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Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Racism has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, including in Victoria. Coordinated actions, political leadership and intensive collaboration between governments and communities are fundamental to avoid negative outcomes from the pandemic, which can worsen the sense of disconnection and isolation in our communities.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the strength that emerges when solidarity is practiced and individualism gives way for a deeper understanding of living in a community. With physical isolation being a feature of the “new normal” for months now, and potentially for some time ahead, many people have discovered our shared human vulnerability and are developing new ways of interacting socially and maintaining a sense of belonging to community.

Whilst the pandemic has offered us a moment to realise “we are all in this together,” it has also heightened fear and anxiety across society. In addition to the psychological impact of the virus itself, other stressors such as financial instability, family ruptures, and inability to plan ahead, have all contributed to a scenario in which inequality can increase and social divisions intensify. In this context, the rise of the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the midst of the global pandemic is a great reminder that despite the idea that “we are in this together,” racism and social exclusion, deepened through institutional practices, continue to divide us.

In Australia, the leadership exercised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the *Black Lives Matter* movement challenged non-Indigenous Australians to consider structures that permit racism to remain strong yet remain unspoken outside of target communities. The Victorian Government’s decision to work with the First People’s Assembly towards a truth and justice process, announced on 11 July 2020, is a remarkable step forward. Without the work of truth telling, racism is likely to continue to be the source of exclusion, not only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but for any group that can be targeted based on racial, religious and cultural characteristics.

As this brief indicates, racism has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, including in Victoria. Coordinated actions, political leadership and intensive collaboration between governments and communities are fundamental to avoid negative outcomes from the pandemic, which can worsen the sense of disconnection and isolation in our communities.

Background

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, racism was already a major concern for many communities and institutions promoting human rights, social cohesion and multiculturalism in Victoria. The Scanlon Foundation 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, which has for years monitored changes in social attitudes in Australia, found that even though Australians continue to support multiculturalism (85%), the percentage of individuals who experienced discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion was 19%, maintaining the upward trend observed since 2016. Support (‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’) for a discriminatory immigration policy based on race or ethnicity was high, and support for discrimination based on religion was even higher. The negative attitudes towards Muslims were confirmed by the number of Muslims who reported having experienced discrimination (42%) within the 12 months prior to the survey.^[1] Similarly, the Inclusive Australia’s Social Inclusion Index 2019 identified that prejudice amongst Australians was higher against religious and racial minorities (27%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (25%), than it was against other groups potentially excluded, such as women, LGBTBI people, and young people.^[2]

In Victoria, discrimination against the South Sudanese community markedly increased after the political and media construction of the 'African gangs' narrative in early 2018. Despite data showing a decrease in crime in Victoria, and the fact that individuals from South Sudanese backgrounds were a small proportion of the population of convicted criminals,[3] the media image of them as a dangerous group has negatively impacted the South Sudanese Australian community, and African Australians more broadly. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) reported a 34% increase in racially motivated incidents in the first half of 2018.[4] Racism has been manifested not only through microaggressions, but also through an increased perception amongst young African Australians that they are racially profiled by Victoria Police and discriminated against when searching for employment.

If skin colour has been the major 'visible' determinant of racism against the South Sudanese and other African Australian communities, religion has shaped discrimination against Muslim communities.[5] Various surveys have shown the increase in anti-Muslim attitudes in the world and in Australia since September 11, 2001. However, since the Christchurch massacre, discrimination against Muslims has intensified, with women wearing a headscarf being particularly vulnerable in public spaces. The Islamic Council of Victoria recently released the *Islamophobia Position Statement*, which provides clear and detailed analysis of the risks of rise in Islamophobia, characterised as a form of racism that "targets expressions of Muslimness and perceptions of Muslimness." [6]

Within this context, the activities led by far right groups in Victoria must be assessed by government. With the increasing use of social media, racial and religious vilification has intensified. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission reported a close to threefold increase in enquiries related to race vilification in 2019-2020, compared to 2018-2019.[7] At the same time, the Anti Defamation Commission has continuously denounced threats and abuses against the Jewish community, such as frequent incidents associated with the public use of the swastika, and verbal attacks directed towards the Jewish community, including against children in schools.[8]

It is important to note that racism occurs not only through the most obvious attacks in public spaces, but also frequently takes place within institutions, in workplaces and educational settings. While research and specific surveys are able to capture the range of discriminatory practices and attitudes, overall the deficiencies in consistent, official data collection and public reporting on racism remain a challenge. As Race Discrimination Commissioner Mr Chin Tan highlighted, "Given recent trends towards increased extremism and hate, there is need for a more systemic approach to collecting data about racism, whether criminal or not. In its absence, policy and resourcing decisions are being made without much needed information. It is hard to get ahead of any problem without a detailed understanding of its pervasiveness, localities and settings, where it is experienced most, and how it manifests." [9]

The COVID-19 Pandemic Implications

The arrival of COVID-19 in Australia saw a re-emergence of anti Asian attitudes and attacks. Primarily directed towards individuals of Chinese background and those of "east Asian appearance," these aggressions ranged from racist slurs to actual physical attacks, and blaming of the victims for the spread of the virus. At the start of the pandemic in February, the Australian Human Rights Commission recorded more complaints under the Racial Discrimination Act than at any time during the prior twelve months. Since February, a third of complaints received were related to COVID-19.[10] During March and April 2020, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission received a total of 97 enquiries (or 10.3% of all enquiries during that period) specifically related to COVID-19. Of those enquiries, 53% were related to racism or racial vilification.[11] Reinforcing this data, a national survey conducted by the Asian Australian Alliance in April received more than 300 reports of COVID-19 related racist incidents against Asians, with the majority of them being directed at women.[12]

Concerned with the risk that the rise of racism during the pandemic represented, ECCV and the Victorian Multicultural Commission hosted a closed roundtable in May. Many participants reported they knew of racism against 'Asian looking' individuals, including in regional Victoria. Participants spoke about the importance of improving the effectiveness of anti-vilification legislation, bystander training, and government leadership in speaking up against racism, as well as the need for better data and reporting.

In this regard the Community Reporting Tool (CRT), launched by the Victoria Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, and which can be hosted on the websites of local governments and community organisations, represents a positive move towards enabling easier, confidential reporting. [13] Since early March 2020, use of the CRT has almost doubled, mainly with reports of racist incidents. Of these reports, 50% were about racial or religious vilification.

Other minorities have also experienced COVID-19 related racism. The identification of an outbreak in northern Melbourne that may have involved a Muslim family, immediately raised concerns about generalised criticism against Muslim communities. At the same time, a Sky News journalist's misleading association of the new outbreak in Melbourne to the South Sudanese community spread misinformation and reinforced racism.[14] Anti-Semitism continues to be a major concern, with the Anti Defamation Commission denouncing online abuses, cartoons, and incidents such as the anti-Semitic, homophobic graffiti sprayed at a golf course in southeast Melbourne in May.[15]

Considering this context, the way in which the hard lockdown was implemented in the public housing estates of Flemington and North Melbourne engendered views about systemic racism. The heavy police intervention, coupled with a lack of early engagement with communities and appropriate health prevention measures in an at-risk environment, reinforced the perception that, unlike other Victorians, migrant and refugee communities, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, can be treated in ways that deny them voice, recognition of their knowledge and agency.

All these threats to community life and social cohesion justify the concerns, amongst community representatives and experts, that COVID-19 related racist incidents might increase once social distancing measures are eased and people begin to return to workplaces, schools and public spaces. From a public policy perspective, it is vital that the government and the media promote messages that highlight the contributions of our diverse communities to the COVID-19 response, and learn from the volunteers within each community, many of them young people, who have shown incredible capacity for emergency coordination and delivery of culturally appropriate support during this very difficult time. Considering the pandemic's impact on social cohesion, government and community organisations need to advance a clear message of unity through public campaigns and education of the general public, to prevent an escalation of social divisions.

ECCV Recommendations

Considering the current circumstances, ECCV recommends that:

- 1** The Victorian Government ensures the establishment of collaborative mechanisms for participation by the multicultural sector and diverse community members, including young people, throughout the process of design, implementation, and monitoring of COVID-19 responses.
- 2** In actions directed at migrants and culturally diverse communities, the Victorian Government promotes paid opportunities for bicultural workers and individuals who already work with specific communities to continue providing community engagement.
- 3** The Victorian Government ensures regular communication with multicultural organisations, faith organisations, community associations, and youth networks from various culturally and linguistically diverse communities, so that updated information is not only translated but it reaches all community members.
- 4** The Victorian Government supports public campaigns and school programs that educate all Victorians on the impacts of racism, as well as, on existing laws to protect against religious and racial discrimination and vilification, and reporting channels.
- 5** The Victorian Government invests in better data collection and reporting on racism and racially motivated crimes.
- 6** The Victorian Government reaffirms its commitment to human rights, and the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, which must be upheld even under emergency situations such as a lockdown.
- 7** That the Victorian Parliament uses the opportunity presented by the current Inquiry into Anti Vilification Protections to reform the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, making it more accessible to victims, strengthening the provisions for online vilification, and including an intersectional approach that recognises overlapping sources of discrimination.

Endnotes

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