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

Why 'Yes' Matters: Understanding Muslim communities' knowledge and needs surrounding affirmative consent

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About us

This report has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). 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, 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. We offer 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 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. This report is designed to highlight learnings and insights from our research with community to contribute to greater awareness and understanding of affirmative consent education needs among Muslim young people and parents.

Acknowledgement of Country

This report 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.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Sexual violence in Australia is a serious form of abuse with that can have lifelong impacts for victim-survivors. While increasing initiatives to reduce sexual violence have been developed over the past several decades, data shows that rates of sexual violence have remained steady (Powell et al., 2023). At the same time, the National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey shows that up to four in ten Australians mistrust women's reports of sexual violence (Minter et al., 2021). Evidently, more needs to be done to intervene in and prevent sexual violence from occurring, increase accountability, and reshape harmful attitudes that contribute to a culture of acceptance.

In 2023, the state of Victoria introduced legislative reforms to better support judicial responses to sexual violence. Within these reforms, there has been a shift to an affirmative consent model. Affirmative consent means if someone wants to engage in a sexual act with another person, they must actively gain consent, rather than rely on the other person to give their consent. These reforms also introduced new laws prohibiting the non-consensual non-use, tampering, or removal of a condom (i.e., “stealthing”), and strengthened image-based abuse laws. While legal protections are important to prevent sexual violence and support victim-survivors, it is critical that information regarding consent and any associated legislation is shared with communities in ways that promote true understanding across diverse cultural contexts. To achieve this, community-led and grassroots organisations such as the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights are critical as conduits to communities who may face a myriad of barriers with accessing accurate and important information about legislative changes.

In response to the introduction of affirmative consent legislation changes, and to inform our approach to education and engagement within the Muslim community, the Why Yes Matters research project set out to explore the levels of knowledge and awareness among young Muslims and Muslim mothers surrounding affirmative consent, sexual violence, and help-seeking. Understanding and addressing the consent education needs of Muslim young people in Australia requires an approach that considers their unique cultural, religious, and social positioning. Yet to date, virtually no research exists which focuses specifically on the Australian Muslim communities’ understanding of consent and knowledge around help-seeking for sexual violence. This research aims to provide recommendations drawing from our consultations with community on how best to support their engagement in open and early communication around sex and consent, develop support networks, and strengthen current and future sexual violence prevention and response initiatives.

Executive Summary

The 'Why Yes Matters' research project contributes to the evidence base on Victorian Muslim communities' understanding of sex and consent to identify education, support, and sexual violence prevention needs. The data for this research has been gathered through focus groups with 37 Muslim mothers, young women, and young men from diverse backgrounds, including migrants and refugees who speak languages other than English.

It is important to acknowledge that, while there is diversity within the research sample, the views presented by the participants may not be representative of wider Victorian Muslim communities. However, they do provide an indication of areas for which additional resources for Muslim parents and young people are required.

Results from focus group discussions showed that participants in this research were enthusiastic about the prospect of further education on affirmative consent. However, there were several knowledge gaps and issues which were identified. These include:

- addressing existing discomfort and stigma surrounding discussions on affirmative consent between parents and children;
- building knowledge on consent within the context of marital relationships.
- providing further information on the meaning of affirmative consent and how it differs from previous understandings of consent;
- the right to withdraw consent (consent as an ongoing process); and
- where to get help/where to access professional support.

Participants provided valuable suggestions and contributions on how to message affirmative consent within their communities. All focus groups spoke about the importance of having open communication and discussing affirmative consent, particularly with younger generations. Many participants also believed that bringing religion and religious values into the discussion may help to frame and legitimise the importance of affirmative consent and appropriate behaviour in romantic and sexual relationships.

A theme which emerged in terms of educating young Muslims on affirmative consent was the importance of conversations around sex and consent beginning at an earlier age, and education being facilitated by a trusted person. Trusted people included parents, friends, and teachers. Parents themselves wished to be supported to have these conversations with their children in order to establish open communication around consent in their homes. Engaging 'trusted people' – namely parents – and building their capacity to message affirmative consent to the people in their lives will facilitate wider understanding within Muslim communities.

Further, results from focus groups suggest that increased focus should be given to identifying and breaking down gendered stigmas and expectations related to how individuals are able to express themselves within their sexual relationships. Counteracting gendered norms will ensure that the foundation is set for individuals to communicate with one another, create healthy boundaries, and seek information on their partners' boundaries and expectations. Emphasis should be given to consent and communication within the context of marital relationships.

Participants did not relay many fears or concerns about messaging affirmative consent to their communities. On the contrary, they were enthusiastic about the concept, and some parents expressed an interest in engaging with the resources and workshops produced by AMWCHR's Why Yes Matters project. The response from participants was promising and indicates that these are issues that parents are likely already thinking about but are unsure of how to broach with their children.

Participants did not relay many fears or concerns about messaging affirmative consent to their communities. On the contrary, they were enthusiastic about the concept

Participants asked the facilitators what more they should do if their child, friend, or other person comes to them and discloses sexual violence, and whether there were any services available. It may be useful to provide further educational programs for parents, and in particular, information on any services that can provide support from a culturally sensitive lens.

Communities may also benefit from information on what to do if their child has engaged in harmful sexual behaviours, how to respond, and what services are on offer. It is important to keep this possibility in parents' mind to encourage preventative work through educating children on affirmative consent and healthy relationships. This will also be a proactive step towards promoting accountability and behavioural change when sexual violence does occur.

Based on these findings, AMWCHR makes the following recommendations to improve community knowledge surrounding affirmative consent:

Recommendation 1

Local, state, and federal governments should provide further funding opportunities for community organisations to develop culturally appropriate sex education and affirmative consent programs for Muslim parents and young people.

Affirmative consent programs should be delivered by community-led organisations and take place in community settings. Such programs should address the knowledge gaps and needs identified in this research and engage Muslim parents as well as young people of all ages, with age-appropriate content.

Recommendation 2

Schools should develop and/or update sex and consent education programs, and provide training to teachers delivering curriculum to ensure inclusivity of Muslim students.

Both public and Islamic schools require new or updated curriculums to ensure sex education for Muslim students is inclusive, culturally sensitive, and consistent. Schools should look to specialist organisations, such as AMWCHR, to upskill teachers through training to ensure that they are aware of and sensitive to the needs of Muslim students in their classrooms and are confident to share information in an inclusive and open manner.

Recommendation 3

Further research is required to explore Muslim women's experiences of sexual violence, help-seeking behaviours, and service quality.

In Australia, there is little to no research on Muslim women's experiences of sexual violence, help-seeking behaviours, and the quality of the services designed to support them. This is a significant evidence gap, and the findings of this research further support the need for deeper exploration of this topic to highlight preventative opportunities and identify support gaps within response systems.

Background

Sexual violence in an Australian context

In Australia, sexual violence remains a common and ongoing issue, with an estimated 22 per cent of women and 6.1 per cent of men aged 18 and above having experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). Sexual violence is a gendered issue; the majority of victim-survivors are women, and the majority of perpetrators are men (ABS, 2021). Young women report higher rates of sexual violence than women in older age brackets, with recent data showing that 12.4 per cent of women aged between 18 to 24 have experienced sexual violence in the past 24 months, compared to 3 per cent of Australian women as a whole (ABS, 2021). Several factors can contribute to or exacerbate young women's risk or experience of sexual violence, including age, living arrangements (e.g., being in out of home care), the presence of mental and/or physical disability, drug and alcohol use, and experiencing an abusive intimate relationship (Barbara et al. 2022). Young people evidently have specific support needs to minimise risk and decrease experiences of sexual abuse.

While Australia has population-wide statistics on prevalence of sexual violence, this data is not disaggregated by religion, language, or cultural background. This means that we have limited understanding of whether or not Muslim women, including young women, experience sexual violence at a higher or lower rate than non-Muslim Australians. What we do know is that Muslim women and young women experience heightened barriers to preventative and responsive support. These barriers can include structural issues such as a lack of culturally appropriate or in-language supports, and potential exposure to racism and Islamophobia within services designed to help victim-survivors (Afrouz, 2023). Socio-cultural barriers can also decrease reporting or help-seeking; such as a person's understanding and knowledge of what constitutes sexual violence, feelings of shame, and stigma (Alliman & Ostapiej-Piatkowski, 2011). Disclosure of sexual violence may also be impacted in cultures or societies where virginity is important. As abstaining from sex before marriage is strongly encouraged in some cultural and religious groups within the Muslim community (Marcotte, 2015; Wray et al., 2014), in these instances, victim-survivors may fear victim-blaming, and that the disclosure of sexual violence will impact their community and/or familial standing (Sciarrino & Davis, 2023). These issues can lead to Muslim women, like many women, choosing not to disclose or report sexual violence.

Unfortunately, rates of sexual violence in Australia have not meaningfully decreased in the past two decades (Flood, 2024; Mooy, 2023). Some research suggests that stable rates of sexual violence may be more indicative of higher reporting rather than higher rates – and therefore indicative of a positive cultural shift in which victim-survivors are more willing to come forward and access support. However, the most recent The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) also identified that four in ten Australians mistrust women's reports of sexual violence (Minter et al., 2021). This suggests we still have a way to go to better educate and inform people about the reality of sexual violence and to support victim-survivors.

Prevention and education to reduce and address sexual violence

In Australia, preventing domestic, family, and sexual violence predominantly relies upon an ecological framework, where prevention initiatives are targeted at an individual, community, structural, and societal level (Our Watch, 2021). Prevention initiatives grounded within ecological frameworks aim to address factors that may influence sexual violence perpetration at multiple levels of social ecology. This includes individual and interpersonal factors (e.g., gendered beliefs that support male entitlement, harmful use of alcohol or drugs, jealousy, and controlling behaviours), as well as more wider scale issues that correlate with higher rates of domestic and sexual violence at a population level (e.g., social norms that devalue women, lack of supports for victim-survivors, high rates of gender inequality) (Stockman et al., 2023; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025).

One important element of prevention initiatives in Australia are community and school-based educational programs. These programs aim to address the underlying drivers of sexual violence (such as gender inequality), build understanding of consent and healthy relationships, and improve capacity of victim-survivors to access support if needed.

A key foundation of such programs is sex education. In Australia, sex education programs have been integrated into the public schooling system. In Victoria specifically, all public schools are required to deliver sex education within their Health and Physical Education curriculum, and Respectful Relationships Education - a family and sexual violence primary prevention program - is a core component of the Victorian Curriculum from prep to year 12 (Victoria Government, 2025. However parents do have the option to remove their children from these classes (Department of Health, 2023). Despite there being a structure in place to deliver classes, a critique of Victoria's sex education programs is that the provision is inconsistent, insufficient time is allocated to the programs, the teachers delivering the content are not specially trained to teach sex education, and students consequently finish schooling feeling unprepared to manage their sexual and reproductive health and safety (Family Planning Victoria et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2022; Ollis, 2014). These programs are also relatively generalist, and may not address community-specific education needs for Muslim young people or teach content in a way that is sensitive to certain cultural or religious beliefs and norms surrounding sex.

While Islamically, it is not discouraged to learn about and discuss sex, sexuality, and sexual health, some parents within Muslim communities may be apprehensive or even opposed to sex education being taught to their children. The cause of this apprehension differs but can be driven by misunderstandings around the intention of sex education classes, and concerns that the content will be over-sexualised and contrary to cultural and/or religious beliefs surrounding sex (Orgocka, 2004; Halstead, 1997). Like parents, teachers and school administrative staff may also contribute to misunderstandings and misconceptions related to sex education for Muslim students (Jeffrey & Sanjakdar, 2001). The proliferation of such misinformation can result in heightened stigma around sex education, and may cause Muslim students to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and fearful of engaging in programs (Jeffrey & Sanjakdar, 2001; Orgocka, 2004).

Research has shown that engagement in Australia's school-based relationships and sex education programs is associated with more positive outcomes in terms of students' sexual and reproductive health, confidence to communicate in sexual relationships, and exposure to unwanted sexual interactions (Kauer et al., 2025). Where Muslim students' parents remove them from classes due to fears around cultural appropriateness, Muslim young people are at risk of knowledge disparities around sex and consent relative to their non-Muslim peers (Orgocka, 2004).

Muslim young people are also uniquely positioned in that their sexual relationships are more likely to be happening within the context of marriage. Over 20 per cent of young Australian Muslims (18-25) are married, compared with only 5 per cent of the overall population aged between 18 and 25 (ABS, 2016a; ABS, 2016b). The tendency for young Muslims to marry at higher rates at earlier ages necessitates further evidence related to young Muslims' knowledge and education needs surrounding consent and bodily autonomy within marital relationships. This includes understandings of consent related to the use, non-use, or removal of contraception. This is particularly important for a community where there is a strong expectation and belief that marriage should be a prerequisite for sex, and many young people - though not all - adhere to this belief (Smerecnik et al., 2010). A foundational principle of Australia's Draft National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children is a recognition that culturally diverse communities have specific support and prevention needs with relation to sexual violence which are not addressed by generalised strategies (Department of Social Services, 2022). Evidently, Muslim communities require specialised, tailored programs, information, and resources that speak to their unique contexts and positions.

Victoria's affirmative consent reforms

In 2023, legislative reforms were introduced in Victoria to better support judicial responses to sexual violence. These changes were made in response to the Victorian Law Reform Commission report - Improving the Justice System Response to Sexual Offences (Sexual Assault Services Victoria [SASVic], 2023). Within these reforms, there has been a shift to an affirmative consent model. Under affirmative consent, agreement to each sexual act must be actively communicated, and if someone wants to engage in a sexual act with another person, they must actively gain consent, rather than rely on the other person to give their consent. (Sexual Health Victoria [SHV], 2023). These reforms also introduced new laws prohibiting the non-consensual non-use, tampering, or removal of a condom (i.e., "stealthing"), and strengthened laws for victims of image-based abuse (SASVic, 2023; SHV, 2023). While a welcome change, the laws and reforms may not realise their full potential if not supported by community education. As explored above, young Muslims have specific education needs due to their cultural and religious contexts and, in some cases, inconsistent exposure to sexual education (Meldrum et al., 2016). If affirmative consent education is not effectively tailored for Muslim communities, the reforms may remain unknown or lacking in relevance, leaving Muslim young people excluded from any positive outcomes from the reforms.

These are issues that require a community-led response from organisations with a strong understanding of how these structural barriers and cultural factors impact young Muslims' understanding of consent and their ability to access support. Unfortunately, the evidence base for the development of such programs is not yet robust, as existing research is often on a small-scale, outdated, or aggregated with data on migrant, refugee, and/or CALD communities broadly. Consequently, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights sought to build on this evidence base by exploring how to effectively engage Muslim communities to improve knowledge related to sex education, affirmative consent reforms, and help-seeking for sexual violence.

Research methods

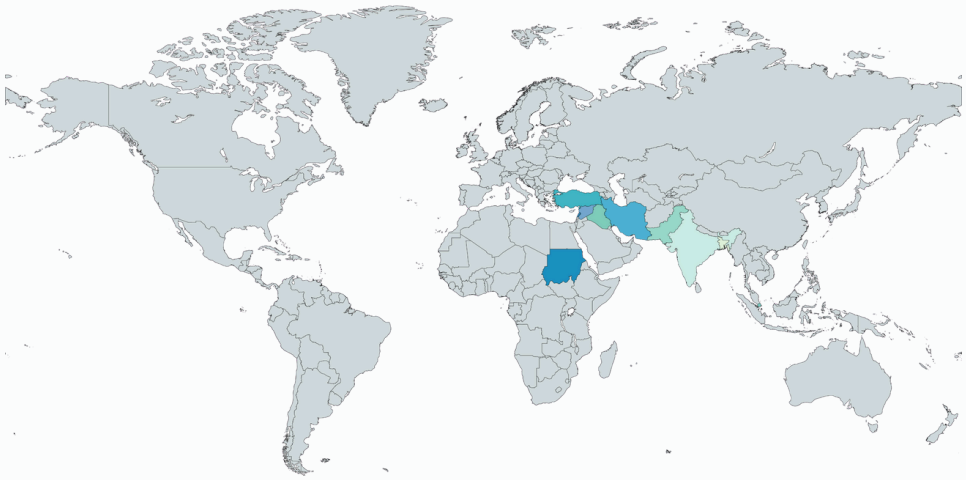
The 'Why Yes Matters' research project builds the evidence base on Australian Muslim communities' understanding of sex and consent to identify education, support, and prevention needs. Specifically, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Victorian Muslim communities understand consent and affirmative consent, and are there any knowledge gaps
2. Where are Victorian Muslim young people receiving information around consent?
3. What role are Muslim parents current playing in consent education within homes?
4. What additional support, education, and initiatives are required to facilitate greater understanding of affirmative consent within Victorian Muslim communities?
5. Are there any specific cultural and/or religious issues to be mindful of when messaging affirmative consent to Muslim communities?

The data for this research was gathered through focus groups with Muslim mothers, young women, and young men. Participants were recruited through community networks via WhatsApp, phone, and word of mouth. Recruitment materials were also shared on social media, through email with sector partners, and on university digital noticeboards.

In total, 37 participants were recruited for this study. This included 35 women and two men. All participants identified as Muslim, were migrants/refugees themselves or in a small number of cases were children of migrants/refugees. Participants described their cultural backgrounds as originating from:

- Pakistan
- Lebanon
- Turkey
- Iraq
- Syria
- Iran
- Sudan
- Maldives
- Singapore
- India
- Bangladesh



While some participants were Australian born, many came here as migrants or refugees. Approximately half of participants required an interpreter.

Focus groups took place both online and in-person. The participants were asked about their own views and their communities' understanding/knowledge on:

- affirmative consent;
- sexual violence;
- cultural, gendered, and religious expectations/stigmas;
- consent in the context of marriage and online communication;
- normalised behaviours around consent; and
- help-seeking resources and behaviours.

Vignettes were also used to explore participants' understanding of consent to allow them to state their views and understandings in response to specific scenarios. This provided additional clarity and elicited further discussion from the groups in a way that was less personal and therefore more comfortable. Of additional interest to the research team was whether participants had received sex and consent education within the home, and, for the parents involved in this study, whether they felt comfortable providing this education themselves.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the focus group data was undertaken to identify and highlight common themes and patterns in participants' knowledge and understanding of affirmative consent, as well as norms related to sex and intimacy.

Due to the diversity of Muslim communities, it is impossible to make conclusive and generalisable statements that represent the needs of all community members. Though this research highlights important trends that may be reflected throughout community, the results should be read as indicative only. Further research, with a larger and more representative sample size, would be beneficial to test the existence of the trends more widely, as well as identify additional ones.

Results

Parent-child education around sex and consent

Participants were asked where they received information about sex, and whether parents in their communities provided sex education within the home. Virtually no participants stated that their parents discussed sex and consent with them, nor did the parents speak to their children about sex. In some cases, when participants' parents had brought up the topic, it was spoken about indirectly and through innuendos. One participant, whose mother had attempted to have a discussion around sex once before, did so in a way which 'was so confusing that it actually made things worse, not better', due to her reluctance to speak about it using direct language (Participant 2, Young Women's Group 2). The young men who participated in a focus group similarly stated that their parents resisted bringing up sex with them. Instead, if it was spoken about at all, it was done so in a 'hush-hush' way, again, using innuendo and metaphor. The mothers who participated also reflected on their own experiences of sexual education – or lack thereof – from their parents. In the Arabic-speaking mother's focus group, participants shared that in their culture, 'there are no words to talk about sex' (Participant 1, Mother's Group 2).

Participants believed that parents resisted talking about sex with their children due to the presence of taboos surrounding the topic. Interestingly, the majority of the focus groups also stated that when it comes to discussing sex with daughters, parents avoid the topic to prevent girls from 'getting any ideas.' Participants stated that there is a perception within their families or communities that bringing up the topic with daughters might make them curious, leading to experimentation. By the same token, one group also said that daughters asking questions about sex leads to parents becoming 'suspicious' that their child is 'up to something'. This results in a lack of communication and curiosity between parents and children. Many participants also said that the only time this was seen as appropriate for young people to be given information or to ask about sex was immediately prior to getting married. One participant shared they didn't learn about sex until their wedding day, and that 'my mother didn't explain to me what would happen. She sent my sister' (Participant 3, Mothers Group 2). Virtually all groups – including the parents themselves – noted a generational divide in how sex was spoken about. From the parents' perspective, young people were seen as increasingly open and educated on the topic. In some cases, parents believed that the shame in broaching conversations about sex was coming from them, rather than their children. As one participant said,

> ***Our children are more open, and you can talk with them, and they will understand. But it's us who are very shy because in our culture you can't discuss these things very openly... these days, I'm more embarrassed than my kids to discuss these things.***
>
> ***[Participant 8 , Mothers Group 1]***

The younger generation's comparative openness to sex education was consistent throughout the focus group discussions. However, parents recognised that having conversations around sex and consent was important in spite of their discomfort. Parents in all focus group discussions asked the researchers for suggestions on how to go about broaching these topics with their children. Additionally, some parents were appreciative of the education that their children were receiving in schools because it lay the groundwork for opening and continuing conversations around sex in the home – particularly where parents feel the need to supplement school-based education with education on cultural and religious beliefs surrounding sex.

In all, however, participants believed that young people were receiving most of their education about sex through friends, school, and digital media. Participants believed that information sharing in friendship circles was the most comfortable way to share knowledge on the topic. Furthermore, young people were comparatively open to having these discussions and wanted to know more about sex and consent, whether or not they were engaged or married.

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Community expectations about sex in marriage

There were clear gendered expectations when it came to the topic of sex in marriage. Participants almost unanimously agreed that within their communities, there is a perception that women – or wives – must always be 'ready' for sex and to fulfil their husbands' sexual wants and needs. Participants believed that their communities viewed women as passive rather than active sexual actors.

> *Participant 9:* ***In our culture, women hesitate to initiate.***
>
> *Participant 5:* ***Sometimes in most cases, it's not like men force you, but women are hesitant to tell [their husbands] what they need... we women are shy to say what we need, what our body needs. It's not in our culture.***
>
> *Participant 3:* ***She can provoke her husband, but she can't take initiative.***
>
> *[Mothers Group 1]*

These participants believed that it reflects badly upon women if they show their interest in sex or communicate what they want and need from their sexual interactions. This is despite, as one participant said, women being 'willing on the inside'. Conversely, participants believed that men are able to 'outwardly express [their] needs'. These norms and ideas surrounding women's sexuality have the potential to result in a breakdown of communication between partners when one side is unable to express themselves. Some participants were already aware of this risk and spoke of normalising women's open communication with their partners. As one participant said,

> ***We also need to think what the best thing for us is... you don't have to cook every day, you don't have to clean every day. Sometimes you have to look after yourself... intimacy doesn't just come from the husband. Intimacy has to come from mutual connection.***
>
> ***[Participant 9 , Mothers Group 2]***

Participants' understanding of consent

To gather insight into participants' knowledge on consent, they were asked about their definition of consent, affirmative consent, and what they understood consent to mean in practice. They were also presented with several vignettes (Appendix A) which depicted non-consensual sexual acts and asked what they thought about these scenarios, any specific issues that stood out to them, and how they thought consent played out in these cases. In this way, the scenarios acted as calibrating questions to gain a more comprehensive view of participants' true understanding of consent. The below sub-topics outline participants' knowledge on consent broadly as well as specific contexts and characteristics of consent.

Participant definitions of consent and affirmative consent

The clearest theme that emerged in participants' definitions of consent was that it is about communication between partners. The majority of the focus groups raised the topic of communication when coming to a definition of what consent is and how it is established – in both sexual and non-sexual interactions. Participants believed, ultimately, that consent was about coming to an agreement and gaining permission to proceed with a sexual encounter. Some participants believed that consent could be obtained through body language – such as was the case with the second Mother's group, who stated that in their communities, there is no word for 'consent', but the concept exists, and it is 'more about touch'.

Other participants believed that consent requires a verbal component where people 'agree mutually'. When asked explicitly about their definitions of consent, only one participant raised the importance of consent being an ongoing process that must be sought before and during every interaction.

> ***Only one participant had heard of the term 'affirmative consent'... that only one participant had heard of this term before indicates that this is not a widely known or understood concept.***

Only one participant had heard of the term 'affirmative consent'. Despite hearing about the concept before, this participant remained unsure about the definition, guessing that it means 'showing excitement from both parties' (Participant 1, Young Men's Group). When asked to take a guess at what affirmative consent means, most focus groups and participants speculated that affirmative consent may be related to gaining explicit verbal consent.1 Interestingly, one participant believed that affirmative consent might relate to

gaining 'consent after the fact' (Participant 1, Young Women's Group 1), while another guessed it to mean obtaining written consent. Participants were curious about the concept and wanted to know more about how affirmative consent differed from common understandings of consent. However, that only one participant had heard of this term before indicates that this is not a widely known or understood concept. It also raises questions about how to communicate the concept to audiences from non-English-speaking backgrounds where consent may not have a direct translation.

Consent within the context of marriage

Participants were asked whether they and their communities believe that husbands and wives have the right to say 'no' to sex in marriage. Responses demonstrated a prevailing tension between women's theoretical right to refuse sex and their actual rights and abilities in practice. Although it is always impossible to generalise – and several participants wished to make it clear that within every relationship there is varying scope for women to say no to sex – broadly, there was a consistent belief that within their communities, women often need to have a 'reason' to refuse sex.

> *Participant 1:* ***Women are working all day – cooking, cleaning, everything. But the man won't accept if you say, 'I'm tired, I'm sick, I did too much this morning'. No. Your job will be finished with him.***
>
> **[...]**
>
> *Participant 2:* ***Not all men are the same and expect women to be ready all the time. Some men, they understand when the woman is tired, she's done a lot of work.***
>
> *Facilitator 1:* ***So, it depends on the man?***
>
> *Participant 2:* ***Yes.***
>
> *Participant 3:* ***He needs to see something. If he comes and sees the house clean, if you've made enough food for the kids and him, then he will understand that you're tired. But if your house is dirty, or there's no food, then what's the reason for you being tired?***
>
> *[Mothers' Group 2]*

> *Facilitator 1:* ***In your communities, are there any expectations on a husband or a wife when it comes to sex within a marriage?***
>
> *Participant 1:* ***Yes. I would think that the females are expected to just agree with whatever the man wants... And you can say no, but you should have a good reason to say no. It shouldn't be just because you're withholding sex because you want something, or just because you're not up for it, but maybe like actual illnesses and stuff.***
>
> ***[...]***

> *Participant 2:* ***I do believe that as [Participant 1] said, there has to be a reason. If you say you don't feel like it, I honestly don't know if that's something that you can do in a relationship or not. But personally, when I'm speaking to someone regarding a future relationship, that is something that I always take into account. Are they somebody that would enforce such rules?***
>
> *[Young Women's Group 2]*

As shown by Participant 2's statement above that she would seek a relationship where a man did not enforce the 'rule' that women cannot say no to sex, there is evidently a difference between what participants viewed as 'allowed' in their culture and/or faith, and what they would wish for in their own lives and in terms of their own bodily autonomy. Importantly, participants shared that within their own marriages and relationships, they retained a high degree of agency with regards to their sexual interactions.
As there often is, there was an interplay between culture, religion, and individual belief when it came to a woman's capacity to refuse sex within marriage. For some participants, the obligation put on women to submit to their husband's sexual advances was driven by religious interpretation, while for others, it was driven by culture. However, as mentioned, participants didn't necessarily feel this pressure in their own lives.

> *Facilitator 1:* ***Do husbands and wives both have the right to say no to sex?***
>
> *Participant 5:* ***Religious point of view, yes, but not cultural point of view. I don't think so. It depends on person to person, depends on family to family. If you asked me my personal view, I can say 'no' any time. My husband doesn't mind.***
>
> *[Mothers' Group 1]*

It is also worth noting that two participants brought up the topic of marital rape explicitly, though from differing perspectives. One participant, speaking of the country in which they grew up, said that there remains a belief among some people that 'when two people marry, they can have sex any time [and] it's not rape even if the other person did not consent' (Participant 1, Young Men's Group).

Although, he also noted that this was a topic that has been given more attention recently. He also made it clear that sex without consent in marriage 'is still rape'. The other participant who spoke of marital rape, however, believed it to be antithetical to the concept of marriage, stating, 'I cannot imagine, especially in a marriage and in a normal relationship, something like [rape] happening… I cannot imagine a couple being that dysfunctional' (Participant 2, Young Women's Group 2). This suggests a more idealised understanding of marriage which may not necessarily align with a reality in which marital rape can and does occur.

Withdrawing consent

The topic of withdrawn consent was raised in the focus groups through a vignette (refer to Appendix A) in which a recently married couple are becoming intimate for the first time. Part way through, the wife says, 'wait. You're hurting me', yet the husband continues regardless. Following the interaction, the wife asks the husband why he didn't stop when she said she was in pain, to which he apologises and said he did hear her, but didn't realise she wanted him to stop, and that he 'was almost finished anyway'.

Participants' responses to this scenario were unequivocal in their agreement that the husband should have stopped when his wife indicated she was in pain. Interestingly, the Arabic-speaking mothers' group was more focussed on coming to a practical solution to the pain, such as using 'cream, oil', 'tak[ing] a break', and stopping to 'build the connection', rather than the topic of whether or not consent was withdrawn in this interaction. All other focus groups, however, believed that this interaction went from consensual to non-consensual once there was an indication that unwanted pain was involved:

> *Participant 2:* ***I also think, like, in his statement, when he said that he was almost finished anyway, the word 'anyway', implies maybe that he knew she was suffering, but thought that she could continue to suffer for a little bit more because he was almost finished. So, I think he actually did know that she withdrew consent, because he said he was almost finished 'anyway'.***
>
> *[Young Women's Group 1]*

> *Participant 4:* ***I think they started off with a mutual consent. He was okay with that. But in the meanwhile, when she was having the pain, [he] should have stopped... I think that was the point she was not consenting anymore, or she needs time.***
>
> *[Mothers' Group 1]*

> *Participant 2:* ***When she directly said, "wait", he does have to wait at least... I would say that it started consensual and it was absolutely non-consensual at the end.***
>
> *[Young Women's Group 2]*

One participant in the young men's focus group was particularly adamant that this was a scenario which demonstrated a withdrawal of consent and spoke at length about the limited understanding of withdrawn consent among a lot of men. In his words,

> ***This is clearly a case of a non-consensual act. I think it highlights our ignorance towards, you know, at first you give consent to sex but then at one point during engaging in the sexual activity, you withdraw your consent.***

The other person still does not understand, or even if they understand, they fail to respect your consent. Many people still think that consent, once it's given, 'yes' means a 'yes', and it will stay so throughout. But focus should be given to the fact that 'yes' can change to 'no' at any point. And I think in our community where consent is ultimately not a much talked about topic, the idea of withdrawing consent at any point of sexual activity is not there at all, at least in my community.

[Participant 1 , Young Men's Group]

The above suggestion that there is limited understanding of withdrawn consent within this participant's cultural community indicates a need for educational initiatives surrounding the nature of consent as an ongoing process. However, the responses from the young women and parents to this scenario also indicate that there is a good level of awareness that consent can be discontinued at any point in the sexual encounter. At the very least, participants believed that the husband in the scenario should have stopped to check-in with his partner. This follows with participants' stated belief that consent requires open communication between partners to ensure that all involved are comfortable. It may be the case that the awareness of consent can be withdrawn at any point is gendered, though the sample size for this study is too small to test this.

Stealthing – intentional non-use, tampering, or removal of a condom

To gauge the relevance of the new anti-stealthing legislation for Muslim communities, participants were asked about their communities' views on the use of contraception, including condoms. The majority of participants stated that there was no stigma around the use of contraception in their communities if the people using the contraception are married. Due to beliefs around the impermissibility of sex outside of the context of marriage, it is largely frowned upon for unmarried women to use contraception, unless for a health reason – e.g., use of the contraceptive pill or other hormonal birth control to manage reproductive illnesses. This indicates that stealthing is a topic that Muslim communities may need to be widely educated on. And indeed, participants' responses when presented with a scenario which showed this form of sexual violence demonstrated this need.

Participants were given a scenario (Appendix A) in which a wife proposes that her husband begin using condoms during intercourse as she does not wish to have any more children. The husband agrees, and they begin using condoms. However, when they are next having intercourse, the husband initially agrees to use a condom, though removes it during the encounter without his wife's knowledge.

There was wide variation in participants' views on this scenario and whether or not this constituted a non-consensual act. Although all participants believed that the husband should have asked his wife before removing the condom, for some, his failure to do so did not necessarily verge into a lack of consent. As one participant said, 'I wonder if I could go that far to say it was non-consensual because as I said, in my mind, non-consensual is rape' (Participant 2, Young Women's Group 2).

For this participant, removing a condom without a partner's consent is not as 'extreme' as rape. Another participant in the same young women's focus group also said that she 'wouldn't say it was non-consensual, but [she] would say that it was not in agreement to what was discussed prior' (Participant 3, Young Women's Group 2).

Virginity and consent – intersections and their impacts

In participants' communities, virginity was seen as an important concept both religiously and culturally. Although men are expected to have avoided any sexual interactions prior to marriage, many participants believed that there was a larger expectation placed upon women to retain their virginity. Discussion on the concept of virginity also revealed generational differences in opinion among focus groups. While parents were generally concerned about the prospect of young people having sex outside of marriage, the younger participants themselves were more open to the reality that pre-marital sex is not uncommon in their communities. Although virginity may have been important to the participants themselves, they relayed stories of friends, peers, and acquaintances who had engaged in sexual relationships outside of marriage. One participant, for instance, said that in her community, men may hope to marry a virgin, 'but because [pre-marital sex] is so common, they don't really have that preference' (Participant 3, Young Women's Group 1). Another young participant also said that men in her community likely prefer to marry a virgin, though 'they would still be okay if a girl wasn't' (Participant 2, Young Women's Group 1). For the young people in the focus groups, there was the knowledge that virginity was important in theory, but in practice, people's own actions, experiences, and opinions on the topic varied widely, and there appeared to be acceptance of this.

The rationale for asking participants about their community's views on virginity was to gauge the reaction to a non-consensual scenario (Appendix A) which took place outside of the context of marriage. In this scenario, a young woman is pressured and coerced by her fiancé into performing sexual acts. This scenario elicited interesting discussion from the various groups, with some highlighting the lack of consent involved in the scenario, while others highlighted the religious prohibition on pre-marital sex. Some believed that the woman in the scenario should have been more assertive in her refusal, placing some level of emphasis or blame on her perceived compliance, despite the coercion involved. This belief – which appeared across several focus group discussions – that the woman in the above situation should have 'said no' may indicate a lack of understanding of the nature of coercion and manipulation, and that force can be psychological as well as physical.

On the whole, however, almost all focus groups viewed the coercive behaviour as a 'red flag' for future abuse and manipulation:

> ***Participant 10:*** ***I think this scenario should be the eye-opening scenario for [the woman] of what will happen even after they're married. He will never ask for consent or he will never listen to her.***
>
> ***[Mother's Group 1]***

Participant 1: ***Well in this case sexual pressure and coercion is clearly not okay. It's important to respect an individual's religious beliefs and sexual boundaries... if she continues to give in to his demands and then marries him at one point, his threats may turn violent in the future once they're married. It may cause domestic violence.***

[Young Men's Group]

Participant 2: ***I just think that speaks to his character and him being impatient. And it doesn't even necessarily have to just be in this situation. I think it would repeat in other circumstances as well. So, she should be aware of the type of person that he is.***

[Young Women 1]

Participants overall had a good awareness of the lack of consent in this situation. What was notable was the belief that these situations are common, and that there are often far more negative repercussions for the women involved than the men. Participants' responses indicated that in cases where families and/or their communities discover that sexual violence has occurred, there may be more focus given to the marital status of the people involved, rather than the manipulation, coercion, and force. This is where the topic of virginity and/or beliefs around the (im)morality of sex outside of marriage may impact understanding of consent, particularly from parents' perspectives. Participants in the focus group with Arabic-speaking mothers, for instance, predominantly believed that fault lay with the woman for the above situation. Some participants also believed that the woman's family held blame too, 'for not teaching their daughter boundaries and how to say no' (Participant 7, Women's Group 2). Participants reiterated that parents play a strong role in educating their children on appropriate behaviour, though from context it appeared that this education was directed towards teaching children about refraining from sexual relationships until marriage, rather than education on consent.

Imaged-based abuse, revenge porn, and non-consensual sharing of private photos

In light of the new legislation to strengthen legal responses to people who perpetrate image-based abuse, participants' understanding of this topic was measured through their responses to a scenario (Appendix A) in which a young man and young woman share intimate photos. Following a break-up, the young man sends the woman's intimate images to friends, family, and community members without her consent.

Again, there was a generational divide in the responses to this scenario. Many of the young people spoke about this sort of thing happening at their school or in their communities, and how it negatively impacted the young women involved. The young people were fairly unequivocal in their condemnation of the man's actions, and there was some awareness that sharing private photos is illegal. There also did not appear to be judgement on the young woman for sharing the photos in the first place, and instead there was awareness that the interaction began as consensual then became non-consensual when the man shared the photos. Participants in the men's focus group were particularly vehement about who was to blame in this scenario.

> *Participant 2:* ***Of course, [the man] was definitely wrong here. There's no doubt about it… I see why [the man] would be angry [that he was broken up with] but this is life, and he should be mature about it. He's acting like a little kid. What [the woman] did in terms of sharing pictures with [him] was her thing and she has that right to do it… And things like this happen all the time in our community. They happen all the time, even here in Australia with my friends and people that I know, for sure.***
>
> *Participant 1:* ***Sadly, it's a very common occurrence… He's a criminal and sharing [the] photos without her consent is a violation of her privacy and trust… So once the girl started not reciprocating the same feelings towards him, he got upset and did what he did… sometimes men have very fragile egos in my community. They can't take no for an answer, so they do all sorts of illegal, crazy, childish things.***
>
> *[Young Women 1]*

Although all participants believed that the man had done something wrong in sharing the photos without the woman's consent, in contrast to the young people, many of the parents believed that the woman should not have taken the photo in the first place. This led to the parents, overall, believing that the woman held half or even most of the blame for what had occurred. Again, parents' responses may indicate that beliefs surrounding pre-marital relationships can impact their primary focus when faced with non-consensual situations. It may be difficult for parents to separate these concerns from the issue at hand, especially where a consensual situation turns into a non-consensual situation.

Parents' knowledge on responding to disclosures

Parents were asked whether they would know what to do if their child or someone they knew disclosed to them that they had experienced sexual violence. Participants stated that they would open up a conversation with their child to discuss what happened. As one participant said, 'there is not only our child involved. Another child is also involved – the girl. What's happening? Was it mutual or what? We should know these things as well' (Participant 10, Mothers' Group 1). In terms of services, participants in the parents' focus groups said that they had no knowledge of who to contact and what the processes were. Beyond discussing the situations with their children, the parents were at a loss as to how to seek professional support, from both a healthcare perspective as well as a legal perspective. As one participant stated,

> *Participant 5:* ***We should also know, as a mother, what our rights are. If someone did a sexual assault, what our rights are in this case and what our kid's rights are. We should know this because we don't know exactly. We've been living here for ages, and we don't even know the exact processes.***
>
> *[Mother's Group 1]*

Parents in the above mother's focus group did state that it was important to keep the lines of communication open with their children so that they were comfortable speaking with them if they experienced sexual violence. They clearly understood the importance of creating a safe space that their children felt able to come to should they ever experience sexual violence. However, they also asked the facilitators what more they should do in these situations and whether there were any services available.

Identifying culturally-sensitive ways to message affirmative consent to Muslim communities

Participants had many views and ideas about how to message affirmative consent to Muslim communities. All focus groups spoke about the importance of having open communication and discussing affirmative consent, particularly with younger generations. Many participants also believed that bringing religion and religious values into the discussion may help to cement the importance of affirmative consent and appropriate behaviour in romantic and sexual relationships. Some parents wished the education to be done in a 'modest way' where sex wasn't spoken about explicitly. For the young participants, there were fewer concerns about being forthright in the education surrounding affirmative consent. As one said,

> *Participant 1:* ***I think at first, we need to expose kids from our community more to the idea of sex in general. It should not be a taboo topic anymore. People should know that sex is a biological thing – it's very natural, but there should be consent. It could be done at schools. I was taught about sex at school, but I was never taught about consent… I think the ideas of consent can be introduced in Islamic schools as well.***
>
> *[Young Men's Group]*

Many participants also spoke about the importance of having conversations about sex and consent between parents and children, and the importance of these conversations occurring earlier. Parents themselves also wished to be supported to have these conversations with their children. A theme which emerged in terms of educating young Muslims on affirmative consent was the importance of this education being done by a trusted person. Trusted people included parents, friends, teachers, and religious leaders. Suggested ways to relay this information included through seminars, brochures and printed resources, and digital media.

To address the different expectations of community members, and to provide educational material without ostracising, offending, or alienating individuals or groups, one participant suggested that education could be done in a 'respectful' way that accounted for generational differences.

> *Participant 1:* ***I think our generations are more open than previous generations. So, more and more people of our age would be willing to hear the message. It's more of the older generations who might not be that willing to receive information... So, I think as long as it's written or communicated in a very respectful way, and then people can choose. They have the choice of learning, not learning, or what they want to learn – things like that.***
>
> *[Young Women 2]*

Participants did not relay many fears or concerns about messaging affirmative consent to their communities. On the contrary, participants themselves were enthusiastic about the concept and some parents expressed an interest in engaging with the resources and workshops produced by this project. The response from participants was promising and indicates that these are issues that parents are likely already thinking about but are unsure of how to instigate conversations with their children.

Discussion

This research project sought to build the evidence base on Australian Muslim communities' understanding of affirmative consent to identify education, support, and prevention needs. Our findings demonstrate that participants were enthusiastic about the prospect of further education on affirmative consent and have existing knowledge and culturally-driven understandings of consent to bring to education initiatives. Participants shared that in their communities, openly discussing sex and consent could be taboo, and not something that is typically done between parents and children. Instead, information was generally shared via friends, siblings, other family members, and through online sources. When discussing how consent was displayed and sought within relationships, participants shared that body language was often used to communicate consent, rather than more verbal or open conversations.

While participants, on the whole, displayed a strong understanding of consent in some areas, they also highlighted several knowledge gaps that require addressing though further education and capacity building programs. Firstly, participants shared that within their communities, women could be seen as more passive, and men more active in sexual relationships. This may reflect what has been highlighted in previous research on the topic; that women are perceived as 'gatekeepers' of consent for sexual activity and men are 'initiators' (Setty, 2023). It is important to break down these gendered stereotypes and expectations to ensure that both men and women are able to express themselves openly within their sexual relationships.

Participants also shared that there is an implicit or explicit perception that women need a 'reason' to say no to sex, with this 'reason' sometimes being tied to the fulfilling of domestic responsibilities. This can therefore lead women to feel an obligation to consent to sex with their husbands, especially where he is seen to have fulfilled his responsibilities in the home (Wray et al., 2014). These gendered expectations were further highlighted when discussing the vignettes for this research, during which some participants had different expectations around sexual behaviour for women compared to men. In some cases, these expectations led participants to attribute culpability to the victim in the vignette. Young women being held different standards when it comes to sex is common across cultures and religions. When it comes to Muslim communities specifically, additional expectations tied to marriage can arise. While it is believed in some Muslim families and communities that sex should be reserved for marital relationships, there can be an existence of 'double morality' where young men are afforded more scope to explore before marriage (Smerecnik et al., 2010). For women, this double standard may extend beyond engaging in sexual activity, towards education surrounding sex altogether. One study that focussed on constructions of sex and sexual health among Australian Muslim women, for example, revealed that young women are often expected to remain naïve about sex prior to marriage, which can leave them unprepared for sexual relationships (Wray et al., 2014).

What was interesting – and different – in our findings was that although gendered expectations were discussed in relation to participants' community norms at large, participants themselves demonstrated resistance towards such expectations. For example, young people shared that pre-marital sex was not uncommon, and young men did not necessarily expect their partners to have abstained from sex altogether. Some participants also shared that while there may be an expectation in their communities that women engage in sex with their husbands whenever he was ready, in their own marriages and relationships, they retained a high degree of agency within regards to their sexual interactions.

While these gendered expectations may not be playing out in practice within participants' lives, they nevertheless reveal the cultural contexts in which education and discussions around sex and consent are occurring. Having sociocultural pressures and expectations based on gender can constrain consent communication (Setty, 2023). Counteracting gendered taboos will therefore ensure that the foundation is set for individuals to communicate with one another, create healthy boundaries, and seek information on their partners' boundaries and expectations, without shame.

A second knowledge gap that was identified was related to how marital status impacts consent. We have already highlighted that within some participants' communities, there is an expectation that wives should agree to sex with their husbands unless they had a 'reason' not to. In the inverse situation, findings from the mothers' focus groups showed that cultural expectations surrounding pre-marital sex may be impacting responses to non-consensual situations – i.e., where a non-consensual act occurs, parents may focus more on whether the people involved are married, rather than on the issue of non-consent. Parents therefore need to be supported to separate their beliefs around sex outside of marriage from their understanding of consent and sexual violence. It may also be pertinent to highlight how situations where force has occurred in a sexual interaction is not the same as a situation where young people are engaging in consensual sexual relationships prior to marriage. The existence of community pressures, judgement, and expectations may also play into parents' focus on abstinence, and parents should be supported to navigate these social pressures while providing preventative education to their children.

When looking at another aspect of the suite of affirmative consent legislation changes – stealthing – participants' responses highlighted additional education needs. While some participants recognised stealthing as a non-consensual act, others raised questions about whether it could constitute a form of sexual violence. These responses suggest that more needs to be done to build understanding of different types of sexual violence and their characteristics. There may also be a lack of understanding of how consent is conditional on agreeing to one particular act in a particular context – in this case, sex with a condom – and that consent must be re-sought if the context changes – i.e., when the condom is removed. It may be of use to provide education on the specific and contextual nature of consent and how consent must be re-established throughout the sexual encounter, particularly when elements of the encounter change.

In light of these knowledge gaps, participants provided valuable suggestions and contributions on how to improve understanding and awareness of healthy sexual relationships among Muslim young people, including rights and responsibilities related to affirmative consent.All focus groups spoke about the importance of having open communication and discussing affirmative consent, particularly with the younger generation. Many participants also believed that bringing religion and religious values into the discussion may help to frame the importance of affirmative consent. In this setting, participants suggested that religion could be both a mobilising and legitimising tool, due to the many aspects of the faith which encourage education in general and reciprocity in sexual relationships. Previous research has likewise shown that sex and consent programs can benefit from appealing to these aspects of Islam that encourage mutual enjoyment, consent, and understanding in sexual relationships (Wong et al., 2017). Our findings provide further evidence for how religion can be utilised to facilitate engagement and inclusion of Muslim young people in discussions on consent.

A theme which emerged in terms of educating young Muslims on affirmative consent was the importance of this education being done by a trusted person. Trusted people included parents, friends, teachers, and religious leaders. In particular, many participants also spoke about the importance of having conversations about sex and consent between parents and children, and the importance of initiating these conversations earlier than the current norm (i.e., right before marriage). Parents themselves also wished to be supported to have these conversations with their children. Engaging 'trusted people' – namely parents – and building their capacity to message affirmative consent to the people in their lives will facilitate wider understanding within Muslim communities.

The participants in this research were enthusiastic about the idea of learning more about sex, consent, and the new affirmative consent legislation, and some parents expressed an interest in engaging with AMWCHR's affirmative consent program. The young Muslim women also felt they would be open to discussing such topics with their parents but were unsure of where to start. The response from participants was promising and indicated that these are issues that parents and young people are likely already thinking about but are unsure of how to broach during conversations with one another. Consequently, if provided with the right programs and materials, and if done in a culturally mindful and appropriate manner, Muslim communities in Victoria may be receptive to engaging more widely in affirmative consent education.

Lastly, participants in this research demonstrated a desire to know more about what to do if their child, friend, or other person comes to them and discloses sexual violence, and whether there were any services available. Evidently, this information is not readily available to parents and young people, and further information on culturally-appropriate services may be required. Further to this point, communities may also benefit from information on what to do if their child has engaged in harmful sexual behaviours, how to respond, and what services are on offer. It is important to keep this possibility in parents' mind to encourage preventative work through education of their children – and particularly sons – on affirmative consent and healthy relationships. This will also promote accountability and behavioural change if sexual violence does occur.

Community-based sex education programs can influence health behaviours and reduce sexual health inequity, if the programs are adapted and tailored alongside the intended community members (McCuistian et al., 2021). When building awareness around affirmative consent in Muslim communities, organisations should therefore harness existing knowledge, language, and understanding of consent to work in tandem with the new legal frameworks.

Grounded in the above findings and evidence, AMWCHR has highlighted the below changes and actions as necessary to address Muslim communities' consent education needs. These changes will facilitate further understanding of Victoria's affirmative consent legislation but also consent frameworks in other Australian states.

Recommendation 1

Local, state, and federal governments should provide further funding opportunities for community organisations to develop culturally appropriate sex education and affirmative consent programs for Muslim parents and young people.

Affirmative consent programs should be delivered by community-led organisations and take place in community settings. Such programs should address the knowledge gaps and needs identified in this research and engage Muslim parents as well as young people of all ages, with age-appropriate content.

Parents are key influencers in this space and their involvement as educators in the home is crucial. Developing parents' confidence and capacity to have open conversations with children around consent will provide young people with a safe space to seek information and can also increase help-seeking in the event that young people have experienced sexual violence.

Messaging has to be shaped directly for participants' needs, based on thorough consultation with intended audience prior to development of content. This will ensure that programs have identified individual issues and barriers that may be shaping belief systems and understandings of sex, healthy relationships, and consent.

Funders must take into consideration the high levels of resourcing that goes into the recruitment, engagement, and delivery of such programs – especially when delivering programs to men who may be more reluctant to engage. Reasonable timelines are required to accommodate this time-intensive process.

Recommendation 2

Schools should develop and/or update sex and consent education programs, and provide training to teachers delivering curriculum to ensure inclusivity of Muslim students

Currently, consent initiatives in Australia are relatively generalist. As we have shown in this research, Muslim young people – and young women in particular – may be engaging with such programs without having developed important foundational knowledge related to sex education in general.

Public schools should conduct a review of current sex and consent program curriculums to ensure school-based sex education programs are inclusive and culturally sensitive. Muslim communities should be consulted on the development of new curriculums to provide opportunities to share concerns and create a more relatable program for all students.

Religious (Islamic) schools also require a consistent and comprehensive sex and consent curriculum. These programs should be developed in consultation with sexual health practitioners and experts to ensure that safe messaging on affirmative consent is delivered. The programs can be religiously grounded, incorporating elements of Islam that encourage reciprocity, equality, and mutual respect within sexual relationships. Islamic schools require incentivisation to develop and implement such programs, and dedicated funding should be provided by state and federal governments to facilitate the achievement of this goal.

Further, we recommend that schools engage with ethno-specific organisations to provide consultancy services to build capacity to deliver appropriate education on sex and consent. Teachers delivering the curriculum require training to ensure that they are aware of and sensitive to the needs of Muslim students in their classrooms and are confident to share information in an inclusive and open manner.

Recommendation 3

Further research is required to explore Muslim women's experiences of sexual violence, help-seeking behaviours, and service quality

In Australia there is little to no research on Muslim women's experiences of sexual violence, help-seeking behaviours, and the quality of the services designed to support them. While this fact in and of itself demonstrates the need for such research, our results also strengthen this case. In addition to the knowledge gaps that show that some types of sexual violence may be under recognised in some communities, participants were at a loss as to how to seek professional support, from both a healthcare perspective as well as a legal perspective.

Evidently, support services are not reaching many within the Muslim community. This context is likely to be playing into victim-survivors' help-seeking behaviours after experiencing sexual violence, and further research is required to highlight preventative opportunities and identify support gaps within responsive systems.

Conclusion

This research provides some of the first evidence for Victorian Muslim communities' knowledge and education needs surrounding consent. Despite conversations related to sex and sexual violence being a sensitive – and sometimes even taboo – topic within Muslim communities, our study has shown that many parents and young people are ready and willing to start having the conversation. While the new affirmative consent laws aim to reduce burden on victim-survivors in legal settings, without effective promotion across all communities, including Muslim communities, the preventative and responsive potential of the laws may not be fully realised. The introduction of the new legislation provides a crucial opportunity for awareness raising and knowledge building. Through further resourcing of community-led programs for Muslim young people, this work can be supported in the hopes of preventing sexual violence and promoting safety across our communities.

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APPENDIX: Focus group vignettes

Case Study 1.

Zara and Matt have recently married and are becoming intimate for the first time. The moment starts off well, with Matt being gentle and attentive, and so they begin having sex. Partway through, the sex begins to feel painful for Zara. She says, "wait, you're hurting me", but Matt continues. Afterwards, Zara is upset and asks Matt whether he heard her say that she was in pain. He apologises, and says that he heard her, but he didn't realise she wanted him to stop, and that he was almost finished anyway.

Case Study 2.

Layla and Hamza have been married for ten years and already have four children together. Layla would like to have a break from having children so that she can go back to work and tells Hamza that she would want to start using condoms as a form of contraception. She tells him how important it is to her that they do this, and he understands and agrees. The next day, Hamza and Layla have sexual intercourse, and Hamza puts on a condom. Afterwards, Layla notices that Hamza is no longer wearing the condom. When she queries her husband about this, he says that he took it off during sex because he didn't like it.

Case Study 3.

Yasmin and Sam met at a friend's party and got engaged soon after. Due to COVID restrictions, their wedding has been postponed twice, and Sam is becoming impatient to be married. Sam's impatience has led him to begin suggesting to Yasmin that they experiment sexually. Yasmin is unsure, as she believes that her faith, Islam, says that they should engage in sexual acts together once they're married. Over time, Sam becomes increasingly insistent and tries a number of ways to convince Yasmin. He suggests that they try sexual acts that don't include penetration so they retain their virginity, he also says that since they will be married soon anyway, having a sexual relationship now won't matter. He even suggests that if she doesn't agree, he might call off the engagement. Under this pressure, Yasmin relents.

Case Study 4.

Dina and Ali met at university and have formed a strong and trusting friendship over the past few years. Recently, Ali has become more flirtatious with Dina, and they've been messaging late into the night for several weeks. One night, Ali suggests that they share intimate photos with each other. Dina is hesitant at first but ultimately decides that this is something she wants to do and feels safe to share photos of herself with Ali, so they exchange pictures.

Over time, Dina decides that her feelings for Ali are not romantic, and so she tells him that she would like to go back to being friends. Ali does not take this well and becomes extremely upset and angry, lashing out at Dina verbally. Dina is concerned about how he has reacted and cuts off all communication.
The following week, she receives a call from a friend who tells her that an intimate image of Dina is being sent around to people they know via an anonymous account. Dina is horrified, humiliated, and confused. She knows she has only ever shared one intimate image with only one person, and that was Ali.