






# Living Spirit: Muslim Women and Human Rights Forum

## Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

This project also relates to:

-  Law
-  Community Harmony
-  Education

*Living Spirit: Muslim Women and Human Rights Forum* – the right to participate in social change, was a one-day interactive forum held in Preston, Victoria, on 21 September 2006. The forum was part of the *Muslim Women's Project: a dialogue on human rights and responsibilities* run by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission with funding from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, under the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security.

The forum aimed to:

- promote harmony and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims
- develop strategies to combat religious and racial discrimination and vilification against women
- explore points in common between human rights principles and Islam, in order to increase mutual respect
- increase understanding of legal protections against discrimination and vilification in Australia.

The Commission worked in partnership with the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria and was officially supported by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia, the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Islamic Girls' and Women's Group, the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition and Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE.

Over 140 women and girls attended, both Muslim and non-Muslim, from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds, including women who had arrived in Australia as refugees.

### Identifying a need through national consultations

In 2003, the Commission began a project called *Ismae: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*. The Commission consulted over 1400 Arab and Muslim Australians around Australia who described their experiences of race and religious vilification since the September 11 attacks and Bali bombings in 2002. The biggest impacts reported by participants were a substantial increase in fear, an increase in distrust of authority, and a growing sense of alienation from the wider community.

The consultations revealed that the impact of racial and religious discrimination was most acutely felt by women, especially those wearing the hijab or other forms of religious dress. Most incidents raised in the consultations had not been reported to police or other government agencies for one or more of the following reasons:

- fear of victimisation
- lack of trust in authority
- lack of knowledge about the law and complaints processes
- a perceived difficulty in making a complaint
- a perception that outcomes would be unsatisfactory.

Women, and young people in particular, reported feeling afraid of being attacked or abused as well as a growing sense of alienation from the wider community and an increase in distrust of authority such as government or police.

The social and personal impacts of these feelings were profound. They included:

- a rise in mental health issues, including chronic depression leading to suicidal behaviour
- limited mobility due to fear of being in places such as shopping centres, and relying on existing social networks to perform daily tasks such as taking children to and from school and shopping

- loss of respect for and confidence in others and the system, leading to a distrust of service providers, friends, government, authority and self limited access to economic and social development, such as to education and employment, and associated loss of social cohesion and limited participation and contribution in the broader community and with people of other cultures and backgrounds
- loss of confidence, motivation and opportunity to plan, develop and access career goals and other ambitions.

There was a feeling of resignation among the women that little could be done about discrimination and mistreatment under current laws and a feeling by many that the law was not there to protect everyone.

Although generally the women had a good understanding of human rights issues, they did not have a good understanding at a conceptual level. There was a lack of knowledge of the legal framework around equal opportunity, anti-discrimination laws and complaints mechanisms amongst newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Participants observed that negative stereotypes of Muslim women were being perpetuated by some politicians, religious leaders, some members of the community, and even some members of Muslim communities. Of most concern was the spread of negative stereotypes by the media. Women felt powerless against media and politicians, and this created further marginalisation.

The Commission identified many other issues, such as a lack of representation of Muslim women on community and religious organisations' management boards, in government and community advisory groups addressing broader non-Muslim issues, in the media, in public and political spheres and in high profile professions and senior positions.

## Community consultations in Victoria and New South Wales

The Commission held meetings either face-to-face or by telephone with 38 key organisations and individuals in Victoria and 29 in New South Wales. The Commission sought advice from these organisations about how best to conduct the project. Participants confirmed the need to hold a forum on Muslim women's human rights issues.

They also felt that it would be beneficial to hold a series of workshops for Muslim women to increase their understanding of legal protections against racial and religious discrimination and vilification.

## Developing the forum

The key organisations and individuals that were consulted expressed the view that the *Living Spirit* forum should not duplicate previous conferences and forums, and should provide a safe environment where Muslim women could speak out about their concerns, needs and aspirations. They believed the forum should be an opportunity to build bridges between communities and dispel myths about Islam and Muslim women, and should:

- focus on empowering the women with information and opportunities
- engage Muslim women at the grassroots level and not merely target participants who often attend such events
- identify sites of discrimination and vilification and focus on practical ways of responding to it, and not just through information and education
- provide interactive, fun, participatory and practical workshops and activities
- use familiar community members and experts as facilitators.

## Promoting the forum

The Commission distributed flyers and other newsletter articles and website material, as did supporting organisations, including the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, through existing networks and women's groups. Information was distributed to mainstream, local and ethnic media.

## The participants

The forum was open to all women, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The participants were diverse in respect of age, culture, religion, experiences and attitudes. Some had arrived as refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan. Others were born in Australia or had arrived as migrants. Most were living in metropolitan Victoria, with a few from rural centres such as Shepparton and Geelong. Some also attended from other states.

The Muslim women who attended were homemakers, tertiary students, service providers, community workers, religious and community leaders and professionals including psychologists and lawyers. Muslim girls were included with 30 of the participants aged between 8 and 18 years. More than 20 children attended on-site childcare. Interpreters and transport were provided.

The non-Muslim women who attended included church leaders, police, community workers, service providers, anti-discrimination agency workers, government representatives and individual community members.

### The forum

The following sessions were included in the forum:

- an Indigenous Smoking Ceremony and traditional Welcome to Country by Senior Women Elder of the Wurundjeri People, Joy Murphy
- a hypothetical plenary session called 'Righting the Wrongs: How would you respond?' which explained policy standards applied to responding to incidents of discrimination and abuse
- a morning tea with politicians hosted by local Victorian Member of Parliament, Maria Vamvakimou MP
- 'Why Women Matter', an exhibition profiling achievements and contributions to Australia by 10 Muslim women, including the profile on Faten below.
- a screening of 'Veiled Ambition' and other DVDs
- an interactive drumming session during lunch
- a *Living Spirit* mural provided an opportunity for all participants, including the children, to write down their thoughts and ideas about human rights, Islam or any other forum topic on canvas (the mural was donated to the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria)
- a plenary session on human rights, Islam and confronting negative stereotypes and misconceptions followed by:
  - » a session run by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship on existing and future government and community projects and how to get involved in them
  - » a closing session on participating in change which focused on strategies for the future and the empowerment of the women.

Five concurrent workshops were held in the morning and another five in the afternoon. Various styles were used including scenario-based role-plays, café discussion style and question-and-answer sessions. Two of the workshops were for young women only. The workshop themes included:

- 'My rights are your rights': human rights and young women
- 'A new world': what the new anti-terrorism laws mean to you
- 'How I can, **not** why I can't': why should I make a complaint and how to cope with crisis
- 'Lost in translation, found in respect': helping Muslim women cope with racial and religious discrimination and abuse
- 'Critical connections': freedom of speech versus racial vilification
- 'Creating possibilities': a conversation between generations about experiences of discrimination – how to make a difference together in your family, community and life.

The forum successfully explored points in common between human rights principles and Islam, in order to increase mutual respect. Young women noted that the correlation between Islam and human rights was both positive and negative. In one of the workshops the 'sad face' of human rights in relation to Islam included lack of employment opportunities and lack of friends for women wearing a hijab. On the other hand, the 'happy face' of human rights in relation to Islam included Muslims being proud of who they are, the practice of religious festivals, mosque visits and tours.

A general belief was identified at the forum that Islam and human rights principles were largely compatible and played a major role in Muslim women's lives. Many of the women believed that Islam provides them with more human rights than international laws based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A closing dinner was held to mark the end of the forum and to celebrate the beginning of Ramadan. Over 70 participants and their families attended.

## Achievements

Through the forum and workshops a variety of strategies were identified to combat the marginalisation of Muslim women. They included educating women and the broader Muslim community about anti-discrimination laws, human rights and the complaints process and providing a checklist about how to collect evidence and other information to support a complaint.

Other strategies developed at the forum concerned improving both state and federal complaints processes by, for instance, providing information in a range of languages, and building trust between communities and complaints bodies, educating youth in schools and stressing the Commission's independence from government.

About one-third of participants completed feedback forms and an overwhelming majority was 'extremely satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the speakers, the issues, and the relevancy and range of topics addressed. The workshops were overwhelmingly seen as 'useful' with only 10 per cent providing no answer or rating them as 'okay' or 'not useful'.

Feedback from partners, key stakeholders and official supporters was very positive and many wanted information about the outcomes of the forum and the *Muslim Women's Project*.

In February 2007, the Islamic Council of Victoria and the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs honoured the Commission for the *Living Spirit: Muslim Women and Human Rights Forum* (2006) at the *Bringing Communities Together: Sharing Our Achievements Symposium* in Melbourne. The Commission received an award for excellence in the field of projects/initiatives beneficial to Australian Muslims in Australia.

Since the forum was held, the Women's Law Centre of Western Australia has expressed interest in organising a *Living Spirit* forum in Perth. Stakeholders in New South Wales are interested in running a similar event there.

A full report on the project is available on the Commission's website at: [www.humanrights.gov.au/racial\\_discrimination/livingspirit](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/livingspirit).

## Challenges

There was a mixed response to a hypothetical panel discussion comprised of a newspaper reporter, a school principal, a religious leader, a Muslim woman, a supermarket manager, police and a politician. The purpose of the discussion was to provide an understanding of best practice procedures, policies and responses to incidents of racial or religious discrimination.

Many participants felt that there wasn't enough time in the workshops and would have liked more time to better contribute to the development of strategies. In addition there was room for improvement in the marketing and distribution of information prior to the conference.

### Key factors in the project's success

The exhibition 'Why Women Matter', featuring profiles of successful Muslim women, was a great success. Workshop participants identified the need to reinforce Muslim women's positive contribution to Australian society by posting these profiles on websites to help address negative stereotypes about Muslim communities and Muslim women in particular.

The use of a variety of interactive formats in the workshop sessions, such as scenario-based role plays, informal café-style discussion, and question and answer sessions contributed to the forum's success. With an emphasis on engaging participants in meaningful discussions and information sessions most participants overwhelmingly rated the workshops as being useful.

A focus on addressing solutions and not just identifying issues was a key component of the forum's success and participants expressed an interest in further contributing to the development of strategies to deal with the issues discussed.

Representing the diversity of the Muslim community was also important. Informal benefits such as meeting new people and creating new community links was considered of great assistance to participants, service providers and government bodies alike.

The fact that representatives from government agencies were invited to attend not only improved networking opportunities between

representative bodies, service providers and community leaders but also allowed people to address questions to government agencies directly, helping to open important lines of communication.

### Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

By consulting widely with key stakeholders early in the project, the Commission was able to design a fresh and relevant forum with a focus on the participants' needs. The advice the Commission received can be applied generically to contribute to the success of similar forums. Some suggestions included that the forum:

- be an effective way of making Muslim women's voices heard and be an avenue for Muslim women to express their concerns, needs and aspirations
- provide bridge-building opportunities to dispel myths about Islam and Muslim women
- provide a safe environment where women can speak out without fear and have an open and honest dialogue
- focus on empowering and building the confidence of Muslim women with information and opportunities
- engage Muslim women at grassroots level and not only target participants who often attend such events
- document the forum (through video or audio) for use in future work
- identify sites of discrimination, and focus on the practical ways of dealing and responding to such discrimination, vilification and abuse, and not just through information and education
- provide interactive, fun, participatory and practical workshops and activities
- use familiar community members and experts as facilitators
- provide transport, childcare and interpreters to address barriers of access and participation at such events.

### Contact details

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## Profile > Faten

**Faten** was born in Khartoum, Sudan and migrated with her family to Australia over 14 years ago. She has completed a Social Science Honours Degree at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

Faten is currently working at the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues as the Youth Project Officer, Sector Development. She is currently a board member of the African Think Tank. Faten said:

My father is Sudanese and my mother is from Eritrea. I have always been involved in both the Eritrean and Sudanese communities in Melbourne from a young age, and enjoy being involved in community activities.

My biggest achievement has been my involvement in a group called 'Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope'. It is a group of eleven young people from North and South Sudan working together to reconcile a country and community divided by a devastating 50-year civil war. We aim to empower young people from Sudanese background living in Australia and around the world to take up a leadership role and to actively participate in sustaining peace in Sudan and to work together on building a nation free of religious and racial hatred.

photo > Faten from Sudan, a participant in the forum



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