed that this was due to the fact that 'we look like Indians' who are 'generally more accepted'. Significantly, the majority of women had either directly experienced Islamophobia or heard stories from friends and relatives. Within this, the majority attributed these experiences to hijab wearing. For example, when describing her experience with Islamophobia, one Arabic-speaking woman recalled that while driving, a man had slowed down to throw a piece of fruit at her window. An Urdu-speaking woman stated:

> *It does matter to someone if they are wearing hijab. Like I was having a class last year. So, in my class, there was an Italian lady. She was like, "Why do you wear this hijab, like covering your face?" Like, "Government should not permit driving lessons to them if they are wearing this because they can't drive". So, we tried to explain to her but she was not ready to accept it.*

Another Urdu-speaking woman stated:

> *I was wearing niqab when I came to Australia. I was coming out from the Aldi and a man said, "What are you wearing?" He tried to block my path…so my husband helped me and sent him away.*

Many of the women reflected on Muslim threat perception concerning Islamophobia, particularly in relation to wearing the hijab. For example, one Arabic-speaking woman stated that she felt more visible wearing the hijab in summer and consequently 'feels like its unsafe' to go out. One Urdu-speaking woman stated that prior to her driving license test, her husband feared that she would fail based on the sole reason that she is Muslim and wears a hijab. One Arabic-speaking woman stated that 'in the car, when there is a road incident, if they see you wearing a hijab, they will abuse you'.

In regard to high-profile attacks against Muslims, many of the women expressed the psychological and social affect these incidents had on themselves and their families. The main effects described by the majority of women included elevated levels of fear and anxiety and increased feelings of anger and grief.

For example, in relation to the 2019 Sydney attack, which saw a pregnant Muslim woman physically assaulted, one Afghan woman stated:

> *It's very scary as parents and as children. Because as parents we want our children to be independent and we want them to educate themselves and have a free life. But when you see things like this it's scary, my daughters are not wearing hijab. But sometimes you feel if they wear hijab you might be more scared for them.*

In relation to the 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand, some of the women expressed similar concerns. One Afghan woman stated 'when I saw this, after when I went outside it affected me. I always got scared thinking someone could shoot any time'. Following on from this, another Afghan woman stated 'our kids are scared from this incident and they don't want to go out at all. This really affected them'. These accounts suggest that regardless of whether one has experienced Islamophobia explicitly, Muslim threat perceptions concerning Islamophobia are all encompassing and impact the daily routines and civic engagement of Muslim women.

Muslim women's sense of being unsafe in public has been well-documented in earlier reports such as Isma [4] and a previous study conducted by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre of Human Rights [5], which showed that:

- Muslim women were significantly more likely to experience racism than Muslim men;
- Women were more likely to experience racism on the street, in shops and shopping malls; and
- The wearing of the hijab was the most frequently cited reason for experiencing racism at work or in public spaces; and
- Women were concerned for the safety or their children.

Significantly, the collected data reveals that many of the women were largely unaware of their rights and ways to access support services regarding their experiences and/or fears of Islamophobia. For example, 72 percent had no clear understanding of their legal rights when facing Islamophobia, with a further 75 percent of women having no clear understanding of Australian laws on discrimination. None of the women had a comprehensive understanding on either area. Moreover, 72 percent of women were unaware of how to get support if they or their families experienced Islamophobia.

Past findings on the racial vilification experienced by Muslim women further show that even when some level of rights awareness does exist, the pathway to redress is often littered with barriers for Muslim women, ranging from basic settlement issues such as language limitations to structural issues such as such as gender bias in the legal system and discrimination against women in private spheres of life. This intersection of multiple forms of discrimination creates unique experiences of disadvantage. Of critical importance here is an understanding of women's diverse experiences of inequality so that tailored and effective response can be developed.

Alienation and Isolation

In regards to their own or their children's experiences as Muslims in Australia, most of the women stated that their children feel comfortable and included. However, this was largely dependent on whether their child attended an Islamic or non-Islamic school. Some of the women noted the comparatively easier experience of raising children at Islamic schools in Melbourne.

Similarly, another Arabic-speaking woman stated:

> *My son is very happy but it helps that he goes to an Islamic school, he loves the Muslim religion. But I do have sister in-laws and their kids don't go to an Islamic school and they find that their kids ask too many questions, like why do we have to fast, why don't we celebrate Christmas, everybody puts a tree up. But the kids that attend Islamic school don't ask these questions, because it comes naturally.*

Many of the women stated that raising children in non-Islamic schools had become relatively easier over the past decade. They ascribed this to increasing levels of knowledge about Islam in Australian society, which has led to more halal options in school canteens, teachers becoming more accommodating in terms of providing their children with prayer spaces and non-Muslim friends catering halal options at birthday parties. Nevertheless, most women with children at non-Islamic schools echoed the feeling that their children often feel alienated and isolated by constantly having to explain and defend their religious beliefs and practices. For example, one Urdu-speaking woman noted the social impact of her children's religious practices:

> *And they do feel, time to time, they do feel different. Different about their food when they're going out with their friends and stuff. What they can eat, what they can't eat. What if they get invited to their other friends who are not Muslim and stuff like that? I think it's a constant thing going on. We always have to see their [non-Muslim friends] ways. And also looking at something that if they want to be friends with them, what are the common things, common places they can go and eat.*

One Urdu-speaking woman claimed that her children's biggest challenge at a state school was 'learning how to answer questions' about their family's Islamic values and traditions.

Following on from this, another Urdu-speaking woman stated:

> *My 12-year-old, she's quite resolved but she's not able to explain to people if they're asking them something like, "Why don't you wear this? Why don't you..." She's tired of answering them that it's not allowed. "We can't eat this, we can't do this, we can't do that". She's always like, "Why is it not allowed to eat, to wear..."*

She then noted the impact this has on her children: 'they get irritated, like why it's happening to us... we are facing this problem, just because of being a Muslim'. Moreover, half of the women in the Urdu speaking focus group elaborated on how they often had to support their daughters in responding to reactions to their family's traditional concept of Islamic modesty at non-Islamic schools. For example, one woman stated:

> *The other issue is the dressing, because when my daughter was young, she was five so she always said, "My other friends, they have the dress up to the knee. They're not wearing something down. So why don't I?"*

Similarly, another woman stated:

> *It's hard, because she was young and she was in prep and her friends told her, "look at the summer. It's summer. You are wearing tights. What is it?" So, when she come back home and she was asking me but then I said, "That's okay. It's okay. We are Muslims. We like to be covered because covered people are beautiful".*

As shown in Part One, Muslim students at non-Islamic schools are subject to Islamophobic behaviour in the shape of teasing, bullying, name-calling and physical assault. In a 2014 article, Marlies Maes and her colleagues note that Islamophobia has even greater direct negative impact on Muslim children and youths, ranging from stigmatization, discrimination, and unfavourable images of their own group.[8]

Similarly, the Canadian Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) and National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM)'s contend that the 'long-term impacts of experiencing hate can create a negative self-image and engender self-loathing...Muslims might feel additional pressure to disassociate from their Muslim identity and even deny their heritage'.[9] In line with these studies, several women reported that their children were trying to distance themselves from Islam due to discriminatory behaviour at school.

For example, one Urdu-speaking woman claimed:

> *They're suffering in schools and canteens...they get laughed on. And at high school, especially whenever there is an event...there was a lot of things going on. Even that my kids Muslim and they're just trying to pretend that they are not Muslim.*

> *...But because of their names and stuff, to get accepted and stuff. But of course, they were coming home really distressed because if there was a plane going in the sky, the boys will start saying Allahu Akbar and will try to hide and stuff and it was a Christian boys private schools.*

Similarly, one Afghan woman noted that at school:

> *'they [children] face a lot of challenges...because of other people discriminating against Muslims, they no longer show interest in their culture and they are drifting away from it'.*

When asked how her children feel to be Muslim in Australia, another Afghan woman responded with:

> *They are happy to be here, Afghanistan it was harder for them, but at the same time we need to lead our kids the right way for them to stay and follow their religion. But at the same time because of different religions discriminating against Muslims they don't want to follow their religion.*

Despite these concerns, the collected data suggests that the majority of women rarely spoke to their children about Islamophobia and found it difficult to initiate such conversations. Significantly, only 6 percent of women spoke to their children about Islamophobia often and only 3 percent found it easy to speak about Islamophobia. As will be explored below, this was largely due to a feeling that they lacked the skills and knowledge to have these conversations with their children. In addition to lack of skills, this avoidance of meaningful conversations around Islamophobia may also reflect women's own confusions, fears and discomfort in relation to mainstream Australian society as women, Muslims, migrants/refugees in the current socio-political climate.

Need for strategies and counter narratives

As explored, there is limited research on how Muslim parents assist their children with understanding public discourses on terrorism and how they support their children during periods of intense media coverage on acts of terrorism. A key finding of this report is the tremendous challenge parents' face in explaining and supporting their children to understand and navigate these discourses and the lack of trust that children feel in disclosing experiences of Islamophobia to their parents.

The majority of women stated that the most difficult conversations held with their children were those concerning ideological violence and acts of terrorism perpetrated by those claiming to be Muslim. Indeed, the collected data shows that only 6 percent of the women found it easy to engage their children in conversation on these topics. Significantly, 79 percent of women did not know how to engage with their children on these topics

For example, one woman stated:

> *My son asked me about this, but if I tell them it's because they are against Muslims, they do this stuff, that will make them hate non-Muslim people and I don't want my kids to grow up thinking everyone is the same.*

Following on from this, another woman stated:

> *My kids ask questions and most of the time I don't have the answer so I don't tell them or give them the wrong information because we don't want them to pass on the wrong knowledge. It's better to not answer than give them the wrong knowledge.*

These responses reveal a dilemma for Muslim mothers whereby they feel pressured to come up with perfectly balanced responses that neither create a hatred for Islam and Muslims in their children nor create ill feeling towards their non-Muslim peers with whom they interact on a daily basis. The challenges the women faced in having conversations with their children was related to the difficult statements and questions posed to them. For example, in relation to a terror incident, one Urdu speaking woman recalled her son's response: 'oh mama, it's again Muslim'.

The most commonly expressed responses given to their children were: 'terrorists are far from religion because Islam forbids killing', 'terrorists have no religion', 'this is not our religion', 'there are good and bad people in every religion'. Most of the women, especially those with younger children, stated that their children were 'very curious' and asked 'thought-provoking questions' about political violence related to Muslims. Yet as previously stated, most of the women expressed that they do not know how to respond to their children. The women attributed this to their lack of knowledge on such issues, or their fears of scaring their children and taking away their innocence. In relation to the 2019 Christchurch attack, all of the Afghan women said that their children asked them about the attack. Most, however, said that they were unable to answer because they didn't want to pass on the wrong message.

> ***Participant:*** In the news, we were watching the Kashmir issue and the kids were asking, 'What's happening? Why is it happening to them? Why are they under the curfew?' And there are so many examples in the world where Muslim countries are being dominated. And children ask for explanations. Why are these happening to only Muslim countries?
> ***Facilitator:*** So, they ask you specifically why this is happening?
> ***Participant:*** Yeah, yeah.
> ***Facilitator:*** Okay. How do you explain?
> ***Participant:*** No good explanation. Like according to their level, what they can understand. I think we can't explain them rightly.
> ***Facilitator:*** So, what do you say if they ask?
> ***Participant:*** Turn off the TV. Just go, do your homework.

Importantly, almost one quarter of the women directly asked the facilitator how to explain geopolitical violence to their children. Some of these questions were as follows:

> *'How do you explain? What to tell them? Like especially when they're teenagers. They need good explanations… they are more conscious'.*

> *'I have some questions rising in my mind, how to go over this situation with our children? Because our kids are very young at the moment. I think the teenagers are getting into more trouble than us. So, we need to teach ourselves first'.*

'My question is the same. How to explain these things to our kids…why is it happening to Muslims like it did in the mosque in New Zealand?'

As highlighted, few studies have documented the strategies and coping mechanisms Muslim families use to help their children understand and build resilience to Islamophobia and discourses on terrorism. The above section suggests that Muslim women are often at a loss when it comes to explaining and supporting their children with these discourses, using avoidance to deal with the very real issues they face, for example, telling I their children to just 'ignore it' or 'turn off the TV'.

In terms of Islamophobia more broadly, a common strategy expressed by the women involved providing counter-narratives to Islamophobic stereotypes as a means to mitigate Islamophobia.

Within this, many of the women stated that they strive to reinforce Islamic morals and principles into their children to motivate them to become good Muslims. For example, one Arabic-speaking woman stated that:

Because our religion is all about manners and good character. When you are a good person to others and also being Muslim, you will be a great example to others about Islam. Better than them thinking he is a terrorist.

Another Arabic-speaking woman similarly expressed:

By the way Muslims behave and be pleasant and well-mannered, they [non-Muslims] get a different view of what Muslims are like, they can understand more than what they see on TV. So, when they see a real Muslim they think 'oh, they are nice people'.

Further elaborating on this, one Urdu-speaking woman stated:

The majority of people behave out of naivety. Like if you inform them about your culture and you talk to them about it, they're going to listen to it. Most of the people are not mean. They just don't know you…so it's our responsibility. If we are just living in our shell and not communicating with other cultures, it's also our fault. So, we should a little bit come out of our shell and talk to them. Most of the people will know but yeah. Again, there is a minority who's always mean so you can't do anything about it.

These strategies are supported by several studies that show 'possessing more knowledge about Islam and having more contact with Muslims is associated with less prejudice against Muslims'.[7]

However, it also highlights how the onus of bridging this knowledge gap and preventing Islamophobia is often placed on ordinary Muslim families, including children.

One Urdu-speaking woman provided anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the power of this strategy to alter negative attitudes towards Muslims:

If you want your children to be interactive and accepting of other cultures, and to be accepted, make sure that you are setting a right example. When I came to Australia, the first thing I did was, I made these pies, and I went knocked on every door, be Irish, Turkish, Nepalese, Indian, whatever. And that's how I made friends with all the neighbours. And I started a conscious effort, like, I used to get rejected twice, but they had to accept me thrice because I was such a nagger. 'No, I have to meet you, I have to make sure to meet you'. And now they trust me to a level that they can leave their kids and families at my home and they come and share their personal things. So, make sure that you are so open and welcoming to other communities. I would also suggest this to my community, because I've seen our community just expects. And they don't really make an effort of communicating with other cultures.

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[9] Fethi Mansouri and Matteo Vergani. 'Intercultural contact, knowledge of Islam, and prejudice against Muslims in Australia', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 66, 2018: 85-94.

PART THREE: PROFESSIONALS

As previously highlighted, limited scholarship has examined the impact of Islamophobia on the daily experiences of Muslim youth and how they cope with such experiences. The professionals interviewed for this report provide valuable insights into these issues, which will be discussed according to the following themes: 'alienation', 'isolation', and 'need for strategies and greater resources'.

In terms of isolation, the majority of professionals pointed to a perception within the younger Muslim community that Islamophobia is a 'reality of the times'. This perceived reality has reportedly given rise to feelings of isolation, particularly in the absence of support. In terms of alienation, the majority of professionals illustrated the tremendous impact that public discourses on terrorism and geopolitical violence have on Muslim youth. Within this, many professionals observed that Muslim youth often feel anger and resentment over how they are depicted within the dominant narrative that conflates Islam with terrorism and portrays Muslims as inherently violent.

This has reportedly given rise to feelings of alienation among Muslim youth, who often choose to withdraw from discussions in fear of being seen as validating violent acts in the pursuit of defending their own beliefs. In terms of the need for strategies, several professionals pointed to the need for greater resources in the education, community and health sectors, to assist educators and practitioners to support Muslim youth address and mitigate their experiences of Islamophobia.

Isolation

All of the professionals interviewed in this report outlined the ways Islamophobia impacts the day-to-day lives of Muslim youth and the challenges they face in mitigating this impact. Many of the professionals pointed to prevalent perceptions in the younger Muslim community concerning Islamophobia. These include: a) that Islamophobia is a reality of the time; and b) that the Muslim community is under-surveillance. Reportedly, these perceptions have given rise to feelings of isolation in addressing Islamophobia, and elevated levels of fear and anxiety when conducting seemingly innocent day-to-day activities, such as browsing the internet or applying for jobs. Youth Worker Two, with 4.5 years' experience working with Muslim youth, stated that Muslim teenagers often describe discriminatory attacks against Muslims as 'another day, another thing'. Similarly, College Staff One, with one-year experience working with Muslim youth, stated that they often hear their younger students' claim that 'I'm just going to go to jail anyway'. These responses indicate a high level of acceptance and almost normalisation of Islamophobia. An anecdote provided by a Counsellor One, with 11 years' experience working with Muslim youth, further highlights these perceptions:

> *One of the kids was telling me that she was wearing a hijab…and she was verbally assaulted as she was walking home with her younger brother…all I know is that he was driving…and like "Go back where you f***ing came from" and other things. And she just walked home with her younger brother, who was, I think, in prep at the time, and she was in maybe grade six or seven, and didn't tell her family or anything. And at the dinner table, the mum is just going, "What's going on? How was your day?" And the brother said, "Oh, today this happened". And the mum just turned to the kid that I work with and said "Why didn't you tell me?" And she goes, "because we live in Australia. And I just thought that was normal."*

In line with the observations made by women in Part Two, some of the professionals explained how daily experiences of Islamophobia had led some Muslims to question or compromise their Islamic identity to avoid discrimination. As Teacher One, with 7 years' experience working with Muslim youth, said:

> *Sometimes they'll bring up the concept that they might not wear a hijab to work or because even though their parents would be very upset with them, they would mention, "I might not want to do that because I don't feel safe."*

Council Staff One, with 15 years' experience with Muslim youth, described the experience of a Muslim student who had encountered anti-Muslim sentiment among his peers at school:

> *When speaking to him he feels completely lost because he feels like, well, society… Like already at the age of 15 he's already reflecting on how he doesn't fit in, the system is against him, his own people who are similar to him are against him…and he really feels like maybe it's better for him to leave his religion, like that would be helpful, and he can be who he wants to be…even his name, because it's such a… it's a Muslim name, that as well. He's spoken to me and mentioned, like he's tried shortening it, so it's less Muslim.*

Similar scenarios were described by Community Worker One in regards to Muslim youth seeking employment:

> *I get a few emails a week with regards to, from specifically young Muslims in corporate going, like, "What do I write on my CV? My name is Mohammad. Like do I initialize it? Do I define that? Because before the question was okay, then I'll kind of, there's going to be issues for me being an African, but the name doesn't really show African identity or context. Yeah. Like you're basically having to dance with two battles. Firstly, you have to try to somehow pass this invisible wall from your Muslim name. And then after that if you get through, then you have to pass the racial dynamic when they see that you're not a white guy named John.*

In terms of support, many of the professionals expressed that Muslim youth often perceive barriers to reaching out, which deepens feelings of isolation. These barriers to support include: 1) fear of retribution; 2) lack of trustworthy avenues; and 3) unwillingness to speak to parents. First, some of the professionals stated that Muslim youth were afraid of retribution if they were to speak out about their experiences of Islamophobia. Youth Worker Two shed light on this:

> *It's just so many times the young people would tell us… they don't want us to then do anything about it. So it will be, they'll tell us some stuff, they'll be really heated and I'll be like, "Hey, can we go to the school and talk to them about this?"…multiple times where we've asked to go to school, young people have been scared of what the backlash would then be for them if it's figured out that they're the ones who made a complaint, or if it's just assumed that they made a complaint….work is just as bad, if not worse. School, it's like they can suspend me but it's really hard for them to expel me and they kind of need to keep me around. Whereas work, it's like they can fire me and not give me an explanation because I've only been here for two months. It hasn't been three months. The kids, they think about "what do I have to do to stay here, because it's not a good place but this is the only place and all the other places are like this". And I think it's really difficult, because I'm trying to be like to young people, "everywhere isn't like this or this isn't how you should be treated".*

Second, some of the professionals pointed to a lack of trustworthy and/or easily accessible avenues for Muslim youth to discuss Islamophobia and discourses on terrorism. For example, when asked why Muslim youth often don't speak to other people about Islamophobia, Welfare Coordinator One stated 'I don't think they see the avenue or they don't feel they can trust'. In relation to the 2019 Bourke Street attack, College Staff One reported that Muslim students wanted to talk about the event but weren't sure where they could go or how they could actually talk about it. Moreover, when asked how Muslim youth attempt to make sense of geopolitical violence, Welfare Coordinator One responded with:

> *They'll engage with it however they can…if the opportunity is afforded to them. Most of the time, especially with the curriculum we have, that opportunity isn't afforded to them.*

Similarly, Community Leader One reported on the lack of easily accessible resources available to younger Muslims:

> *I don't think as 13-, 14-, 15-year-olds, you're going to know what's out there, that you can get help…. they're going to school and coming home. They're not going to be going to a seminar at seven o'clock in the evening on a weekday to talk about Islamophobia. A lot of the programs that are out there that are catered for Muslims don't cater for the youth. It needs to be reaching them in their schools, and it needs to reach the people that are doing the discriminating and that are actually perpetuating Islamophobia, i.e. the teachers and the other non-Muslim students. So, if they're not being educated, the students are not going to, they're not going to benefit from it.*

Third, while the majority of professionals acknowledged the importance of parents in supporting their children navigate issues related to Islamophobia, most stated that Muslim youth avoid talking to their parents about such issues. This observation was noted in a 2016 report published by The Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR). The report found that Muslim students do not often report incidents of bullying to their parents due to fears of getting in trouble or perceptions that their parents do not understand them.[1]

Significantly, ten out of the eleven professionals and educators made similar observations. The most identified reasons as to why Muslim youth choose not to talk with their parents include: perceived generational divide; fears of backlash; and family experiences with trauma. In terms of generational divide, most stated that there is a perception within the younger Muslim community that their parents don't understand them.

When asked who Muslim youth speak to about their experiences as Muslims in Australia, College Staff One stated 'I don't think they particularly like adult intervention…they feel like, for the most part, that adults don't understand them'. They went further to describe how this perception applied to adults and leaders within the Muslim community:

> *We ended up discussing about where do you feel comfortable as a Muslim person to go to? And for some reason people assume the mosque is the place where young people go to, and they were like absolutely not, that's where our parents would love us to go to, but who there can we go to for guidance?…the adults in their community do not understand us, a whole different wavelength.*
>
> *They don't go to mosques, they don't go to… the community leaders is a no-no, the amount of young people who have come to me and said I want to do the opposite to what the community leaders are doing. And these are generalisations, like they're taking our money, or their agenda is not focused on us.*
>
> *I've got young people who have worked closely with them [community leaders] who have said they absolutely do not understand what young people want…they think they know from their view and their perspective but they're not asking us, they're not engaging us to have conversations, they're not inviting us to talk, or if they're inviting us it's very selective and very specific about what they want us to talk about, or they want us to be the face, so it looks like they're including us.*

In terms of backlash, some of the professionals stated that Muslim youth fear, or are disheartened by, their parents expected responses to experiences of Islamophobia. For example, Youth Worker Two stated:

> *You want the parents to be on the same team as the young people, that we're all in the same, the same boat. We know what's happening every step of the way. And some young people, like their parents, they won't tell them out of fear, just not wanting backlash and parents wanting them to listen to authority. So, the parents will be like, "Well you know the teacher, they want what's best for you. Maybe they made a mistake or maybe they're wrong". But then, the ones who know that it's not a mistake. When they know that its discrimination, then they worry about the backlash for their children. So, they're more like, "If you're to going to stay here, then we're going to actually be even better behaved. What can we do to make them like you? What can we do to make it that we're not, we're special Muslims, we're really nice Muslims, really good Muslims or what can we do to prove that to them?"*

Community Leader One similarly expressed:

> *I think their parents mostly tell them to ignore things, which should they get in trouble for at school because they feel like they don't have the outlet and they don't have anybody to discuss things with. And their parents tell them, "It's okay. Don't worry about it. Even if someone says something bad to you, just be quiet. Don't cause trouble. Just be quiet".And they feel like they're creating trouble even though they've done nothing, just for asking questions, just for wanting to get support from their parents, wanting their parents to come and engage with the teachers and the principals. They feel like they're not backed, only because their parents obviously come from marginalized communities and they've got that trauma of having to leave their country, and their parents don't have that trust of teachers or law enforcement. So, they feel like the best thing to do is just to comply and be quiet and don't complain.*

In terms of trauma, some of the professionals noted that the family homes of Muslim youth are often not conducive to discussions on Islamophobia. When asked why Muslim youth avoid talking to their parents, Welfare Coordinator Two, with 10 years' experience working with Muslim youth, responded with:

> *I think they could be a bit scared to talk about it. They may know that their family comes from a torture trauma background and that's just something that's not spoken about at home. Yeah, I guess they would be the main reasons I could think of, yeah.*

College Staff One similarly expressed:

> *I'm not going to generalise, but most family life has a sort of violence to it. It doesn't have to be physical, but also verbal and emotional… especially for migrant families, because they have such trauma, they [youth] don't want to discuss it.*

In the absence of support, the mental wellbeing of Muslim youth can be significantly affected.[2] Several professionals observe that Muslim youth will often bottle-up their feelings and may subsequently act out in unhealthy ways.

For example, Counsellor One expressed that:

> *A lot of them, they don't go and ask anybody else because they don't feel like people relate to them. So, I think they speak to people that are closer to their age or their friends, it's more to vent. I think they all know that they can't get anywhere. I think a lot of the time this just kind of reinforces and validates their anger…and it validates their sense of hopelessness.*

College Staff One similarly expressed that 'it's clear that violence, anger and aggression, they just internalise it and release it on whoever it can be released on'. Building on this, Counsellor One claimed:

> *I think they internalise it and they become angry and angsty and rebellious and a little bit lost. And it just prolongs their becoming who they are. They don't know who they are. They can't find identity in anything that's not rooted in hate and violence…so that's where the confusion comes in and parents are like 'they're out of control'.*

Alienation

There is significant research that points to the role of the media in shaping public discourses on terrorism and geopolitical violence.[3] Within this, the dominant narrative conflates terrorism with Islam and portrays Muslims as potential terrorists and the enemy within. In a major Australian study, Hussein Tahiri and Michele Grossman found that:

> **There was a strong and well-established perceived link between Islam and terrorist thought and action in public community discourse. The primary source of this link was seen to be the media…Most participants thought that this link was forged mainly through media sensationalism, stereotyping and distortion; media over simplification or 'dumbing down' of issues around Muslims, extremism and terrorism.[4]**

As a result of these dominant discourses and narratives, Muslim youth 'have been forced into defensive positions – apologising for things they had no influence over, and feeling ostracised owing to their religion or culture'.[5] In the Australian context, few studies have examined how Muslim youth navigate public discourses on terrorism and geopolitical violence and how these discourses impact their daily experiences. The majority of professionals in this report noted that Muslim youth often feel alienated by these discourses, particularly at non-Islamic schools. For example, when asked how children make sense of geopolitical violence concerning Muslims, Youth Worker Three, with 20 years' experience working with Muslim youth, stated that:

> *I think it's really hard when you're from a background where a lot of the conversation is about your community, but you're perhaps going to a state school…so you will have moments of silence for this event that's happening in the world or whatever by acts that have been done by Muslims. So, it's that kind of thing of being self-conscious and I feel like it's a lot less now. Kids don't notice it as much, but there's still that element of, do people think that's me? Is that, do they think that's my community, my family? And then people are defensive. I find even kids can be defensive and they don't really understand why they're being defensive. They just realise that something's not right.*

Similarly, Welfare Coordinator Two stated that Muslim youth at non-Islamic schools often ask how to respond to their non-Muslim peers when approached with statements such as 'my mum said this about Muslims…that they're aggressive or they're terrorists'. In reference to such scenarios, Welfare Coordinator Two went further to state:

> *And students just not knowing how to even start or how to explain this. Or even the fact that they feel like they had to explain it. That would probably be the most common experience I've had with Muslim students. And that can lead to…they can either get really angry and then that start spiralling into something else and also really isolated and all the other problems that come with that.*

Moreover, some of the professionals explained how periods of intense media coverage related to terror incidents hinder the school performance of Muslim students. For example, Youth Worker One, with 7 years' experience working with Muslim youth, highlighted:

> *As a young person, or even, mid-year, uni is one the biggest things, because you're studying full time. The mind is on their studies. Once things happen, like if an incident happened, they straight away forget about their studies and they go to mental health problems.*

Community Leader One similarly observed:

> *Like Muslims as a community and as individuals are discussed on a daily basis and it's always in a negative context. So, when they come to school, they're having, instead of focusing on what they're studying on, the subjects, their exams, they have to answer to whatever incident happened on the other side of the world, or hear that they might not even have heard about the news or have seen it. They have to answer to that, and they have to have a response. And it's never going to be good enough because the next day something else will happen and they always have to answer to that.*

Periods of intense media coverage also have a considerable social impact on Muslim youth. Several professionals pointed out that parents often restrict their children's social interactions with non-Muslim communities in fear of retribution. Moreover, they illustrated how Muslim threat perceptions concerning Islamophobia are heightened in the aftermath of terror-related incidents. As Youth Worker Two pointed out:

> *Because parents get really, whenever there's something in the media about Muslims being a certain type of way, the kids, they're not allowed to go out as much, especially girls who wear hijabs. Even the girls joke around about it, where they're like, 'Oh somebody did something and now we're all on lockdown. We can't go out because our parents are freaking out and they'll think that we're going to get attacked by white people,' you know? And then it's like, there's a difference between what is perceived to then happen to young Muslim people and then what does happen.*

In relation to the 2018 Bourke Street attack, Teacher One similarly observed:

> *My students, the next day were like, 'Miss, is this going to make them hate us even more?' And they were just so scared. And then we had to take the girls out for city experience. And a lot of the parents wanted to pull the kids out, because they were just scared that them wearing their long skirts, wearing their headscarves. Because of the outrage and because of the public anger that would impact them, some sort of violence would happen towards them. They're very, very hyper aware of the language spoken to them and about them.*
>
> *I feel like sometimes it's made worse, and sensationalised to a greater degree, because we've put this panic in them, and parents put this panic in them. So, it stops them from being able to mend and communicate with other communities.*

This last statement suggests that socially restricting Muslim youth undermines a key strategy expressed by the women in this report concerning the importance of intercultural contact as a means to mitigate prejudice against Muslims.

Many professionals explained how Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism infiltrate classroom discussions, which deepens feelings of alienation among Muslim youth. Indeed, several international studies point to the increasing problems Muslim students face during classroom discussions on terrorism and geopolitical violence. According to a 2016 report published by The Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR):

Classroom discussions on Islam, the Middle East, and terrorism are another area where American Muslim students can feel marginalised. When these topics arise in a classroom setting, American Muslim students are often put in an uncomfortable situation of defending their beliefs, correcting misconceptions relating to them, or being perceived as unpatriotic. [6]

In their study on American Muslim youths, Sameera Ahmed and her colleagues identify factors that contribute to stressful educational environments for Muslim students. They contend that Muslim students can feel further marginalised due to their non-Muslim teachers' and/or peers' 'lack of religious or cultural awareness,' or 'negative perceptions of Islam'.[7] They further claim that experiences of Islamophobia within school settings 'can lead to depression, anger alienation, or withdrawal,' while noting the long-term impact this can have on Muslim students, some youth attempt to explain their faith to teachers and peers, while others may choose to disassociate themselves from the generalised blame attributed to Islam and Muslims by attempting to conceal their Muslim identity. When young people do not feel peers and teachers support their beliefs and practices, they may develop separate identities at school and at home, potentially leading to confusion and dissonance among Muslim youth.[8]

The Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) outlines similar consequences of Muslim students encountering Islamophobia within school environments. Muslim students may feel marginalised, disempowered, and begin to internalise negative stereotypes. Minority students who feel disconnected or alienated from the school environment will lack confidence, suffer academically, and fail to fully invest in their future.[9]

Several professionals noted the effect that these classroom discussions have on Muslim youth. Within this, they pointed out that Muslim youth often hold a more nuanced understanding of geopolitical violence than what is taught at school, which gives rise to feelings of anger and resentment towards how they are depicted. Highlighting this, Teacher One expressed:

> *A lot of them who come from Afghani [sic] backgrounds, who come from Iraqi backgrounds, hold a lot of anger and resentment because in the wake of 9/11, it was their family homes and their cousins and the places that they lived that were bombed and ruined, that sort of thing.*

Building on this, Community Leader One stated that at school:

> *'they feel like it's taught in a way that makes them feel more isolated and makes them feel like they're guilty, and they have to either sit down quietly or pretend like they're not there so they don't draw attention to themselves'.*

To underscore this point, Community Leader One provided the following anecdote:

> *I've actually had one of the girls tell me that she presented something and she felt like she was getting in trouble for this essay that she submitted, because she presented a different viewpoint on Islamophobia and terrorism or whatever it may be. She spoke about underlying issues, and she felt straight away that she's been put in a corner and, 'Why do you have these views and why were you saying these things?' And it's almost as if they can't discuss underlying issues because it makes them feel like they're validating violent acts. And it's okay for someone else to say that, but they can't say that, especially when it's in relation to an incident where a Muslim is involved. So, they don't think ... They feel like, 'If I even discuss this, if I even write anything on this topic or mention anything that could be seen as validating it, I'll be in trouble'.*
>
> *And a lot of them sadly enough are avoiding certain topics, like international relations...and that's a topic and a subject that they're usually interested in. But they feel scared to go into it now because they're like 'what's the point? You've asked me to discuss something and I've done it, but now I feel like I'm in trouble'.*

Periods of intense media coverage also have a considerable social impact on Muslim youth. Several professionals pointed out that parents often restrict their children's social interactions with non-Muslim communities in fear of retribution.

Importantly, several studies have examined Islamophobia at an institutional level, namely counter-terrorism measures, and the impact these have on Muslim youth. For example, Tahir Abbas and Imran Awan contend that Islamophobia is evident in government counter-terrorism measures that 'have seemingly targeted Muslim communities more so than any other religious groups'.[10]

Similarly, Nahid Afrose Kabir argues that these measures 'have been heavy-handed on the Muslims'.[11] The impact of these measures on Muslim youth is significant. Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick observed in their 2011 study, that among their Muslim youth participants, counter-terrorism laws reinforced a sense that innocent Muslims were being treated as part of a 'suspect community'.[12]

The study found that while some Muslim youths sought to challenge this misconception through engagement, the majority expressed 'feeling increasingly alienated and isolated'.[13] Similarly, Abbas and Awan contend that counter-terrorism measures 'alienate Muslim groups', while 'disenchanting them from integration in wider society'.[14] In line with these studies, some of the professionals observed that Muslim youth often feel uncertain or afraid of being targeted by government counter-terrorism policies, particularly surveillance.

Community Leader One, with ten years' experience working with Muslim youth, stated that 'they're scared to even search anything, they're scared to look at stuff because they're like, "Oh, I want to know what the issue is in Syria. But then okay, if I said that word, am I going to get locked up?"' The Community Leader then provided an anecdote to elaborate this observation:

> *Even myself, I studied politics and I've done subjects on terrorism. There's always something in the back of my mind that I'm like, 'Oh my God, okay, I'm reading this essay. Should I be reading this?' It's a published paper and it's totally fine for me to read it, but I'm just programmed to be so afraid of every step that I take. And I think that they feel this already as refugees and people from migrant and war-torn countries. But now it's heightened because it's like you are on some ... You're scared, you're like, 'Am I going to be on some type of watch list?' And then people are like, 'If you're on that watch list you must have done something.' They're just scared so they're like, 'Let me just not interact with this.'*

Similarly, Community Worker One, with 15 years' experience working with Muslim youth, stated:

> *I get a lot of questions about data and security because they know that they're being targeted. The question is how and how do you mitigate that? I think the one statement I would say is I got this from a 15-year-old recently and the question was, 'I need to know how to mitigate being targeted'. The question isn't 'If I'm going to get targeted'. The question is 'When?'*

Need for greater awareness

As shown, Islamophobia has far-reaching consequences for Muslim youth, severely impacting their learning environments, social lives, mental wellbeing and sense of self. The majority of professionals pointed to the challenges they face in supporting Muslim youth overcome these experiences, while stressing the need for greater resources to assist educators and practitioners with understanding Islamophobia. The following accounts highlight the reported shortcomings in mental health, education and community sectors in addressing Islamophobia. When asked how they respond to the concerns of Muslim youth regarding Islamophobia, Youth Worker Three stated 'I tend not really to give advice because I don't actually know what to say half the time'. Youth Worker Two shed light on this statement:

> *Unfortunately, we're youth workers, but the things that we get taught, it's just like how to service white, middle-class teenagers. Sometimes they say disadvantaged and get a bit more diverse with it, but really what training do we actually get about working with Muslim young people? What training do we get specifically working with people from the African diaspora? There isn't that nuanced training. It's normally what we do amongst teaching each other. And at least I work in an organisation, we work specifically with Muslim and African youth, so we get to, as a team, discuss things and do in-house training for each other.*

Community Worker One expressed similar concerns about the mental health sector:

> *I think at the moment, we're very limited in what we can actually do…Because at the moment there is nothing, and I'm starting to see the impacts of [Islamophobia] and more and more people are reaching out, going like, "I'm feeling depressed. My brother's depressed. My sister's depressed". You're starting to see symptoms of that, and the issue is where they're meant to go. Yeah.*
>
> *How do you explain this situation to the mental health sector who doesn't really understand, not only the reality of growing up in these inner-city kind of places, but also there's like an Islamic or racial dynamic behind it? It's like you can empathise, but these guys already feel targeted. They're not going to go to a psychologist and go like, "I'm feeling depressed because someone is literally questioning the core of my being. They're literally accusing me of not participating in the society, not belonging, not interacting, simply because my name is X, and I look like this and I wear this, and that's it".*

Welfare Coordinator Two expressed the need for greater resources on Islamophobia in the education system:

> *Sometimes they would approach me about how they didn't like what a teacher had said. Maybe they made a very generalised statement about Muslims in general or a particular group like Afghans or Africans or whatever, and they were really hurt and offended by that. So yeah, I feel that teachers need training on how they are talking about these kind of issues with students as well. And even upper management schools, principals, assistant principals, are not really equipped and are often quite dismissive when this kind of stuff is brought up.*

Building up the knowledge base of professionals on the experience of those affected by Islamophobia stood out as critical in enhancing their capacity to engage positively with Muslim youth and their families.

Strategies

Several professionals noted the strategies they employ to support Muslim youth with their experiences of Islamophobia and public discourses on terrorism. These interrelated strategies included: listening to and validating concerns, sharing similar experiences, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and above all, building trustworthy and ongoing relationships. For example, when asked how they respond to Muslim youth, Council Staff One stated:

> *I just hear them out…its hearing them out, but also offering some tools, and also linking them up with resources and where they can go to. I think here, there's lots of young people walking in and out, I can't really… There's no program or anything, so I kind of just have a chat…I give them that time to just talk. I think it's just giving them time. It's just listening, but offering support but also not just going, "here you go, that's where you go". We're offering continued support and my colleague really stressed to them that she's happy to be there the whole time, even if she's not working. I think that just made… you can see if it was to happen again, then hopefully they would come back, and the others know.*

Some of the professionals highlighted the importance of building trust with Muslim youth, which is often generated through the sharing of similar experiences. Community Leader One elaborated on this point when asked why Muslim youth prefer to speak to members of the younger Muslim community:

> *I think they think that obviously I'm not that much older than them and may have faced similar issues. And secondly, they've seen me speak out about these issues, so they know that I'm on their side. They know that if they say that they'd been discriminated against because of the colour of their skin or because of their religion, they've heard me speak about these things. They've heard me speak about my own experiences. So, they're like, 'Okay, this is someone I can trust because they know what I'm talking about. They've experienced it'.*

Many of the professionals stressed the importance of creating safe spaces for Muslim youth to discuss Islamophobia. Community Leader One shed light on their initiative to support Muslim female students:

> *We started this initiative where we do camps for a lot of the young African girls. And a lot of that is we talk about discrimination, we talk about identity, we talk about Islam, Islamophobia and we discuss terrorism as well. There's nothing that's taboo, there's no stigma. And we unpack a lot of the issues and we're trying to cover these things. Like we have a workshop coming up on discrimination next year.*
>
> *I feel like that's the only way they can discuss things in a safe space because they can't do that at school. They're already being made guilty. They're already made being made fun of. And they can't sit there and say, 'But no, actually, I don't know anything about that person. I don't anything about that incident, I'm not a part of it.' They can't say that, so we let them vent their frustrations.*

Developing strategies of listening, building trust and empathy appeared to be important in the work of professionals. This was seen as the first step to building rapport with Muslim youth in order to work productively with those affected by Islamophobia.

[1] The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) MISLABELLED: The Impact of School Bullying and Discrimination on California Muslim Students (2016), p. 10, available at https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CAIR-CA-2015-Bullying-Report-Web.pdf

[2] Islamic Social Services Association and National Council of Canadian Muslims. Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence & Islamophobia: A Guide for Educators, n.d., available online at, https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/97e4-Geopolitical-Violence-and-Islamophopia.pdf; and Siham Elkassem et al. 'Growing up Muslim: The impact of islamophobia on children in a Canadian community', Journal of Muslim Mental Health 12:1, 2018, pp. 3-18.

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[5] Islamic Social Services Association and National Council of Canadian Muslims. Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence & Islamophobia: A Guide for Educators, n.d., available online, https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/97e4-Geopolitical-Violence-and-Islamophopia.pdf>

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CONCLUSION

The impact of Islamophobia on the daily lives of Muslim families and children is significantly understudied. Most research on Islamophobia focuses on the prevalence and practices of Islamophobia, the role of the media in the normalisation of bias and fear, but very little on its impact on Muslim communities and families.

Through an examination of the collected data, this report highlights the multifaceted impact of Islamophobia on the daily lives of Muslim families and children and points to the tremendous challenges Muslim families and children face in responding to and navigating Islamophobia. The following themes and issues were commonly identified by the participants during the interviews, focus group discussions and pilot program:

First, most Muslim youth participants reported direct or indirect experiences of Islamophobia, which has a significant impact on their mental wellbeing and sense of self. For those attending non-Islamic schools, many described experiences of Islamophobia in the form of teasing, name-calling and bullying, which often resulted in feelings of frustration, isolation and helplessness. Muslim youth were also reported to often feel anger and resentment towards their teachers and non-Muslim peers when discussing issues related to Islam, the Middle East and terrorism, because they felt judged. Moreover, most Muslim youth participants reported a lack of resources and avenues to support them with navigating these experiences. This resulted in not having the opportunity to discuss the impact of Islamophobia. These findings point to the need for greater access for Muslim youth to support services. The findings further suggest that there is significant room for improvement in Australia's education sector, in terms of fostering cultural awareness among teachers and school administrators and equipping them with tools to build trusting relationships with diverse students. Through fostering cultural awareness, teachers will be better positioned to understand and challenge Islamophobia in Australian schools, while providing a safe and inclusive learning environment for Muslim students.

Second, most Muslim women reported that they lacked the tools to assist their children navigate their Muslim identity among their non-Muslim peers, or support their children with experiences of Islamophobia and/or public discourses on terrorism. Moreover, most women were unaware of how to access support services to help with their own and their children's experiences of Islamophobia.

These findings suggest that there is room for the development of programs and services aimed at equipping mothers with the skills and knowledge related to discrimination, racism and Islamophobia and ways of conducting safe conversations with children about these issues.

Third, all of the practitioners and educators noted the prevalence of Islamophobia in the lives of the younger Muslim community. They reported that the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim youth is manifest in feelings of frustration, alienation, and helplessness. Moreover, they noted that in the absence of support, Islamophobia adversely impacts Muslim youths' learning and social environments, mental wellbeing, and their sense of belonging and identity in Australia. While pointing to these challenges, most highlighted that they faced difficulties in supporting Muslim youth due to a lack of knowledge and/or strategies on how to support Muslim youth affected by Islamophobia. These findings suggest that there is significant room for improvement in terms of fostering cultural awareness among health, youth and community workers and equipping them with better resources to support Muslim youth navigate Islamophobia.

Fourth, creating space for open conversations with parents on Islamophobia and related concepts such as discrimination, vilification, racism and human rights, is a promising strategy for empowering parents to better support their children and narrowing the communication gap. When parents feel heard and have the opportunity to talk about their experiences, concerns, fears and confusions, followed by capacity development in a safe environment, it will improve their awareness, communication and confidence in engaging with their children on Islamophobia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the analysis of the collected data in this report and identified areas of need:

FOR SCHOOLS AND PRACTITIONERS

- Develop and deliver programs and resources for school staff to build capacity and raise awareness of the issues of race and Islamophobia and its impact on students and their families.

- Foster greater cultural/socio-political awareness and resources in the education, community and health sectors to assist educators and practitioners with providing safer and more inclusive learning and social environments for Muslim youth.

- Promote inclusive practices within schools using a human rights and social justice framework by supporting schools to facilitate class discussions on issues of race and rights.

- Develop more effective mechanisms for parent-teacher support and trust building to enable them to communicate with each other regarding children's experiences of Islamophobia inside and outside school.

FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS:

- Develop partnerships with community-based organisations to support the delivery of programs and initiatives to support Muslim families address issues of Islamophobia.

- Develop resources and programs, including the expansion of the pilot parenting program, to assist Muslim parents with supporting their children in understanding and navigating the challenges of Islamophobia and discussions of terrorism.

- Increase access for Muslim women to support services to report encounters with Islamophobia.

- Address the gendered nature of Islamophobia through specialised programs at community and schools to highlight the additional threat to safety and violence experienced by Muslim girls and women in communities.

- Develop opportunities and resources for Muslim youth to discuss and explore the public discourse on terrorism and Islamophobia.

APPENDIX: THE WAY FORWARD

Pilot Parenting Program on Islamophobia

At the end of the study, the AMWCHR designed and piloted a parenting program aimed at equipping mothers with the skills and knowledge related to discrimination and Islamophobia and ways of having safe conversations with children. The program focused on supporting children in dealing with their direct or vicarious experiences of Islamophobia; and on helping children understand media coverage of vilification or attacks against Muslims or by Muslims.

Specifically, the program aimed to:

- Increase participants' understanding of the terms related to Islamophobia, racism, discrimination and vilification.
- Enhance participants' understanding of children's developmental changes, its impact on children's sense of identity, belonging, confidence and wellbeing and the inter-relationship of the experience of Islamophobia on these changes.
- Increase participants' awareness of the impact of media vilification and violence, by or against Muslims, on children
- Enhance parent's skills in having safe conversations with their children on these issues.
- Equip parents with the skills and resources to support children affected by Islamophobia.

The program design was highly participatory combining presentations and group activities. The Parenting Program equipped the participants with a clear understanding of their rights and the laws on discrimination.

A brief evaluation of the program, using pre- and post-workshop questionnaires and qualitative data (based on facilitator observation), showed positive results. Significant increases were noted in the following:

- Improved understanding of the concepts of discrimination, racism and Islamophobia,
- Awareness and understanding of their rights and the laws on discrimination,
- Awareness of services and resources available to deal with issues of Islamophobia,
- Increased confidence in engaging with their children on Islamophobia,
- Confidence in using their communication skills to engage with their children generally,
- Attempts to have conversations with their children around race, discrimination and Islamophobia,

These results underscore the importance of such conversations with parents and indicate that there is much scope for such programs to be replicated, adapted and expanded across different segments of the Muslim community.

Sample program outline

The following program may be run as a full 6-session workshop or as two workshops of 3 sessions each as was done by AMWCHR:

SESSION 1: Understanding Islamophobia

- Introduction
- Group Rules
- Our vision for our lives in Australia
- Conceptualising safety
- Introduction to the concepts: discrimination, racism, Islamophobia and vilification
- Human rights and diversity

SESSION 2: Supporting Your Child Dealing with Islamophobia

- Childhood contexts and unpacking children's lived experiences and impact
- Bullying, Racism and Islamophobia faced by children
- Supporting Your Child through relationship building, information and action

SESSION 3: Affirmative Action and Support

- Concretising the concept of Islamophobia
- Reporting Islamophobia

SESSION 4: Media Literacy

- Exploring the community's sources of information and news
- Exploring children's sources of information and news
- Impact of media representation of Muslims and Islam
- Striking the Balance - identity: race, religion and citizenship

SESSION 5: Instilling Values

- Strategies for Balance - challenging rigidity and extremes
- Communities and Values of Diversity - diversity, equality, justice, etc.
- Active Listening and Responding

SESSION 6: Conversations that Matter

- Creating Conversations that Matter – how to talk to children, skills and strategies
- The Hard Reality – responding to Islamophobia
- Evaluation

Guidelines for conducting a parenting program

These guidelines are based on factors identified by the developers and facilitators of the AMWCHR pilot parenting program that contributed to the positive results:

- ***Content:*** Merely providing information on anti-discriminatory laws is often insufficient in effecting change; participants are better able to learn and change behaviours when the focus is on skills, attitudes as well as on knowledge acquisition
- ***Safe space:*** providing space where participants can safely share their thoughts, experiences, concerns and vulnerabilities allows for better, more relevant and effective learning
- ***Participatory approach:*** using primarily participatory techniques such as discussions, small group activities, sharing among participants, practice techniques, etc., allow for more sustainable learning and change
- ***Facilitator skill:*** To be able to effectively address, and facilitate a conversation on sensitive issues, the role of the facilitator is critical. Lack of experience, personal biases, limited knowledge of the issues, etc., can serve as significant barriers. A facilitator who is skilled in working with diverse groups, has a good knowledge of issues of race, human rights and violence, who is sensitive to the vulnerabilities of grassroots vulnerabilities and contexts and is approachable, would be best placed to run a group of this kind
- ***Small groups:*** Working with small groups at a time allows more time for participation and trust building and more in-depth sharing
- ***Interpreters:*** even if most participants are proficient in English, having back-up interpreters can help create a sense of safety and additional comfort in expression, and an ensuring that there are no communication barriers.

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