



YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

NEW SOUTH WALES

Report to the Minister for Youth on Social Inclusion and Young Muslim People

BACKGROUND

On 28 February 2008 the Minister for Youth, the Hon. Linda Burney, met with the Youth Advisory Council and asked it to provide advice to the Government on ways in which the Government can work collectively to break down negative perceptions of young Muslim people. The Minister requested that the Council examine the issues around social inclusion and young Muslim people with particular reference to volunteering. The Minister asked the Council to consult with young people in South Western Sydney, such as Lakemba, Canterbury and Auburn.

The Council took a number of steps in preparation for the consultations with young Muslim people in South West Sydney. This included undertaking literature reviews of information that has direct relevance to their work on this issue including:

- *Muslim youth's experiences of and attitudes towards volunteering*, Volunteering Australia, June 2007
- *Into the Looking Glass: Report on Muslim Youth*, Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR), 2007.

In order to become better informed on the issue the Council invited two guest speakers to their meetings. The first was Kuranda Seyit, Executive Director of the Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations, who spoke to the Council on the intrinsic role of volunteerism in the practice of Islam. The second speaker was Scott Marshall, Diversity Officer at Surf Life Saving NSW, who spoke to the Council about the Surf Life Saving NSW program 'On The Same Wave'.

CONSULTATIONS

On Thursday 24 July the Council members undertook consultations with 245 young Muslim people in South West Sydney. Council members visited seven schools in this area, four public and three private. Each of these consultations involved discussing issues related to young Muslim people and volunteering.

After consulting with a wide range of Muslim young people it became clear to the Council that although all participants identified themselves as 'Muslim', they were in no way identifiable as a homogenous group. The group of young people consulted included practising and non-practising Muslims, as well as Muslims from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. It is clear that Muslim young people are influenced by a combination of mainstream Australian society, Islamic culture and their ethnic background¹. Both cultural background and religious beliefs have an important influence on young people's views on volunteering and community participation. It is also clear that different cultural backgrounds and values influence the interpretation and practice of Islam in different ways. While a number of common religious themes in relation to volunteering and charity were identified in the consultations, it is not possible to conclusively suggest that all young people who identify as Muslim will display similar beliefs with regards to this issue.

The term 'volunteering' is used throughout this document to refer to all types of voluntary work. It was noted during the consultations that young Muslim people often refer to this kind of activity as 'charity work' and 'community work'. During the consultations it emerged that many young Muslim people were not aware that the term 'volunteering' included the kind of activities they were involved in. When this issue was explored further the Council found that many of the participants were involved in informal volunteering or volunteering within the local Islamic community. These activities included helping out at school, helping out at the Mosque, helping family/friends/neighbours, helping fellow students, fundraising and donations (eg. time, money, goods). Currently, much of the voluntary work carried out by young Muslims in Australia is not formally recorded or recognised².

A small number of the young people were already involved in or had previously been involved in volunteering activities with mainstream volunteering organisations³. These young people felt that their experiences volunteering with mainstream organisations had been positive ones, and they would encourage other young people to volunteer with these types of organisations.

The majority of young people who participated in the consultations expressed a positive attitude towards volunteering. As discussed above, many of participants were already involved in volunteering activities, although they did not initially identify these as 'volunteering'. The groups consulted identified a number of factors which motivated them to participate in volunteering. The most common factors were:

- Helping others
- Empathy/sympathy
- Gaining skills, knowledge and experience
- Building self-confidence

¹ *Young Muslim Women's Participation in Sports and Recreation*, Youth Affairs Network Queensland, June 2008.

² *Research: Supporting Volunteering Activities in Australian Muslim Communities, Particularly Youth*, Volunteering Australia, June 2007.

³ In this document the term 'mainstream volunteering organisations' or 'mainstream volunteering' refers to volunteering opportunities with large well established organisations, eg. the Red Cross, The Smith Family, St Vincent de Paul, The Benevolent Society, The Salvation Army.

- Feeling good/satisfaction
- Receiving recognition or rewards (non-monetary)
- Family and friends

These motivating factors, to varying degrees, are common across all groups in society that undertake volunteering. Also identified were a number of common motivating factors that relate more specifically to young Muslim people. These included:

- Religious or cultural beliefs or practices
- Changing the perceptions of young Muslim people
- Breaking down cultural barriers and learning more about other cultures

The consultations also identified a number of barriers to volunteering for young Muslim people. These included factors that are common to all groups in society, including:

- Time commitments
- Study/education commitments
- Location and transport difficulties
- Lack of confidence or skills
- Family commitments
- Organisation 'red tape'

A number of barriers to volunteering were identified which relate more specifically to young Muslim people. These included:

- Religious commitments
- Religious or cultural practices and beliefs
- A lack of awareness and understanding of mainstream volunteering organisations
- The perception of Muslim volunteers being unwelcome in mainstream organisations

COMMENT

A number of key issues were identified during the consultations, and these were common across the majority of groups that were consulted. These issues are related to generally to volunteering, as this was the focus of the consultations. However common issues were identified relating specifically to young Muslim people and social inclusion. Detail on each of the key issues is provided below.

Religion

The majority of young Muslim people consulted indicated that Islam was an important influence on their views on volunteering. Many participants noted that Islam encourages 'charity' and felt motivated by their religious beliefs and practices to participate in volunteering activities. Some participants indicated that they or their families regularly donated to charity, and many of them had previously participated in fundraising or charitable activities.

Some participants felt that the practice of their religion was a barrier to participating in mainstream volunteering activities. This was mainly due to time commitments related to participating in religious activities, such as prayer times and attending the Mosque. There were also some young people who felt that volunteering organisations might not be accepting of their religious practices, such as praying five times per day, or for women, wearing the hijab.

It is clear from the consultations and from other research available on this issue that Muslim young people are enthusiastic about volunteering⁴. It would also appear to follow that organisations that demonstrate a strong commitment to including volunteers from diverse backgrounds would be more likely to attract young Muslim volunteers. It is also clear that young Muslim people do not want to be singled out as a special group that requires specific attention. However it is important for volunteering organisations to be aware of various religious practices that will help young Muslim people to feel more comfortable volunteering with their organisation. These include:

- Prayer times – required five times per day in a suitable location
- Avoidance of alcohol
- Females wearing the hijab
- No female-male contact allowed

Culture

The young Muslim people who participated in the consultations were from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. This reflects the diversity of the greater Muslim population in NSW. There is a common misunderstanding in Australia generally that equates 'Arabs' with 'Muslims'⁵. It is important to note that the largest proportion of Muslims in Australia are Australian born⁶. Of those that were born overseas, less than 20% were born in the Middle East or North Africa. The Muslim population in Australia includes migrants from countries such as Ghana, Malaysia, India, Iran, Vietnam and South Africa⁷.

While Muslim religious beliefs and practices are generally a motivating factor for young Muslim people to volunteer, it is important to understand that different cultural backgrounds and beliefs will influence the views of young Muslim people on volunteering in different ways.

⁴ *Muslim Youth's Experiences and Attitudes towards Volunteering*, Volunteering Australia, August 2006.

⁵ *Young Muslim Women's Participation in Sports and Recreation*.

⁶ *A Background Brief on Muslims in Australia*, Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre, Kings Cross, NSW, 2003.

⁷ *Supporting volunteering activities in Australian Muslim communities, particularly youth*.

In many cases a young person's culture will support volunteering as a worthwhile activity, while in some cases cultural values and beliefs may have a negative impact on their access to volunteering opportunities and their views on volunteering in general.

Family

Many of the participants in the consultations indicated that their family was or would be an important motivating factor in participating in volunteering activities. The support of family, especially parents, is an important factor in influencing the views of young Muslim people with regards to volunteering activities. Some young Muslim people felt that participating in volunteering activities helped to develop a good reputation for their family and themselves among the local Muslim community.

Some families may be concerned about some aspects of young Muslim people volunteering. This includes prioritising study and career commitments, a preference for young women to participate in volunteering during the day, and concern about the type of volunteering activity that the young people are involved in.

Gender

The consultations undertaken by the Council and other research indicate that young Muslim women are much more likely to have been involved in or be currently involved in volunteering activities, despite there being more barriers identified to young Muslim women's participation than young Muslim men. This reflects the trend in the community in general for more women to be involved in volunteering than men⁸. The results of the consultations that the Youth Advisory Council undertook in 2007 on volunteering also reflected this trend. Young Muslim men are more likely to respond to volunteering opportunities when asked or invited to participate⁹.

Religious and cultural practices with regards to gender can create some barriers to young Muslim women's participation in volunteering. In particular, restrictions on male and female contact and interaction can mean that some volunteering opportunities are not suitable for young Muslim women. The consultations also indicated that in some cases parents are less likely to allow their daughters to participate in volunteering than their sons, as they have a more protective attitude towards young women. Some young Muslim women felt that another barrier to volunteering is the fact that many of them wear the hijab. They felt that there is a lack of understanding and acceptance from mainstream volunteering organisations about why Muslim women wear the hijab, and this discourages them from putting themselves forward for volunteering activities.

School

A number of young Muslim people who participated in the consultations had undertaken organised volunteering through their school. Providing information on volunteering and volunteering opportunities through schools can be an effective way of encouraging young Muslim people to participate in volunteering. However, the level of awareness and participation in volunteering activities differs between public and private schools, with private schools having more organised volunteering activities for students.

The consultations identified a number of important factors which can influence young Muslim people's decisions about volunteering. Many students, especially young women, said that they would feel more comfortable and be more likely to participate in volunteering with friends or fellow students. Participants also indicated that they would be more likely to

⁸ The Centre for Volunteering, Volunteering Statistics, http://www.volunteering.com.au/tools_and_research/volunteering_statistics.asp

⁹ *Muslim Youth's Experiences of and Attitudes Towards Volunteering*.

participate in volunteering opportunities that fit in well with and did not interfere with their study schedule.

Volunteering Organisations

Many of the young Muslim people consulted indicated that they were currently or had previously participated in volunteering activities, however these were mainly informal and local community based activities. Although there was some limited awareness of mainstream volunteering organisations, there were only a small number of young people who had volunteered with mainstream organisations. Muslim young people are less informed about volunteering opportunities outside of their communities¹⁰ than other young people in NSW.

An important factor that comes into play when young Muslims are considering volunteering is the culture of the volunteering organisation. Many larger mainstream organisations are perceived by Muslim young people as not welcoming or suitable for Muslim volunteers. Many young Muslims mistakenly believe that organisations are faith based (predominantly Christian) when they are not, and this makes them unlikely to choose to participate in the activities of this organisation. Volunteering organisations can play an important role in providing information to young Muslim people on their organisational culture and activities to remove the barrier of potential religious conflicts. Organisations also need to improve their ability to effectively attract and include young Muslim volunteers in volunteering activities. There are however a number of barriers and limitations faced by volunteering organisations that may affect their ability to implement this kind of program.

Muslim Identity

It is clear from the consultations and other research that young Muslim people in NSW are concerned with a number of issues that relate to Muslim identity within the context of Australia¹¹. The young Muslims consulted very clearly articulated their dissatisfaction and frustration with the current media coverage of Muslims in Australia. They feel that the media encourages negative stereotyping of Muslim, especially young people. These feelings about negative stereotypes have an important influence on the decisions young Muslims make about participating in mainstream community activities, including volunteering.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this report, it is important to recognise the impact of different cultural and religious practices on the attitudes of young Muslim people to volunteering and community participation. Those people who identify as 'Muslim' in Australia are by no means an homogenous group, and indeed their cultural, religious and social practices and beliefs vary enormously. Any strategy which aims to encourage better participation of young Muslim people in volunteering and other community activities must take this into account, and recognise that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not appropriate.

¹⁰ *Muslim youths experiences and attitudes towards volunteering.*

¹¹ *Supporting volunteering activities in Australian Muslim communities, particularly youth.*

ADVICE TO THE MINISTER

The Council would like to provide the following recommendations to the Minister in response to the request for advice on ways in which the Government can break down negative perceptions of young Muslim people. The majority of the advice involves practical strategies related to volunteering, however there is also some more general advice on strategies related to young Muslim people and social inclusion.

It is recommended that the Government:

1. *Better utilise the schools network for promoting volunteering organisations and opportunities.*
This could include initiatives such as volunteering expos in schools and having mainstream volunteering organisations visiting schools. Volunteering NSW currently runs a program that introduces mainstream volunteering organisations to young people in schools called the Student Community Involvement Program (SCIP). This program has not yet been delivered in any private Muslim schools. This strategy could also include encouraging volunteering organisations to involve role models and people with first hand experience, preferably Muslim young people, to undertake promotion of volunteering activities.
2. *Encourage mainstream volunteering organisations to become more responsive to the needs of young Muslim volunteers.*
This could be undertaken in partnership with an organisation such as Volunteering NSW. This could include encouraging organisations to establish and maintain links with leaders in the Muslim community. It may also include undertaking internal change management and cultural training with staff to ensure that the organisation is welcoming and accepting of young Muslim volunteers.
3. *Create a Government grants program for volunteering organisations and community groups to promote the inclusion of young Muslim people in volunteering activities.*
4. *Create an award for organisations who undertake successful programs to encourage inclusion of young Muslim people in their activities.* This would reward organisations that develop good practices and successfully include young Muslim people.
5. *Provide Government funding to appropriate agencies for social inclusion initiatives.*
6. *Promote these strategies within relevant national frameworks and forums.*

REFERENCES

A Background Brief on Muslims in Australia, Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre, Kings Cross, NSW, 2003.

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Supporting Volunteering Activities in Australian Muslim Communities, Particularly Youth, Volunteering Australia, June 2007.

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