



On the Road with Australian Muslim Mothers – An Outer Suburbs Roundtable

The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria’s (ECCV) roundtable discussion on the lived experiences of Australian Muslim mothers in Melbourne’s outer suburbs held in August 2015.

ECCV is the peak advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria. An invitation-only roundtable was held with Australian Muslim mothers in the south eastern suburban area of Melbourne, to discuss their recent experiences. A group of 14 Afghan women, supported by a Foundation House program coordinator and an interpreter, spoke with ECCV.

ECCV found that local residents, in particular Australian Muslim mothers and daughters, are distressed by high levels of discrimination from other local residents in the streets where they live, in parks and shopping centres and on roads with vehicles. The aggressive use of vehicles has escalated in the last two years. At the same time negative attitudes from other local residents towards these women and their children has become more overt.

Ongoing anecdotal evidence to ECCV from its members over the previous six months about their vulnerability convinced us to speak directly with these women whose voices are often overwhelmed in the debate on social cohesion. Their role at the heart of families is a unique witness to the emotional effects of social cohesion narratives which is not fully appreciated. Their lived experience is also rendered invisible by the language of policy.

Despite their concern for the growing confidence of right-wing extremist views, Australian Muslim mothers remain strongly supportive of their children’s future in Australia. They are upset by political and media narratives that contribute to a sense of loss of belonging to Australia which they, and their families, are resisting.

Key Consultation Feedback

Key points

Local residents, in particular Australian Muslim mothers and daughters, are distressed by high levels of discrimination in public places in one of the fastest growing outer suburban areas in Victoria.

The involvement of vehicles in acts of discrimination is escalating, causing genuine fears among Australian Muslim women and children for their safety.

Australian Muslim mothers and their school children have perceived some unconscious anti-Muslim and anti-migrant bias from teachers and other students in schools. Lower expectations for their children's future career prospects, especially daughters studying at university, is a deep cause of concern.

These women feel a diminished sense of belonging to Australia as a result of increasing discrimination and racism experienced through verbal and physical abuse in public places witnessed by other locals. The women noticed a growing confidence in the attacks and a lack of interest by Victoria Police to take them seriously.

To avoid reactions from other local residents in the streets where they live, in parks and shopping centres and on roads with vehicles, many Australian Muslim women avoid going out alone and are becoming increasingly socially isolated and "prisoners in their own homes." As a result, family tension is experienced by their husbands and sons.

Participant's insights

The following is a snapshot of issues raised by roundtable participants. The participants were Afghan speaking Australian Muslim mothers and ECCV engaged an interpreter to facilitate the conversation. Three of them chose to speak in English and would immediately translate their words to the other women in a session which was often emotional for all participants. Where a direct quote is made the reader is to assume that it came through the interpreter unless quotation marks are used to indicate the words were spoken in English.

- When we are driving in the car they drive aggressively around us and cut in front of us. They say bad things to us about our headscarves.
- We don't feel safe anymore because whenever we go out and we are wearing our

headscarves people in cars toot the horn at us. I'm not going to take off my scarf because of them.

- We had to make a Citylink toll payment so we drove to the local 7-Eleven store. I stayed in the car while my 19 year old daughter got out to go into the store. She was wearing a headscarf and another car narrowly drove past her very fast and she got really scared. We said nothing.
- I was going for a walk around the block after dinner with my husband last night when a car passed by and a lady screamed at us through the window. I didn't understand what she said but it was very loud. We don't feel comfortable when we go out anymore.
- I took my daughter for a drive in the car and we had to stop at a red light but the car behind us kept tooting the horn. The driver wound the window down and shouted f-words about Muslims and migrants. My daughter said let's go from another side street. However our boys and sons wouldn't react so calmly. When it happens with them they want to get out and fight especially if there's an attack on their mothers.
- When we moved into our house and the next door neighbours found out we were Muslims they used to hit our car with banana peels and apples when we went shopping. It gets worse in summer because more people come out.
- In summer they turn on their motorbikes close to our cars. When we walk the children to school they drive towards us in their cars and try to hit us. I thought the car would hit me with my little boy. There was a bystander who told them that they nearly hit the little boy and not to do that. My husband called the police. When a male police officer arrived the other driver was so calm and cool. The police didn't do anything.
- My daughter was coming home from university in the train and there was a professional man wearing a nice suit sitting near her. Her phone dropped on the ground and he kicked her in the shins and said, "Why

did you drop your phone?" And then said some bad words to her. She told him she was sorry, it happens to drop one's phone, and he still kept going on about it. She was wearing a headscarf.

- One day I had a headache and went for a walk to get some fresh air. A car passed me and the woman driver screamed at me and drove the car fast over the nature strip towards me. I was so scared I thought I was going to die and after that I decided not to go out for walks anymore.
- In another incident someone's daughter was on the train going to university and an older man said to her, "I want to get married to you and have sex with you" and she got up and changed her seat.
- My mum, wearing a headscarf went to the local shopping centre and got hit by a trolley pushed by another woman in the supermarket. The husband said, "Go back to your country you stupid Muslim," and they didn't say sorry. My mother didn't want to make a fuss about it. A lot of people keep it quiet because they don't want to make a big deal about it in public.
- My daughter who is studying for several years and is worried that she won't get a job because she is covering herself.
- Once the school asked why we don't allow our daughters to go swimming. They then found a solution to have days for Muslim girls only and that was good. Sometimes even we don't think of those solutions as we just stay quiet.
- There was a program in the school where the kids did some practice for dancing. I was sitting with a neighbour who was my daughter's best friend's mother and she asked me where I am from. I don't cover but told her I was a Muslim from Afghanistan. The next day my daughter came home crying and said her school friend's mother said they don't want to be friends with an Afghan girl. After that everything changed. They ask if you are Muslim and if you say "yes" everything changes.
- Australian Muslim women and their families are experiencing high levels of anxiety and fear in public places, and are losing trust in the

Victoria Police and local authorities to protect them.

- *(The following story is an inter-cultural incident)* When I wasn't married and working in an office my direct manager said so many bad things to me about Muslims and terrorism. When I was pregnant he said, "I hope you don't put a bomb on your child and make him into a suicide bomber." I was tired of being quiet and went home and cried so much.

My husband contacted my work and made a complaint to my manager's boss who said they don't tolerate racism and that man lost his job. The CEO and other managers were really good about it but they said they couldn't believe that he would say something like that. My husband talked to him really nicely and invited him for coffee to our house to see that we were nice, ordinary people but he refused. I put up with that bad behaviour for a very long time.
- When I was a social worker I took an Afghan woman to the doctor and after that we went to Medicare to make the claim. A woman confronted us and said, "You animals go back to your country." My client was in a poor state of depression and her mental health condition got worse after that. I have been living here for 20 years and never saw anything like this.
- I tell my husband and he worries about these things but he tells me not to stop my life because of that. He says we have to live here. I am particularly worried about my two daughters who go to university. They won't feel safe especially because of the way they dress.
- My kids needed a new school uniform. At the shop someone said in an aggressive tone, "Why are you wearing that bright pink colour? It's not your country here." I wanted to say it's not your country either - it belongs to the Aboriginal People, but didn't say anything.
- The problem with the police is they don't see that the conflict was provoked and they arrest the person who hits first. A lot of young Muslim boys get into fights because of these incidents.

- Parenting across cultures becomes more challenging when children get to adolescence. At primary school it's ok but it gets more complicated later. Sometimes intergenerational attitudes vary. We try hard to cooperate and fit in. My husband tells my son when they teach you cooking at school, don't reject the food dishes. Just eat it even if you don't like those tastes so you don't make yourself unpopular.
- My son was in school in Pakistan. School is a good experience here. We are very happy with the school here but there are two sides to the story. They are happy about school here because they don't get physical punishment by the teachers in Australia. However sometimes they get treated differently by teachers here because we believe some teachers are racist. For example some of our Year 9 students were not satisfied with the teachers because they were picking on them.
- My boy was very happy at school when he was little and then three years later he is shy and reticent and I don't know why. Maybe he has problems with other students or teachers.
- Sometimes we get treated differently. When the school celebrated Mother's Day they took a photo of each kid with their mother but not of me with my son, even though I signed the consent form and turned up at the school at the right time. I didn't say anything as I didn't want to make a fuss because of my son.
- I took my two sons to the park and an older kid said, "You can't play with that one, he's not from here."
- My husband who has a Muslim name was looking for a job for one year. When he changed his name he got a job.
- My son who is still under 18, is afraid he won't get a job after university. He wants to change his name from Mohamed so that he will get a job.
- All this is not necessary. When we are walking down the street and people are screaming at us - that is racism. There are professionals amongst us – engineers and teachers. If Muslims go for a job and have better qualifications, skills and knowledge, the local

Australians will get the jobs. That's discrimination in the workplace.

- A friend of mine with a PhD applied for a job and went through three stages of short-listing. She said when they saw her passport was from Afghanistan she didn't get the job.
- The public trusts the politicians and the media and they don't think about what is the real terrorism overseas. Some of us have been here for 10 and 15 years. Public attitudes towards Muslims have changed over the past few years. Five years ago people were approachable and supportive to us. These acts of racism and discrimination have increased over the last two years or so. Only in the last few years do people in the general public show those feelings that they don't like me and other Muslims from Afghanistan.
- Whatever the media says the public believes. People believe what the Prime Minister and the politicians say. I have been living here for 16 years but in the last two years I feel fear when I go out. They judge you by what you wear.
- A few years ago the neighbour who lived opposite us used to say "Hi, how are you?" but now she and the husband stopped doing that and we think, what have we done wrong?
- I came here 10 years ago but the people, and even the teachers, are not nice to us anymore. There used to be Australian women who stood up for us but not anymore.
- I noticed that a lot of racism arises from the media talking about ISIS and that's also from the stories of people arriving by boat and Australians feel they are taking their jobs.
- There was a newly established park and our families took our children to that park. We sat having cups of tea, the little children were playing in the playground and our older children were playing soccer. Some women came with dogs and they let the dogs off the leashes and sent them towards the children. Our children were screaming in fear and the women filmed it on their phones instead of taking back their dogs.

One of our 13 year old girls confronted the women and said it wasn't right doing that

because the little children were scared and the lady slapped her in the face. Our husbands came and the women with dogs drove away quickly. We called the police and they talked so nicely and wrote something but nothing happened.

- When people have a feeling of belonging they have to have a feeling of security. The reason we came here years ago was because of conflict and war in our country of origin where we didn't have feelings of security. Now after all those years again we are not feeling secure because of the Australian government and the media. How can we feel at home here when we go out and see the negative reaction in their eyes?
- Australia is a country of multiculturalism. We give thanks to the Australian government that they gave us the opportunity to come here. We have equal rights on paper but not in reality. You should not have the feeling of difference.
- We would like to tell the Ministers of Parliament: now that we have come to this country, thank you, but we want to contribute. We want an equal opportunity and please don't judge a book by its cover. Our children want to study. We don't want to be pushed aside for racist reasons.
- We would like the Government to consider what we can all do to bring us together with other Australians to teach them better understanding and bring them closer to us.

Future directions

- Expand social cohesion initiatives to address increasing displays of public racism in outer suburban growth areas.
- Focus on resourcing the cultural responsiveness and well-being of teachers and students in schools with growing Muslim and migrant enrolments.
- Develop more community engagement programs in the outer south eastern suburbs of Melbourne to assist better understanding between local residents and migrants and refugee families.

- Resource Victoria Police to build trust with Muslim communities in the outer south eastern suburbs while addressing the concerns of the wider local community.
- Reinvigorate programs and initiatives that welcome culturally diverse families into their local neighbourhoods.
- Conduct evidence-based research on the social impact of demographic changes in outer suburbs.

About ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs

ECCV's social cohesion policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on social cohesion issues. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members, leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We post our briefs online within two weeks.

The information is a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 41 years of consultation with multicultural Victorians.

To receive future ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs please subscribe by emailing eccv@eccv.org.au with the subject '**Subscribe to Social Cohesion PB**'.

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