

It is my honour to be speaking in support of the ACON 'We're Family Too' Report Launch.

ACON is Australia's largest community-based organisation dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

Today, their focus is on the Arabic-speaking community of New South Wales, and the need to address underlying trends of homophobia surrounding homosexual members. Homophobia must be removed.

Whilst homophobia exists in all communities, its existence in the Arab community contradicts the compassionate, hospitable emphasis of the Arab culture.

In 2007, as I indicated in my Inaugural Speech, I entered Parliament for a number of reasons.

'The first was to fight prejudice. This was driven by my desire to promote Australia's great society, progression and ability to embrace difference; to accept and include and embrace.'

The second reason was 'to fight injustice. As Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."'

Today, these endeavours remain a high priority in my work.

That is why I am proud to be a part of ACON's 'We're Family Too' Launch.

I am the father of 6 daughters, constantly working to protect them from the feelings of animosity and prejudice of any form whatsoever. I understand that any parent would feel the same.

So why should prejudice based on sexuality be ignored?

According to ACON's research, indicated in chapter three of the report, 88% of participants experience a reigning sense of hostility from members of the Arab community. This is far too high, and stems from issues such as a lack of understanding.

Misconceptions include the beliefs that homosexuality is a choice, unnatural, and a Western notion. As a result, some community members have experienced homophobic acts such as hurtful rumours, verbal abuse, pressure to act 'straight', threats of violence, intimidation or acts of physical violence.

These mistaken community attitudes are unjustly harming the homosexual members of the community, as well as members of their families.

However, it would be erroneous to attribute homophobia to the entire Arabic-speaking community. I credit those who support and accept same-sex lifestyles and initiatives.

For instance, one girl spoke highly of her gay brother, I quote: "I developed a really strong pursuit to giving it a voice after my brother came out. To generate some kind of honouring for him and for how beautiful he is."

These attitudes should be adopted. Family should be respected, accepted, and celebrated. If more members of the community implemented this attitude, the large proportion of individuals who fear disclosure of their sexuality would be diminished, and the community's bond strengthened.

'Coming out' should be a time of liberation and self-affirmation for the individual. Not a time of fear and rejection.

But in order to protect 'familial honour and reputation' within one's community, many are left feeling silenced and trapped. The report reveals some families develop a greater level of homophobia, burdening the individual with issues of self-acceptance. The research attributes this to cultural silence, as individuals and their family's feel a need to remain secretive of sexuality, for protection.

I quote from one of the participants: "I don't feel I could ever be 'out' in the Arabic community without bringing my family to shame. It does make you feel somewhat trapped."

The report shows that as a result, a greater proportion of Arabic-speaking homosexuals have chosen to disclose their sexuality to non-Arab friends, as opposed to Arab friends.

Many are also turning to gay and lesbian organisations and services, like ACON, as support networks and a form of acceptance. Some participants specified that the organisations and services available to homosexuals of the Arabic-speaking community were culturally inappropriate.

One interviewee said that these services "... don't get the complexity of living as an Arab in the current climate... There is no one from the community represented in these organisations, especially Muslim people, to help with the delivery of services."

Hence, many members of the Arab community are seeking services that focus on educating their community, supporting their families and dispelling some of the myths about being gay that exist in the Arab community.

ACON's 'We're Family Too' will see the development of initiatives dedicated to the support and understanding of homosexuality in the Arab community.

There is a strong division in the community between those who see homophobia as the problem, and those who see homosexuality as the problem. It is vital that these sides are unified through an informed understanding, further strengthening the Arabic-speaking community.

Those isolated by homophobia are being deprived of their right to embrace their culture, and in turn, be embraced by their community.

I quote from one of the participants: "That's the best thing about our community; that close-knit aspect. When that close-knit aspect can be used in a positive way, it's actually really beautiful."

The values of compassion and familial intimacy that characterise the Arab culture should not be lost to ignorance. Individuals of different sexual orientations should be of no exception. They are family too.

In the 80s, ACON led one of the world's most successful campaigns in response to HIV Aids and the myths regarding homosexuality.

Today, we see ACON working in our community to address misconceptions surrounding homosexuality, and dispel homophobia.

I am proud to be a part of ACON's launch of the 'We're Family Too' initiative, and trust that our community's ideals of love, understanding and compassion will prevail.