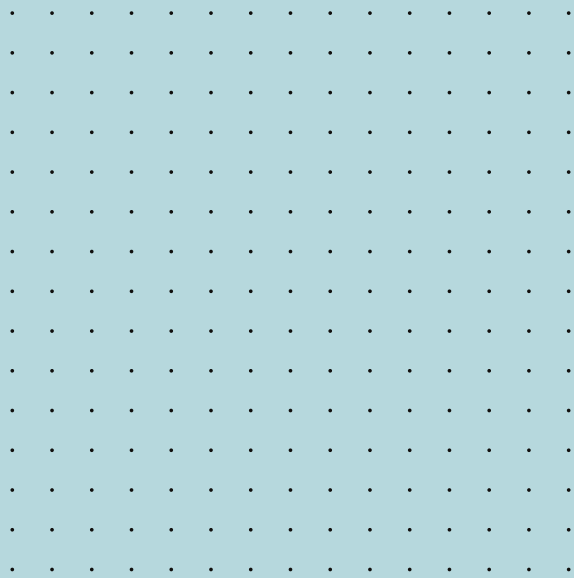




Australian Muslim Women's
Centre for Human Rights
Equality without Exception



Submission to the Inquiry into Right Wing Extremist Movements in Australia

Australian Muslim Women's
Centre for Human Rights

April 2024

About us

This submission has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). The AMWCHR is an organisation of Muslim women leading change to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

We bring over 30 years of experience in providing one-to-one support to Muslim women, young women and children, and developing and delivering community education and capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift prevailing attitudes. We also work as advocates - researching, publishing, informing policy decisions and reform initiatives as well as offering training and consultation to increase sector capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women, young women and children.

As one of the leading voices for Muslim women's rights in Australia, we challenge the most immediate and pertinent issues Muslim women face every day. We promote Muslim women's right to self-determination - recognising the inherent agency that already exists, and bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light.

AMWCHR works with individuals, the community, partner organisations and government to advocate for equality within the Australian context.

Acknowledgement of Country

This submission recognises that gender, race, and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, particularly in a context of growing Islamophobia. It also recognises that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Before we can successfully tackle issues within our communities, we must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and discrimination in all its forms in this country.

AMWCHR acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands our organisation is located on 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.



Introduction

Key points:

- Right-wing extremism remains an ongoing threat for Muslim communities in Australia. The mass trauma of violent extremist events such as the Christchurch Massacre are severe and ongoing to this day, and there are legitimate fears that a similar event could occur in Australia.
- Right-wing extremist ideologies have specific gendered implications for Muslim women. White Replacement conspiracies politicise and degrade Muslim women's roles as mothers, while violent Islamophobic attacks are most often experienced by Muslim women who wear a hijab.
- Far-right extremist groups may be a relatively small minority, but they are highly motivated and dedicated, and the consequences of their actions – violence, abuse, and political change – are significant for Muslim communities.
- The gendered nature of the threat of extremist movements can also be seen in the rise of anti-feminist right-wing movements. The anti-feminist nature of right-wing movements undermine progress towards gender equality and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.
- Australia's politicians and media is in large part to blame for shifting the Overton window on how Islam and Muslims are spoken about in public spaces, expanding levels of acceptance of dehumanising and Islamophobic rhetoric and policies. This has normalised the targeting and scapegoating of Muslim and migrant communities and provided cover for far-right movements to flourish.
- The online environment plays a significant role in proliferating extremist right-wing content. As more and more of services, social interactions, and media moves online, Muslim communities are at high risk of exposure to far-right threats and abuse.
- As right-wing movements continue to grow and expand, we remain concerned that the focus is still primarily on Muslim communities.

In recent years, far-right extremism has become a frequent topic of intense public and political discussion. Following the 2019 Christchurch Massacre, during which an Australian terrorist murdered 51 Muslim community members in Christchurch, Aotearoa, a warranted level of introspection has raised questions about how our society contributed to and propagated such hatred and violence. Evidently, Australia must do more to form a robust and effective response to prevent further harm and fracturing of Australian communities.

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) welcomes the opportunity to provide our expertise and perspective to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's Inquiry into Right Wing Extremist Movements in Australia. Consultation with community-led organisations such as AMWCHR, especially on a topic that directly threatens and impacts our community's lives, is critical.

This submission is designed to contribute greater awareness and understanding of the unique risk posed to Muslim communities by right-wing extremists, movements, and the structures that support and perpetuate them. We use a gendered lens throughout to highlight the most pressing issues for the Committee to be aware of, and identify the ways in which Muslim communities' safety and wellbeing can be centred in discussions on right-wing extremism.

Response to Terms of Reference

On 7 December 2023, the Senate referred an inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for inquiry and report. The inquiry will focus on right wing extremist movements in Australia, with particular reference to:

1. The threat posed by extremist movements in Australia

Over the past decade, the threat of right-wing extremism in Australia has risen sharply alongside a global rise in far-right populist movements. The threat of extremism is not felt evenly across the population; migrant and refugee communities, Muslims, First Nations communities, Jewish communities, racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, disabled Australians, and women, among others, are overt targets of far-right violence, abuse, and disenfranchisement. Among the targets of far-right extremism, there are compounding factors that shape how far-right threats and rhetoric is experienced, especially for those who sit across the intersections of the above identity and community groups.

In our region, the threat of far-right extremism is no better represented than through the 2019 Christchurch Massacre, during which an Australian terrorist murdered 51 Muslim community members and wounded an additional 40 in Christchurch, Aotearoa. The terrorist livestreamed the attack on Facebook and published a 74-page manifesto online which outlined his 'justifications' for the murders. These 'justifications' largely centred around the far-right 'Great Replacement' or 'White Replacement' conspiracy theory, which posits that Anglo-European (white) people in western countries are being socio-culturally as well as demographically 'replaced' by people of non-Anglo-European descent (Ehsan & Stott, 2020). Proponents of the Great Replacement theory attribute these perceived demographic and cultural changes to high birthrates among non-white communities, in addition to immigration from non-western/non-European countries (Ekman, 2022). These demographic projections are not based in reality. The Great Replacement is, by definition, inherently ethno-nationalist and centred on the belief that 'the west', and whiteness specifically, is a superior culture and race.

The focus on the Great Replacement theory by the Christchurch terrorist demonstrates how Muslim communities are a central target of right-wing extremists. The terrorists specifically killed Muslims, and attempted to justify his actions through appealing to far-right as well as more mainstream narratives that dehumanise Muslim communities. These were common tropes and stereotypes – e.g., that Islam and Muslims are inherently violent, that western countries are being 'taken over' by Muslim migrants – though they were also implicitly and

explicitly gendered in their presentation. Hussain, Allen, and Poynting (2024) provide analysis of how Muslim women are demarcated as embodiments of the Great Replacement conspiracy, arguing that,

His so-called manifesto, posted online immediately before the mass murders, makes clear that he not only regarded women and girls as legitimate targets, but that he saw their extermination as the central element of his mission. Opening with the statement “It’s the birthrates” repeated three times, the manifesto goes on to elaborate that all Muslims, including children, are to be regarded as enemies on the basis of their reproductive capacity... Their ‘crime’ was to be Muslim – and to be ‘breeders’. Long-accused of potentially concealing weapons beneath their modest clothing, Muslim women are now accused of harbouring a still more sinister weapon within their bodies – their wombs.

Muslim women’s roles as mothers – or potential mothers – are politicised through Great Replacement theory, and this perception that they are active participants in the ‘Islamisation’ of the west leaves them at high risk of right-wing extremist violence. At the same time, the gendered nature of the Christchurch terrorists’ motives and manifesto can also be seen in how Muslim men were framed and targeted. Muslim men were characterised as inherently violent and as sexual predators, playing into the common far-right trope that Black and brown men are a threat to white women. Women’s bodies have long been used in nationalist ideologies as a symbol of nationhood due to their role in producing – i.e., birthing – the nation (Beutel, 2019). They are also strategically characterised as victims through which outward- and inward-facing violence is justified under the guise of ‘protection’ (Bannerji, 2020). The Christchurch terrorist appeals to these hyper masculinist beliefs in order to justify his own actions and motivate other men to join the violent cause.

The Christchurch Massacre is not an outlier event. It is the furthest point along an interconnected right and far-right wing political spectrum that targets Muslim communities in various ways and through various means. The impacts of right-wing extremist ideologies are clearly and consistently felt in Muslim communities. The mass trauma of violent extremist events such as the Christchurch Massacre are severe and ongoing to this day.

At a community level, the threat and consequences of extremist movements culminate in heightened fear, diminished sense of belonging, and a trigger for further demeaning and dehumanising public discussion related to Islam’s ‘compatibility’ with the west. The growth of these movements and the risks they present have severe impacts on individuals’ sense of self, ethnic and religious identity, and mental health for those who are visible and non-visible Muslims. Right-wing actors are highly motivated, and have a desire and willingness to encroach upon Muslim community spaces and activities, or prevent their establishment in the first instance. This was seen in 2015, where nationalist group United Patriots Front (UPF) gathered over 1000 people to protest the building of a mosque in Bendigo (Morris, 2015). While Victoria Police at the time described UPF as a ‘fringe group’, protestors reportedly travelled from as far away as Sydney, Queensland, and Adelaide. Far-right extremist groups may be a relatively small minority, but they are highly dedicated, and the consequences of their actions – violence, abuse, and political change – are significant for Muslim communities. They also exist within an ecosystem of less extreme, though nonetheless harmful, right-wing actors that marginalise Muslim communities. The various factions of this ecosystem are mutually reinforcing, and

legitimised by politicians, public figures, and media institutions that perpetuate ideologies of bigotry and hate.

We also note that extremism in Australia – and across the globe - is a rapidly changing landscape in which unlikely alliances are forming. Examples include racist/antisemitic Zionists (O'Donnell, 2021), racist/Islamophobic “ex-Muslims” (Isa & Yaapar, 2021), and anti-trans “feminists” aligning with far-right and neo-Nazi groups (Kolovos, 2024). The traditional lens for viewing far-right extremism is not appropriate in the current age, where groups with seemingly contradictory aims and ideologies will align to target a particular minority group or issue. The COVID pandemic and the increased reliance worldwide on online spaces amidst global lockdowns, in part, accelerated the formation of these new, far-right ideologies and alliances.

The COVID pandemic also saw an increase in the spread of misinformation. Trust in authorities was eroded, and over-policing and blaming of migrant groups became normalised in Australia (Ben & Elias, 2024). The pandemic fuelled ethno-nationalism and united previously misaligned movements on the basis of shared anti-interventionist beliefs. Alongside the pandemic, both structural and interpersonal racism increased, with one systematic review showing that experiences of racism in Australia were 30-40% higher than average during the pandemic (Ben & Elias, 2024). The most widely studied forms of COVID-racism were verbal abuse and harassment, physical attacks, exclusion and Othering, and institutional racism involving governments, media and employers.

At a systemic level, Islamophobic far-right beliefs are a concern for our communities and organisation. The existence of far-right ideologies in Australia's police and military forces pose a particular threat, as individuals who hold such beliefs also wield high levels of power and authority. There has been some evidence to suggest that anti-Islam and white nationalist beliefs are an issue in Australia's police and defence forces (Bucci, 2019; Percival, 2020), though the police force themselves deny or downplay the issue (ABC, 2019). We are highly concerned that the presence of racist and white supremacist beliefs in police forces is leading to racist policing that targets Muslim, Black, and brown communities.

2. The motivations, objectives, and capacity for violence of extremist groups and individuals holding such views

Far-right movements undermine Australia's multicultural society through fuelling division and hate amongst and towards various community groups. Religious and cultural freedom and expression is curtailed, as public displays of religiosity present safety risks to community members.

Underestimating or dismissing the right-wing's willingness to use violence is what has led to the many attacks targeting Muslim communities and those who support their rights. This includes

large-scale violence such as the Christchurch Massacre and the Norway attacks¹, but also the more frequent acts of violence experienced by Muslims in Australia on a one-to-one basis. In 2019, Rana Elsamar, a visibly Muslim woman, was violently attacked in a Sydney café while 38 weeks pregnant. The attack was racially and religiously-motivated, and the attacker yelled Islamophobic abuse at Elsamar while physically assaulting her (Nguyen & Kozaki, 2019). Right-wing threats and violence have a highly gendered nature. Those who are visibly Muslim, and particularly women who wear a hijab, are at high risk of violence and abuse. According to the latest Islamophobia in Australia Report, 78% of victims of Islamophobic incidents were women, and 70% of perpetrators were men (Iner, Mason, Smith, 2023). Further, in the months following October 7th and Israel's bombardment of Gaza, reports of Islamophobia in Australia have increased thirteen-fold (Islamophobia Register Australia, 2023), indicating a heightened risk for more and severe violence towards Muslim communities, and Muslim women in particular.

The gendered nature of the threat of extremist movements can also be seen in the rise of anti-feminist right-wing movements. Far-right movements often identify with 'traditionalist' ideas of society, culture, and gender in the private and public sphere (Agius, Edney-Browne, Nicholas, 2022). One recent study which mapped right-wing extremism in Victoria through a gendered lens found that far-right and anti-feminist sentiments are mutually reinforcing (Agius, Cook, Nicholas, et al., 2020). Anti-feminism can unite various right-wing factions, as it appeals to notions of 'tradition'. It can also unite those who believe the system is working against them, as it directs their focus towards those they view as benefitting at their expense – i.e., women and minorities (Agius, Cook, Nicholas, et al., 2020). As Muslims sit at the intersection of these foci, they are at high risk of violence and abuse. The anti-feminist nature of right-wing movements undermine progress towards gender equality and Australia's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. Disrupting this progress is a deliberate tactic of far-right extremist movements, as they attempt to regress towards outdated gender structures and roles.

Further, the effect – and aim – of right-wing threats and violence is to prevent diverse community members from being active and visible in Australian society. Threats to Muslim representatives in the public sphere prevents other Muslims from stepping into influential and leadership spaces, such as politics, media, advocacy, and activism. Sudanese-Australian writer, activist, and engineer, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, is a clear example of this. As a public Muslim woman, Abdel-Magied experienced extreme forms of racist, Islamophobic, and misogynistic abuse including death threats and sexual violence threats (BBC, 2018). The abuse was so severe that Adel-Magied left the country. These experiences are not uncommon for Muslim women in the public eye, and results in fewer women feeling safe enough to take up public space and advocate on community issues.

The motivations for Islamophobic attacks and violence are to spread fear among Muslim communities, disrupt social cohesion, and strip Muslim and migrant communities from their enjoyment of public life. This safety risk impacts community members' capacity to engage in education and employment, manage health, and seek support. It inhibits migrant and refugee

¹ The 2011 Norway terror attacks targeted government and civilians including children. 77 people were killed and an additional 320 were injured. The terrorist released a manifesto in which he shared his hatred of Islam and his belief in Great Replacement conspiracies related to Muslim immigration to Europe.

communities' settlement journey and experiences, as they feel unwelcomed and threatened in Australian society. These consequences have long-term and even intergenerational impacts on families and communities. While the Committee is focussing on extremists' capacity for violence, it is also important to emphasise that the impacts of far-right extremism are strongly felt even in cases where no physical violence has occurred. The social, psychological, and structural impacts of these dehumanising ideologies are equally as important to highlight and address.

3. Links between individuals and groups with international movements

Far-right movements often follow global trends, and we can see similar patterns expressed across many countries around the world. With the networks created by social media, the potential for overseas extremist movements to expand and form wings in Australia or encourage copycat violent events is high. A number of far-right movements and groups, such as the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo movement, and other accelerationist forces originating in the United States now have adherents and even chapters in Australia. In recent years, Australia has also seen an increase in far-right and extremist figures travel to the country for speaking tours and events. This has included white nationalists such as Stefan Molyneux and Lauren Southern, and the leader of the Proud Boys Gavin McInnes. In 2018, controversial far-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos was even invited to speak at Parliament House by then-Senator David Leyonhjelm (Ross, 2018). These international figures and movements have adherents in Australia, and their increasing popularity, particularly with young men, presents an elevated risk and should be a concern for Governments.

4. How individuals progress to committing acts of violence

Right-wing networks and narratives appeal to race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender to galvanise a shared identity and create an imagined threat, primarily identified as Muslim and migrant communities. However, the threat of far-right extremism doesn't exist in isolation; individuals are progressively exposed to and embrace increasingly extreme views due to the laundering of far-right theories and ideas. Mainstream discussions and rhetoric are of particular concern, as we watch the media, politicians, and public figures normalise the targeting and scapegoating of Muslim, migrant and refugee communities.

While there has been an increased focus of late on the role of social media in the spreading of extremist content, traditional media continues to be instigators of Islamophobia that emboldens far-right extremist movements and their fellow travellers. Australia's media is in large part to blame for shifting the Overton window on how the public and politicians talk about Islam and Muslim communities, expanding the level of dehumanising rhetoric and conversations that are permitted to happen in our public spaces. In recent months, we have seen this play out with relation to the genocide in Palestine. A recent media analysis by the Islamophobia Register of Australia showed a significant bias against Palestinians and dehumanising reporting (Carland, 2023). This dehumanisation of Palestinian lives and their suffering also impacts how local events are depicted in the media. Those who are supportive of

Palestinian liberation have been characterised as terrorist sympathisers, as antisemitic, and as ‘un-Australian’ (ABC, 2023; Sky News, 2023). What this media coverage does, in effect, is further depict Palestinian and Muslim communities as violent, as subhuman, and a threat to Australian society. The rhetoric surrounding the Palestinian genocide legitimises in the mainstream what far-right groups already espouse about Muslim, Palestinian, and migrant Australians, and has the potential to bring more people into the fold of extremist ideologies.

In recent months, we have also seen increased discussion in Australian media surrounding the role of immigration in Australia’s housing crisis (Kelly, 2023; Sweeny, 2023). Governments have been asked to ‘tame the flows’ of migrants driving up Australia’s house prices (Murphy, 2023). This was a widespread discussion that played out in Australian media, reminiscent of the common trope that migrants are ‘stealing’ Australian jobs (Hogan & Haltinner, 2017). Migrant communities have long been used as a scapegoat for economic issues, regardless of their basis in reality. These discussions deliberately ignore the power that governments have at their disposal to address the housing crisis – for example, ending negative gearing, caps on rental increases, vacancy taxes, and more. Instead of directing the conversation towards the financial incentives and tax concessions that landlords and investors receive in the property market, the focus is on migrant families who need a home to live in. While the overt discussion may not link explicitly with right-wing extremist beliefs, they mirror and normalise the far-right perception that Australia’s prosperity, society, and culture is being threatened by immigration.

The adoption of far-right ideologies in Australia can also be attributed to the normalisation of extremist beliefs by politicians. This was seen after the Christchurch Massacre, where immediately following the event, Australian Senator Fraser Anning Tweeted, “Does anyone still dispute the link between Muslim immigration and violence?”. His office then issued a statement claiming that the ‘real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets today is the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place’ (The Guardian, 2019). Senator Anning’s comfort with expressing such sentiments immediately after a racially and religiously motivated mass shooting is demonstrative of a high level of tolerance of extremist Islamophobic rhetoric in Australia. Anning’s politics can be described as far-right, though far-right tropes and stereotypes are also expressed amongst more traditional conservative or centrist politicians and political parties. The current Liberal Party Leader, Peter Dutton, recently called for attendees of pro-Palestine rallies to be deported (Bannister & Lock, 2023). These comments were in response to reports of violent antisemitic chants at the protest, which were later proven false (Hannam, 2024). Dutton’s assumption that the protestors were migrants, and his calls to deport them, is reminiscent of far-right ideologies that demarcate Muslims as inherently foreign, and their place in Australia conditional if not outright objectionable.

5. The role of the online environment in promoting extremism

The online environment plays a significant role in proliferating extremist right-wing content. Online environments embolden individuals to adopt extreme beliefs, and provide an environment to express those beliefs under the protection of anonymity. For Muslim communities, online spaces can be extremely hostile and high-risk environments for abuse.

According to the latest Islamophobia in Australia Report, 44% of reported incidents occurred online. As the Report states,

Of the online perpetrators, one-third (36%) were associated with far-right groups and/or ideology. Social media provided a fertile ground for hate groups through the free exchange of divisive and hateful viewpoints, which are largely unregulated and unmonitored. Far-right alternative media and social media outlets reframe, recontextualise and reproduce news stories by carefully selecting information from non-mainstream sources to justify their ideological agenda. Accordingly, news items appearing to be neutral are recrafted as partisan and combined with disinformation and propaganda for the public to consume (Iner, Mason, Smith, 2023).

As more and more of services, social interactions, and media move online, Muslim communities are at high risk of exposure to far-right threats and abuse. Again, the Christchurch Massacre provides an example of how online environments are used to share and promote extremist content targeting Muslim communities. The Australian terrorist is known to have been active in online far-right spaces, and following the attack, it was these spaces that commended and valorised his actions (Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques, 2019). The use of online spaces to detail the terrorist's actions in detail was not limited to right-wing spaces. Footage of the massacre was livestreamed and then republished in other formats online and in the media. The immediate impacts to the victims, and the repeated exposure to the extremely distressing footage has had severe physical and mental impacts on the victims, their families, and surrounding communities. It also provides content for other extremists to aspire to, and several 'copycat' attacks that cite the Australian terrorist as inspiration have already occurred (Beutel, 2019; Burke, 2019; Cecco, 2023). Online and in internet forums, right-wing extremists are inciting each other to commit large-scale acts of violence against Muslims, Jews, and other minority communities around the globe.

With the rise of social media has come increased exposure to and engagement with right-wing 'manosphere'² influencers. Young men in particular are highly vulnerable to these influencers, as they appeal to men's real – though misplaced – feelings of rejection, alienation, pessimism about the future, and mental health struggles (Rich & Bujalka, 2023). One particularly notable character that has been highly influential in men's adoption of increasingly right-wing extremist beliefs is Andrew Tate. Tate, a former kickboxer turned social media personality, has gained an incredible amount of popularity with men. Tate is a self-professed sexist and misogynist who promotes a message of ultra-masculinity. He consistently objectifies and sexualises women, and spreads racist, homophobic, and transphobic messages. Andrew Tate has been highly influential among young men, including in Australia. In AMWCHR's work in Victorian schools and with parents, we have heard a concerning number of stories about the increasing influence of Andrew Tate's racism and misogyny in Australian classrooms. These experiences are not isolated, with just this week the ABC reporting that Tate's ideology is driving sexual harassment, sexism, and misogyny in Australian classrooms (Herman and Yussuf, 2024). Andrew Tate has also been deliberately appealing to young Muslim men and promoting (and celebrating) the misconception that Islam permits violence against women (Haq, 2023); another example in

² The 'manosphere' is the umbrella term for the many reactionary 'men's rights' movements that have emerged in response to feminism, women's empowerment, and social justice movements.

which disparate concepts and ideologies can find alignment in online spaces, unhinged from the reality of how misaligned they actually are.

6. The terms and operation of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023

We appreciate that the federal government is taking seriously the increasing threat of Nazi groups and far-right organisations. However there remain some concerns with the Bill, which includes:

- that the expansion of the offence to include ‘praising’ the doing of a terrorist act may be misappropriated to target Muslim communities. For example, speaking supportively of legitimate social and political resistance in Muslim societies may be misconstrued as supporting “terrorism”. We have seen over the past several decades the disproportionate focus on Muslim societies and individuals being identified with terrorism.
- The legislation bans the display of the ISIS flag, and establishes that anything which is likely to be confused with or mistaken for the flag is prohibited. This latter aspect is concerning, as the flag contains little else other than the shahada, written in Arabic text, on a black background. The shahada, or testimony of faith, is an important piece of text in Islam, and is commonly displayed in books, artwork, mosques, and in people’s homes. Linking it explicitly in the legislation with a terrorist group gives the incorrect impression that the shahada is a symbol of violence. This is the explicit targeting of an important part of the Islamic faith, and has the very real potential to legitimise and increase Islamophobia including myths and stereotypes surrounding Muslim communities and terrorism. As the Islamic Council of Victoria noted in their Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security related to this amendment:

[T]he banning of the ISIS flag, as provided for in the Bill, is impractical. Paragraph 80.2E(d) establishes that any ‘thing’ which is likely to be confused with or mistaken for the ISIS flag is prohibited... It is likely that many ‘things’ will closely resemble the ISIS flag - which again, has no distinguishing elements - where the maker of the thing is either completely oblivious to the similarity, or has no express intention to imitate ISIS. There are many ‘things’, such as calligraphic art, which members of the Australian community, the vast majority of whom do not read Arabic, would mistake as the ISIS flag (ICV, 2023).

7. Measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people

Addressing far-right extremism is vital to prevent further breakdown in social cohesion and resurgence or growth of other extremist ideologies. Governments should look at how their own actions, legislation, policies, and practices are fuelling right-wing extremist movements. Normalising Islamophobia directly contributes to the emboldening of far-right movements and violence against Muslim communities.

Young people are particularly at risk of developing links with right-wing extremist movements, and especially young men (Nilan et al., 2023). Young men who feel disconnected are prone to seeking out ‘identity-building narratives’ centred around the development of a community of individuals holding similarly extreme beliefs (Collins, 2024). These environments create a sense of unity within the right-wing ecosystem, and directly respond to young men’s misplaced feelings of ostracisation and victimhood (Agius, Edney-Browne, Nicholas, 2022). Muslim and migrant communities are used as a scapegoat for both individualised as well as social problems.

As right-wing movements continue to grow and expand, we remain concerned that the focus is still primarily on Muslim communities. Over-policing and surveillance are an ongoing issue impacting Muslim communities (Akbarzadeh, 2020). In February of this year, for example, a Melbourne magistrate found that counter-terrorism police ‘fed’ a 14-year-old autistic boy’s ‘fixation’ with Islamic State and then arrested him on terrorism charges (Crowe, 2024). The Magistrate also found that police intentionally delayed charging the boy until after he turned 14 to avoid the *doli incapax* defence, which presumes a child cannot be held responsible for committing a crime (Crowe, 2024). There is a high degree of bias and profiling of Muslim communities when it comes to extremist movements, and this targeting has fractured trust in public institutions including police. Experiences from Muslim communities that were and continue to be targeted for both prevention as well as surveillance show that building trust with communities is a complex and problematic role for police. Community leaders and organisations that offer alternatives to disenfranchised youth, education around online manipulation, and greater proactive anti-racism education in schools and institutions are vitally needed.

When it comes to programs that address the extremist beliefs that young people hold, again, these programs are often framed as responses to ‘Islamic’ extremist ideologies, which creates a misconception that Islam and Muslims pose a pronounced threat to society and Australia. We suggest that programs must be designed to respond to broader extremist and radicalisation threats amongst young people.

There must also be greater coordination between police forces, social services, and community organisations when designing and implementing extremism prevention or response programs for young people. Increased funding is required to support an effective multi-agency approach with focus on addressing underlying issues of disenfranchised youth through education and psycho-social support.

Conclusion

Far-right ideologies continue to be an ongoing threat to Australian Muslim communities’ safety and wellbeing. Right-wing extremist movements disrupt social cohesion, spread anti-Muslim hate, and prevent individuals and communities as a whole from achieving full equality and participation in Australian society.

While far-right extremist beliefs pose the biggest threat to minority communities in Australia, the right-wing ecosystem as a whole must also be looked at to highlight how more moderate beliefs

reinforce, legitimise, and perpetuate extremist ideologies. The Committee should take note of harmful rhetoric from Australian media, politicians, and public figures, and how this rhetoric normalises the targeting and scapegoating of Muslim, migrant and refugee communities.

We also encourage the Committee to use a gendered and intersectional lens when looking into the impacts and risks of right-wing extremism in Australia. As this submission has shown, Muslim and minority women – as well as women in general – are implicitly and explicitly targets of far-right ideologies and movements. With the increase of anti-feminist right-wing movements in Australia, progress towards gender equality and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children is undermined.

We hope this contribution towards the Inquiry supports the development of a robust and effective response to the threat of right-wing extremist movements in Australia. Without such a response, Muslim communities' safety and wellbeing remains at risk.

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