



ISLAMIC WOMEN'S WELFARE COUNCIL of Victoria Inc.

Race, Faith and Gender:

Converging Discriminations Against
Muslim Women in Victoria

The Ongoing Impact of
September 11, 2001

A Summary Report on Racism Against Muslim Women

Published by:

Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria Inc.

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ISBN: 0 9758204 8 6

Designed by: Savanah Design Pty Ltd

11 December 2008

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ISLAMIC WOMEN'S WELFARE COUNCIL of Victoria Inc.

“It’s a great system in Australia, but I see a different side of it now that I am covered (wearing the hijab)”¹

“I was sitting on the tram, and in front of me there was a veiled woman sitting by herself. There were two Australians that were eating sandwiches ... they started spitting food at her. The poor thing looked like she was a non-English speaker because she said to them ‘Don’t rubbish, No rubbish’. They started laughing and continued spitting on her. She ran to the tram driver and said ‘... please police, call police, please police’. The tram driver said ‘... it’s not my business; you want to call the police, do it yourself.’ She started crying and got off on the next stop but they followed her and started harassing and spitting on her.”

“I was going shopping with my son, he is blind. These men followed us, and one extinguished his cigarette on my head. I felt it burning. I started to run with my son. They came up and surrounded us, 6 of them, Australian and white ...”

“...We walked past the park. This man ... filled his mouth [with saliva], and spat at us and got us, and he was a white man. He started swearing at us: “We don’t need you here, go back ... You are Taliban” I said to him ‘I had never heard of the Taliban before I came here. I came from Africa’. We were very scared ... we ran for our lives. He told me, we were filthy people and wore ugly robs. “You look like a monkey, look at your nose, you look like Zimbabwe’s! You are a terrorist, this is our land, you’re an animal, you take our jobs, you live off our money ...”

¹ All quotations included in this report are statements made by Muslim women in our first and second round of focus groups.

Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without funding from the Myer Foundation and the assistance of the following people:

- To the many hundreds of participants from the relevant communities who agreed to participate in the focus groups and gave so generously of their time. We are grateful to them and hope this report reflects their experiences in a way they find meaningful and empowering.
- Professor Sue Kenny, Professor Linda Briskman and Diane Sisley who all assisted in the development of the research.
- The Social Research Centre, most especially Lou Stockfield whose assistance in the survey development was crucial.
- Group facilitators and leaders: Khadra Omar, Zeynep Sevnic, Guzide Bosnok, Seyda Yakmaz, Ayten Karakus, Maggie Abdel Malek, Amal El Khoury, Micheal Mawal, Munira Mahmoud, Guizide Besnek, and Terri Kaufman, Salma Ibrahim, Amina Malekin, Zahra Baho, Faranak Safaei, Haji Najat Yamack, Gabby Fakhri for facilitation of the second round of focus groups.
- Special thanks to the staff at Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria for their commitment and generosity to all the projects we implement. Most especially Sultan Cinar, Nuzhat Lotia, Jaweria Khalid for their group facilitation and Asha Bedar for her work on the second set of focus groups. The Committee also needs special acknowledgment for their support, most especially, Urfa Masood, Tasneem Chopra and Rasheeda Cooper.

A note of thanks to Nilufer Yaman for her direction and to Professor Kevin Dunn for his ongoing expert advice and guiding hand throughout the project. Finally, we'd like to thank Kim Webster and Dr Natascha Klocker for their review of the final draft of the full report.

Edited by: Barry Strmelj

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Preface

In the aftermath of the terror attacks in the United States of America on 11 September 2001 there was a dramatic increase in the experience of racism by Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslims, in countries like Australia. Of course, there is neither a logical link nor any relation between the two events. However, this Report confirms the findings of reports across Western nations of a spike in the experience of racism following the September 11 terror attacks and subsequent events. Those attacks, and the political statements and debates that swirl around those events, provide perpetrators of racism with some sort license to act. However, the psychology of racist actions is not the focus of this Report. This Report focuses, for my mind, on three much more important things: how this racism was experienced; how it might be linked to attitudes, and; what might be done by way of remedies.

The first focus is on the experience of Muslim women in Victoria. These experiences were collected through focus groups, and so in this Report we hear the voices of those women, reported in their own way, on their own experiences. The experiences of racism in the latter part of 2001 are shocking and the everyday racist incivilities that have carried on since reveal the unacceptable exposure of Australian Muslim women to racism. These hate crimes and incivilities against Australians should have been seen as a national emergency. The voices presented in this Report strongly evoke the sadness and disappointment felt at the time by these women. Their disappointment is largely linked to the failure of Government and civil society to protect them as citizens. They are saddened by instances where their fellow non-Muslim citizens stood by and did nothing while they were racially abused in the public spaces of our cities. The quotations gave me the sense that most of these women remain confident in both their faith and their Australian citizenship. There is a striking earnestness and integrity to the statements of these Victorians.

The second important focus of this Report is on the attitudes of non-Muslim Victorians. Six hundred non-Muslims were surveyed in mid-2005. The surveys reveal that most non-Muslims are not anti-Islamic: most have a positive view of Muslims, most thought that the media portrays Muslims quite poorly, and that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria were generally friendly. Close to half of the survey respondents perceive Islam to have gender relations that disadvantage women, and this Report wisely draws our attention to this strongly held perception. Most non-Muslims are aware of their own ignorance of Islam, too few have meaningful contact with Muslims, and they acknowledge their problematic reliance on the media for information about Islam. In general, Victorians would prefer that non-Muslims were more tolerant of Muslims and for Muslims to be integrated into Australian society.

The third important emphasis in this Report is on the actions that might be taken to reduce racism. Specifically action is needed to assuage the extent of everyday racist incivilities that are experienced by Muslims in Australia, but we also need to set in place strategies to deal with the outbreaks of violence that follow terror events overseas. The latter requires a much more robust set of anti-vilification and anti-discrimination provisions. State agencies need to be able to act on behalf of people who have been vilified and racially attacked. The voices in this Report call for better leadership from our politicians and other public opinion makers, to speak against racism, and to both confront and spurn the temptations of Islamophobia. Muslim women in Victoria want their governments to protect them from racism, they want positive leadership, and they wish to be treated as full citizens. They also want more information, and more-rounded information, to be made available to non-Muslims about Islam, and they are happy to be involved cross-cultural meetings and other forms of dialogue to achieve this end. Muslim women's recommendations for improving attitudes and community relations are overwhelmingly the same as the recommendations made by non-Muslims.

I applaud the staff of the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria for the insights contained in this Report, and I strongly recommend it to all Australians who believe in social justice, a fair go, and freedom of religion.

Kevin M Dunn

Professor in Human Geography and Urban Studies
School of Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney

Introduction

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

Research in Australia and overseas documented a surge of racism against Muslim communities after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Anecdotal information received through The Islamic Women’s Welfare Council’s (the Council) work with Victorian Muslim women confirmed this trend while also highlighting that Muslim women were more likely than Muslim men to experience racism, suggesting a possible gender dimension to racism.

A preliminary review of the literature found that there was little research into Muslim women’s experiences of racism or whether a gender dimension to racism existed, indicating to the Council that Muslim women’s experiences of racism in Victoria were going unnoticed. This research attempts to address this gap by documenting Muslim women’s experiences of racism, and the impact it has had on the lives of Muslim women.

Believing there was a growing disconnection between Muslim and non-Muslim Victorians when designing this research, the Council felt it was important to investigate non-Muslim Victorian’s views and perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women in particular. It was felt that knowing how non-Muslim Victorians viewed Muslims and Muslim women would help to contextualise Muslim women’s experiences and allow for the development of potential solutions with both Muslim and non-Muslim Victorians.

In summary, this research project aimed to:

- systematically investigate and document Muslim women’s experiences of racism in Victoria;
- examine the impact of these experiences on Victorian Muslim women;
- identify what perceptions non-Muslim Victorians have of Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular;
- identify variables associated with anti-Muslim sentiment;
- identify Muslim women and non-Muslim residents’ views on how to improve and strengthen community relations; and
- develop recommendations to shape future policies and intervention programs to address these issues.

Key points from the literature review

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

There is considerable documentation of an increase in racism against Muslims across Western countries after the September 11 attacks.

Attitudes in Western countries towards Muslims are more negative since the September 11 attacks and Muslims:

- are viewed more suspiciously;
- as wanting to remain separate;
- as not valuing other cultures; and
- as being more violent than other religious groups.

This documented increase in prejudice corresponds with an increase in incidents of racism towards Muslims in America, the United Kingdom and the European Union, as well as Australia, after September 11.

There was only one study, conducted in Canada, that investigated the gender dimension of racism. This study concluded that the events of September 11 had a negative impact on Muslim women.

In Australia:

- Muslim women were over-represented in the number of racist attacks reported to a Community Relations Commission hotline;
- a study examining Muslim Australians’ experiences of racism found that:
 - Muslim women were significantly more likely to experience racism than Muslim men;
 - that women were more likely to experience racism on the street, in shops and shopping malls; and
 - the wearing of the hijab was the most frequently cited reason for experiencing racism.
- a study examining Muslim women and public space in Sydney noted that every woman interviewed had experience some form of verbal or physical abuse; and
- Muslims were identified by Australians in several studies as the key out-group in Australian society

Australian research has shown that a connection exists between racism and a range of poor personal and social outcomes such as health and psychological well-being, socio-economic status, employment and education.

In conclusion, Muslim women’s vulnerability to racism since September 11 and its link to a range of poor personal outcomes underscores the need for the current study.

Research Approach

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

To achieve the aims of this study quantitative and qualitative data was collected in three stages:

Stage 1 Focus groups with Muslim women

- From November 2003 to March 2005, 13 focus groups were held with 206 Victorian Muslim women. Participants were asked to what extent racism was an issue, whether it had increased or decreased, the impact it had on them and suggestions for strategies to help reduce racism. Focus group participants were representative of the Council’s service users. They tended to be unemployed, from low socio-economic strata of Muslim communities, predominantly non-English speakers and many were newly-arrived to Australia.

Stage 2 Non-Muslim Victorian’s perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women

- This stage consisted of a telephone survey of 600 non-Muslim Victorians randomly selected from the Victorian White Pages. Respondents were asked about their views on Muslims and what they associated with Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular. They were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Victorians, as well as to suggest strategies to improve relations. Respondents were mostly born in Australia, and more women than men took part in the telephone survey. They had little to do with Muslims and primarily gained their information on Muslims through the media.

Stage 3 Follow up focus groups with Muslim Women

- Twelve focus groups were held with 96 Victorian Muslim women from March 2006 to November 2007. Although some participants had attended the first set of focus groups, the majority had not. Due to this the same questions from the first focus groups were used in the follow up focus groups. As in the first set of focus groups, participants were representative of the Council’s service users and were from low socio-economic strata of Muslim communities, predominantly non-English speakers and largely newly-arrived to Australia. The objective of the follow up focus groups was not to assess individual shifts in perception but to assess collective changes and identify emerging themes.

In total 302 Muslim women and 600 non-Muslim Victorians participated in our research. All were asked to contribute their ideas and views as to how community relations could be strengthened and improved.

Key Findings from the focus groups

“My daughter is six years old was playing with other children. One woman called her daughter over to her and told her in a loud voice ‘Don’t play with that girl, she’s Muslim.’ I was so shocked”

Racism against Muslim women in Victoria extends beyond a few isolated incidents after September 11.

A total of 137 incidents of racism were cited by women. Almost 80 per cent of women expressed that they felt unsafe and unwelcome in Australia generally. Almost 90 per cent of women knew of other Muslim women who had experienced racism.

The incidents cited include (in order of frequency):

- daily forms of racism and incivility, such as being ridiculed and insulted;
- verbal abuse including intimidating and threatening behaviour;
- acts of discrimination; and
- physical violence.

The majority of incidents were in public spaces such as on the street, in parks, shopping centres and on public transport. They were usually perpetrated by people unknown to the victims.

Almost half the participants believed that work opportunities were significantly limited because of their religion or because they wore the hijab. Women were particularly concerned for the welfare of their daughters, believing that discrimination would significantly limit their daughters’ educational and work opportunities.

Impact on women

Women spoke of the detrimental impact racism had on their:

- sense of wellbeing;
- freedom of movement and sense of safety;
- sense of belonging and participation in society; and
- sense of control and agency over their lives.

Many participants stated that they experienced a consistent sense of low grade fear and vulnerability. They no longer travelled alone.

“If media reports on terrorism, it always becomes bad for us!”

The follow up focus groups established that Muslim women:

- continued to be affected by extended periods of low grade, daily and mundane forms of racism, abuse and incivility;
- experienced a sharp rise in racism and violence following periods of international Muslim terrorism and related media coverage; and
- in many cases, believed they were no longer wanted in Australia.

Prioritising safety above independence and well-being

Safety measures such as restricting their independence and freedom of movement adopted by women immediately after September 11 have become an ongoing way of life for the majority of Victorian Muslim women in our follow up focus groups. The response to these events has created a social environment whereby Muslim women constantly fear the potential of abuse. Women have prioritised their safety above their independence and well being.

Some Muslim women reported hiding at home with their children for up to a month in the periods immediately following Muslim terrorist attacks overseas. Muslim women who had migrated to Australia as refugees from war torn countries at times reacted in ways that resembled living in conflict situations.

Muslim women’s right to freedom of movement and independent living have been compromised. Muslim women no longer feel safe to travel alone. They have become increasingly dependent on family and friends to travel with them to undertake basic necessities such as grocery shopping.

These restrictions on women have occurred at a time when some Muslim women had achieved substantial gains in attaining their freedom and independence. For other Muslim women, it introduces restrictions on movement and independent living that they had never known prior to September 11.

Generally Muslim women lacked faith in the public authorities mandated to deal with issues of racism, discrimination and violence. For the small group of Muslim women who attempted to seek assistance and redress, many found the system unresponsive and unable to provide any form of meaningful protection.

“I have a friend, she was attending an interview, like applying for a job and when she got to the interview itself, it was very interesting when they saw her in the hijab... So much negativity.”

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Greater vulnerability to racism for some Muslim women

Although most women felt that it was their gender and faith that put them at risk of racism, our research provided evidence that some groups of Muslim women appear more at risk than others. This includes women who wear the hijab, as well as darker skinned and black women. A trend which appeared in the second set of focus groups suggests that the greater the veiling, the increased susceptibility to abuse.

Impact on children

Children have also been victims of racism and in some instances, violence. However, the impact of this on children has received little or no attention in research. Women were exceedingly concerned about the direct and perceived impact on children.

Non-Muslim Victorians' perceptions of Muslims and Muslim women

“For my generation, as mothers, we do understand the discrimination and the context of it, but our children don’t. When they hear people shouting ‘Go home’ it is confusing for them because Australia is the only home that they have known and it is [her emphasis] their home ...”

The overwhelming majority of Victorians (93%) reported that they had hardly any or little contact with Muslims. The majority of Victorians relied on media for their information about Muslims. Far more people with little (54%), or hardly any (66%) contact with Muslims used television as a source of information compared with people with a lot of contact (19%).

Victorian views of Muslims are complex and warrant further investigation. Although 62% of Victorians surveyed stated that they hold a positive view of Muslims, almost one in two respondents (48%) associated Muslim women with poor treatment, oppression and submissiveness. When respondents were asked if they thought Muslim women were treated fairly by their community 51% disagreed, with almost 20% strongly disagreeing.

Just over a third of respondents surveyed associated Muslim women with varying degrees of veiling or being shrouded.

On this basis it would appear that there was a significant disparity between the experiences of Muslim women and non-Muslim Victorians' views of Muslims. However, associations Victorians held for Muslim women compares poorly to those held for Muslims in general, and this goes some way to explaining Muslim women's experiences. While views such as oppression and poor treatment may be considered to be sympathetic rather than negative, these notions are nonetheless inextricably linked to notions of misogyny.

Victorians who held positive views or were neutral about Muslims generally, were basing these views on principles of equity and justice or by not forming a view altogether. Only a small percentage of this group had direct contact with Muslims. When there was direct contact with Muslims it had a positive effect on Victorians' views of Muslims.

“They [Australians] think we are people of blood and war”

The 10% of Victorians surveyed who held negative views of Muslims did so because they:

- disagreed with Muslim religion and culture;
- accepted the negative portrayal of Muslims by the media;
- perceived associations between Muslims and war and terrorism; and
- believed Muslims mistreated women.

Almost 60% of Victorians held the view that media representation of Muslims was unfair and biased, with a third of this group holding this view very strongly. Importantly, 84% of respondents agreed that media representations of Muslims affected the way they are treated, and over half of those surveyed strongly agreed with this view.

Victorians’ perception of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims provided some interesting information. Although 60% of respondents felt that the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim Victorians was friendly, 56% disagreed with the statement that there is a high level of trust between Muslim and non-Muslim Victorians, with 20% strongly disagreeing with this statement.

A number of respondents (36%) agreed with the statement that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Victoria are difficult, while 43% disagreed.

Questions about mutual understanding also yielded some interesting results. Sixty-eight per cent of Victorians agreed with the statement that non-Muslim Victorians do not have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life with 23% agreeing strongly. Just under 20% believed non-Muslim Victorians did have a good understanding of the Muslim way of life. When reversed, only 43% agreed with the statement that Muslims in Victoria had a good understanding of the non-Muslim way of life, suggesting that survey respondents thought neither group had a good understanding of the other’s way of life.

The majority of respondents (70%) agreed that Australians need to be more tolerant of Muslims and 27% strongly agreed with this statement, while 18% disagreed. In contrast, however, a similar proportion of respondents (72%) believed that Muslims in Australia needed to integrate more into Australian society, with 27% strongly agreeing with this statement. Again a small number (16%) disagreed and felt Muslims did not need to integrate further.

Improving Relations

“It only takes one incident in the world concerning terrorism before Muslim women are attacked again.”

Non-Muslim Victorians and Muslim women made similar suggestions as to how to improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Victorians.

Both groups mentioned education as both felt that non-Muslim Victorians did not know enough about Muslims. Non-Muslim Victorians suggested that education in high school to improve understanding of Muslim culture was very important, while both Muslim women and non-Muslim Victorians highlighted the need for community education.

Other strategies mentioned by both groups included:

- increasing the interaction of both groups through events and activities;
- improving media representations of Muslims with more balanced and positive images of Muslims;
- Muslims becoming more prominent and active in the wider community; and
- the need for government to be more proactive in promoting diversity and multiculturalism.

Muslim women expressed a strong desire to become involved in intercultural activities and initiatives, as well as to participate in a dialogue aimed at increasing understanding of Islam and Muslims, eradicating stereotypes and demystifying how Muslims live.

Muslim women made a number of recommendations regarding how to reduce the incidence of racism. These suggestions included:

- Muslim women becoming more vocal about their experiences of racism;
- improving Muslim women’s confidence in, and access to, public authorities;
- strengthening mechanisms to respond to Muslim women’s complaints;
- a specific service that could provide support to women and their families when they become victims of racism or discrimination; and
- politicians to take a strong anti-racist stance.

Conclusion

“You have to educate people to see everybody as equal, because really, we are all equal”

The experiences of Muslim women in Victoria after September 11 documented in this research demonstrate that instances of racism are not simply isolated, one-off incidents. Racism against Muslim women has a pervasive and persistent cyclical pattern, characterised by quiet periods of everyday racisms and incivility, which are interrupted by sharp rises in racism after international incidents of Muslim-related terrorism. This research demonstrated that non-Muslim Victorians’ perceptions of Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, are complex but nonetheless inextricably tied to Muslim women’s experiences of racism. What non-Muslim Victorians think of Muslim women affects these women’s lives and their potential for integration.

It is concerning to see the very limited contact non-Muslim Victorians appear to have with Muslims, particularly given that contact with Muslims generally leads to non-Muslim Victorians having a positive view of Muslims. Although non-Muslim Victorians assess their views of Muslims as positive, their beliefs and views of Muslim women are decidedly narrow and negative. If non-Muslim Victorians believe that Muslim women are generally oppressed and mistreated by their societies or religion, it begs the question of how it is possible for non-Muslim Victorians to have a positive view of Muslims. One possible explanation is that it is not that non-Muslim Victorians necessarily hold positive view of Muslims, rather they withhold their judgement because of a commitment to other values or beliefs. For example, a third of those surveyed gave ‘commitment to equal treatment’ as the reason for their positive view of Muslims. However, when views about Muslim women were elicited such considerations of equality of treatment received little consideration.

It is important to note that, at least for Muslim women who participated in this study, it was the fear of racism and not their mistreatment by their society or religion that restricted their freedom and independence.

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

Media constitutes a significant issue of concern for the majority of those who have participated in our research. Both groups surveyed believed that the media does not

“I’ve learned to do things for myself because no one is there to help you”

Media constitutes a significant issue of concern for the majority of those who have participated in our research. Both groups surveyed believed that the media does not appropriately represent issues connected with Islam and Muslims and felt that media representation affect how Muslims are viewed and treated. This is an important area for consideration, and requires further investigation and action.

Muslim women repeatedly stated that they were willing to assist in promoting positive intercultural relationships to improve the perceptions of Islam and Muslims, and to participate actively in the political and civil life of this country. However, priority must be given to locating effective means to protect women and their children from racism and abuse. The lack of protection and options for redress available to women who have experienced racism is extremely concerning. It is clear from this study that focus group participants felt they had been left to fend for themselves. Existing mechanisms for protection and complaint clearly do not appear to be working for women, with many articulating a lack of faith in the institutions established to protect them.

Although this research did not seek to explore or document the experiences of children, the research has exposed pressing issues relating to children, which require further investigation and follow up.

The effects of everyday racisms and incivility have clearly caused suffering, and worked against the inclusion of Muslim women and the protection of their human rights in Victoria. On the issue of racism, Muslim women feel that all levels of government have abandoned them.

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

Recommendations

“It is everyone’s responsibility, because that is the only way society changes”

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

- a support program that provides individual and group information, support, and counselling to Muslim women and their children who may be affected by racism. This program should have a special emphasis on assisting women to regain their sense of independence and freedom of movement. Priority should be given to black and dark skinned women, and women to wear the hijab or other forms of veiling;
- further research on the impact of racism and discrimination on Muslim children in Victoria;
- a Muslim women and children’s racism survival kit which provides information on racism, and existing options for redress and support;
- projects be established through local Councils to identify key ‘danger zones’ and establish local processes to increase the safety of women;
- improve the responsiveness of racism and discrimination complaints mechanisms;
- increase the capacity of community legal centres and other advocacy services to support and advocate on behalf on women and their children experiencing racism or discrimination;
- provide training for security related personnel (police, public transport staff, security guards) to better understand, identify and respond to racism and requests for assistance by those affected;
- capacity building, leadership and mentoring initiatives that promote Muslim women in community roles within the Muslim community and broader society;
- educate health professionals to screen Muslim women and their children for the effects and impacts of racism;
- empathy training and a pamphlet to assist bystanders to become aware of their options if they witness racism;
- establishment of a not-for-profit Centre Against Racism that monitors and evaluates the impact of racism, and designs education programs for the general public and targeted communities;
- to develop and implement an anti-racism community education strategy that is strategic and sustainable;
- promote and develop stronger relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Victoria through community activities, intercultural initiatives and events, and not just through interfaith activities;
- strengthen and support existing community education initiatives on Islam, Muslims and Muslim women; and
- adapt the Council’s existing Media Guide on Islam and Muslims for circulation to the education, business, community and government sectors.



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