

MEDIA RELEASE

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NEW REPORT REVEALS EFFECTS OF HOMOPHOBIA AND RACISM ON SAME SEX ATTRACTED ARAB-AUSTRALIANS

A new report has for the first time ever documented the effects of homophobia on same sex attracted (SSA) Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, while also drawing attention to racism and stereotyping within the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

The ground-breaking report – to be officially launched by NSW MLCs John Ajaka and Helen Westwood at 1pm on Tuesday 10 April at NSW Parliament House – is based on a consultation with SSA men and women from Arabic backgrounds in NSW, as well as family members, community and welfare workers, and religious and community leaders from NSW's Arab communities. The respondents were from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds.

Titled *We're Family Too*, the report has been produced with the support of ACON – NSW's leading GLBT health organisation – and the Arab Council Australia.

While reflecting positively on their cultural roots, most SSA respondents reported experiencing homophobic hostilities, often from within their own families and communities. Verbal abuse, being pressured to 'act straight' and being victim to rumours were the most commonly reported experiences among the 37 SSA survey respondents. A third reported threats of violence, with a quarter having actually experienced homophobic violence.

Many SSA respondents felt that disclosing their sexuality or challenging homophobia within the Arab community was difficult due to a cultural emphasis on maintaining collective harmony, the need to show respect to elders and a concern for bringing shame on themselves and their families.

Significantly, nine community and religious leaders were part of the consultation. While none advocated violence against homosexuals, the majority considered exclusion or corrective interventions (such as 'cures') an appropriate response in order to discourage homosexual behaviour.

The report also highlighted a significant gap in understandings of homosexuality in Arab communities with a dominant perception of homosexuality as a Western import, a choice and/or an illness. One in five SSA participants reported having been taken to a doctor or religious leader to be 'cured'.

The report also reveals that within the GLBT community, many people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds experience racism and ethnic stereotyping, and are frustrated by what they perceive as an undue emphasis on sex, drugs and body image.

In answer to negative experiences in both the Arab and GLBT communities, SSA respondents reported creating their own networks and spaces where they can freely acknowledge and celebrate their sexuality and cultural identities.

Report author Ghassan Kassisieh says the report opens an important conversation for the first time.

"The report is titled *We're Family Too* and that's the key message. SSA Arabs are saying to their families and communities, we exist and we must talk about the pain that homophobia is inflicting on us and the people who love us," Mr Kassisieh says.

"Yet despite the homophobia experienced, the participants in the report keep coming back to the great value they place on their family and culture, and the desire for a more inclusive and supportive relationship with the people who love them."

Arab Council CEO Randa Kattan says while the Arab community is not alone in having negative attitudes to homosexuality, the Arab community in Australia needs to address the effects of homophobia.

“GLBT people from Arabic backgrounds are a valid and vibrant part of the Arab community and to exclude them or be violent towards them is destructive at all levels,” Ms Kattan says.

“The discrimination and marginalisation that GLBT people experience in both the Arab community and broader society is a human rights issue. The wellbeing of people in our community should always be our priority and we need to work together to make everyone in our community feel like they belong.”

ACON CEO Nicolas Parkhill says homophobia and racism has a major impact on the health of GLBT people.

“The provision of human rights impacts directly on a person’s wellbeing,” Mr Parkhill says.

“For many people, the experience of discrimination, social exclusion and violence leads to a range of health concerns, especially mental health issues. It also limits their access to services, opportunities and social networks and creates an environment which affects their ability to make good choices about their health and wellbeing. We look forward to working with both the Arab and GLBT communities to help increase respect for diversity and to improve the health and safety of GLBT people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.”

The report recommends a range of initiatives including education campaigns featuring role models and ambassadors from both the GLBT and Arab communities; better support services for GLBT Arab-Australians and their families including support groups, online information, counselling and resources; and an increased commitment to cultural and artistic endeavours by SSA people in Arab communities.

The full report as well as information about support services is available at **www.wearefamilytoo.info**

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