

**RANDA KATTAN**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
**ARAB COUNCIL AUSTRALIA**  
**WE'RE FAMILY TOO LAUNCH**  
**NSW Parliament House, Jubilee Room**  
**TUESDAY 10 APRIL 2012**

Thank you Helen

Good morning everyone

I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and I pay my respect to their elders past, present and future. I acknowledge that this land was and will always be aboriginal land.

I am proud to be standing here with you all today to take part in launching this groundbreaking report – a report that I consider a first step towards including people from our community who for so long have been rendered invisible, ostracized and excluded.

Homophobia exists in all communities, in all religions and in all races. The Arab community is not alone in having negative attitudes to same sex attracted people. The idea that same sex attraction is contrary to cultural and religious values is prevalent in all communities. Equally common are descriptive terms such as disgusting, a sickness, a choice, unnatural, a risk to children and that it leads to AIDS.

A distinctive belief in our community however, is that this is a western import and that it doesn't exist or it exists but not to the same extent in Arab communities.

Well, same sex attraction exists in the Arab community, in our families and in all religions. Those believing and saying otherwise and those perpetuating homophobic attitudes could well be the people who are denying support and causing untold pain and suffering to a son, a daughter, a grandchild, a brother, a sister, a nephew or a niece; condemning them and their families to a life of marginalized existence fearful of being exposed and shamed.

And what about the shame and honour factors that we hold in such high regards inside our families and community? To what extent will we allow these to take priority over the well-being, safety and quality of life of members of our families?

Community attitudes and misconceptions about same sex attraction need to be challenged and addressed.

And with the launch of the "We're Family Too" report, we believe we have opened up the dialogue we need to have inside our community.

This is a report that has a long history dating back to 2004. My organisation, Arab Council Australia has been involved in facilitating the process alongside ACON, Beit el Hob and others from the very beginning.

Back then, we didn't know where the research was going to lead us or how we were going to deal with this sensitive and taboo subject in the community. I recall a time when many were mortified that we are even contemplating such a project!

We debated long and hard on how to lead on this. How do we bring it out in the open? Is the timing right or not? We considered the myriads of issues the community is facing and the fact that we have been the target of racism and systematic discrimination for a long time. We deliberated over concerns that we were placing the community in a vulnerable position; in the spotlight to be collectively attacked in public yet again, portrayed as violent when this is not the case.

So what do we do? Do we wait some more for things to shift? For the community to be ready and we follow?

We decided to lead the dialogue on homophobia. We believe that unless we bring the discussion out in the public domain, things will not change and same sex attracted people from our community and their families will continue to suffer and to be ostracized.

We believe that opening up the discussions, irrespective of the negative attention that the community might receive, speaks to our strengths. It says that we are open to take a hard look at ourselves so we can progress beyond our fears. It also conveys that we as Arab Australians understand too well the pain of exclusion and how harmful and detrimental it is to

people's well being and quality of life. So knowing this, how could we inflict this pain onto a valid and vibrant part of our community? How could we inflict it on our own? How could we go on marginalising each other?

We at Arab Council Australia pride ourselves on our capacity to work inclusively across diversity. To us, working inclusively is not only about getting along with other cultures. It is much deeper than this. It is about the universality of human rights for all persons. It's about making sure that we embrace all people regardless of gender, race, religion, sexuality, colour, disability, age and so on.

We know that the road ahead is going to be hard and painful - most likely for a long time. But the wellbeing of all people in our community is always our priority and we will continue to work towards ensuring that everyone belongs.

Nevertheless, I feel that things are shifting. The wider debate in Australia and around the world relating to the rights of same sex attracted people is having its impact on communities. More and more same sex attracted people from Arabic speaking background are organising and speaking out with groups like Club Arak and Beit el Hob providing support and social connections; the Arab media coverage of this issue and the "We're Family Too" is unprecedented; and our organisation with the unanimous support of the Board, has taken a leading role in this process

Needless to say that we are also committed to continue working in the long term with ACON, Arab background same sex attracted people and government agencies on realising the report's recommendations.

In closing I would like to thank, on behalf of Council's Board, staff and volunteers, all the people who gave this report life and brought a taboo and highly sensitive subject out in the open.

My deepest appreciation to Ghassan Kassisieh the author of "We're Family Too" and members of the steering committee. Your work, commitment and persistence over the years ensured that that this document is seeing the light of day. So chapeau bas everyone!

I would also like to thank ACON, our partner in this journey for their commitment to this process and for all the support provided over the years. Particular thanks to ACON's Board, its CEO Nic Parkhill and the ACON team for getting us to this stage.

And thank you all for joining us today in what is a significant moment in the life of our community. I would particularly like to acknowledge The Hon John Ajaka and the Hon Helen Westwood for their invaluable support to this launch.

It's been an absolute privilege to have been involved in this pioneering work.

I look forward to the day when we are not as driven by our fears of shaming the family but more by our love and wanting the best that life can bring for our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our grandchildren and nephews and nieces. And with everyone's efforts and with more and more people refusing to be silenced, our community will one day have a place for everyone.

Thank you.