

'WE'RE FAMILY TOO'

A report into the effects of homophobia in
Arabic-speaking communities in NSW



Arab Council Australia
المجلس العربي استراليا



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REPORT SUMMARY

METHODOLOGY

- A largely qualitative methodology was used to survey the experiences and opinions of people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. In addition to an online survey, there were:
 - two focus groups with 7 same-sex attracted (SSA) men and 5 SSA women;
 - a focus group with 11 community and welfare workers, and
 - one-on-one interviews with 9 community and religious leaders and 6 family members from three families.
- 37 valid responses were received to the online survey of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Of the sample, 26 respondents identified as male and 11 as female, just under 2/3rds were Australian-born, and 60% identified as Christian and 30% identified as Muslim. The majority of survey respondents were from Lebanese background, under the age of 34 and located in South West and Inner West Sydney.

KEY FINDINGS

Understanding Homophobia In Arab Communities

- Almost all participants perceived that hostile attitudes existed towards gays and lesbians in Arab communities. There was a strong division between participants who saw homophobia as the problem and those – mainly some community and religious leaders – who saw homosexuality as the problem.
- Participants who saw homophobia as a problem said reasons underlying hostile attitudes included:
 - the interconnection between religious and cultural values;
 - the centrality of heterosexual relations for life progression;
 - patriarchal structures and rigidly defined gender roles; and
 - a lack of understand or education about sexuality in general.
- These participants said such attitudes persisted because of:
 - socio-economic and cultural marginalisation
 - the unchallenged (views of elders being passed down to younger generations – it was disrespectful to challenge the views of elders
 - the importance of maintaining personal and familial reputation or 'honour' – this made it harder to challenge homophobia or claim an SSA identity because it was perceived as bringing shame on the family; and
 - religious values and cultural mores which mutually reinforced each other.
- A few community and religious leaders suggested that hostile attitudes towards homosexuality were positive virtues, although none supported actual physical violence being used against SSA people. They variously saw (or said others in Arab communities saw) homosexuality as contrary to cultural and religious values, a Western import, non-existent or less prevalent in Arab communities, disgusting, contagious, a sickness, curable, a choice, unnatural, immoral, a risk to children and/or leading to AIDS.
- Participant responses revealed a complex and nuanced interaction between religious values and homophobic beliefs. In some cases, religious values and beliefs were used to justify homophobic attitudes, whilst in other cases religious values helped analyse or challenge the non-acceptance of homosexuality, or specific homophobia-related attitudes and hatred.

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Experiences Of Homophobia

- SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds reported homophobic experiences and violence directed towards them by people from within and outside Arab communities. Rumours being spread about them, verbal abuse and being pressured to act 'straight' were the most commonly reported experiences, with the spreading of rumours said to be more likely to originate from people within Arab communities.
- More than a third of the SSA survey respondents reported threats of violence or intimidation and one quarter reported physical violence from people within Arab communities. Seven out of 32 reported being taken to a doctor or religious leader to be cured.
- Disclosure
- SSA survey respondents were more likely to disclose their sexuality to gay and lesbian friends from Arab-speaking backgrounds, non-Arab friends and work colleagues. Fathers and religious leaders were least likely to be told.
- Key reasons given for the non-disclosure of sexuality were fears of a negative reaction, a sense of duty and commitment to family members to not bring shame upon the family (honour), a sense of being unready, or a desire to keep with cultural norms of sexuality as 'private'. A desire for openness, self-affirmation and self-determination were the main reasons given for disclosure.

Support

- For SSA survey respondents who had disclosed their sexuality to families, siblings were more likely to be supportive, followed by mothers and then fathers. For those who had not disclosed their sexuality to family, fathers and extended families were perceived as least likely to be supportive. SSA participants spoke of varying levels of support within families but many spoke of partial or complete familial rejection.
- Supportive family members who knew about their relative's sexuality spoke of a tension resulting from the need to simultaneously support their SSA relatives and defend them from homophobia, whilst concealing their relatives' sexuality from other family members, and maintaining family honour. Some family members felt very alone.
- Friendships with other SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds were highlighted by SSA participants as great sources of support.
- Community and welfare workers said there was a gap in health and welfare services in both Arab and GLBT communities which simultaneously addressed sexuality and cultural needs.
- Some SSA participants spoke of isolated instances of quiet support from religious leaders. However, 6 of the 9 community and religious leaders interviewed held views ranging from moderate compassion (yet disapproval) to outright hostility towards lesbians and gay men.

Experiences within GLBT communities

- SSA participants had varying experiences of GLBTQ communities and the commercial scene. For those who expressed dissatisfaction with GLBTQ communities and/or the scene, reasons given were perceived features (such as drugs, an emphasis on sex and body image) as well as experiences of racism (feeling ignored or invisible because of ethnicity or being fetishised or stereotyped into certain roles as a result of ethnicity or racial appearance).
- Out of 31 responses, 14 SSA survey respondents did not believe that gay, lesbian and queer organisations adequately addressed issues concerning Arab gays and lesbians, and a further 16 said they only 'partly' did so.

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Recommended Areas For Action

- Most participants felt that a sustained, grassroots public education campaign in partnership between GLBTQ and Arab communities was necessary to address misconceptions and misinformation about homosexuality. However, there was a concern amongst some about further stigmatising Arab communities. Some community and religious leaders reacted strongly against any campaign promoting acceptance of homosexuality.
- Support services directed specifically at SSA people and their families (including support groups, online information, counselling and resources) were also highlighted.
- Other suggestions for action included supporting people to speak out as role models within Arab communities, supporting cultural and artistic endeavours by SSA people in Arab communities and addressing wider social and legal discrimination (including racism and racial exclusion).

ENDS

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