

Submission into Australia's Multicultural Framework Review

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

28 September 2023

About us

This submission has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). The AMWCHR is an organisation of Muslim women leading change to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

We bring over 30 years of experience in providing one-to-one support to Muslim women, young women and children, developing and delivering community education and capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift prevailing attitudes. We also work as advocates - researching, publishing, informing policy decisions and reform initiatives as well as offering training and consultation to increase sector capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women, young women and children.

As one of the leading voices for Muslim women's rights in Australia, we challenge the most immediate and pertinent issues Muslim women face every day. We promote Muslim women's right to self-determination - recognising the inherent agency that already exists, and bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light.

AMWCHR works with individuals, the community, partner organisations and government to advocate for equality within the Australian context. This submission is designed to contribute greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges and barriers facing Muslim communities, and how these barriers should be addressed to realise a truly multicultural Australia.

Acknowledgement of Country

This submission recognises that gender, race, and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, particularly in a context of growing Islamophobia. It also recognises that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Before we can successfully tackle issues within our communities, we must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and discrimination in all its forms in this country.

AMWCHR acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands our organisation is located on and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. AMWCHR is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters, and seas and their rich contribution to society.



Introduction

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights thanks the Department of Home Affairs for the opportunity to submit a response to the Multicultural Framework Review (**The Review**). The theory, values, and policies of Multiculturalism have played an integral part in shaping Australian culture and society, both past and present. When looking to the future, however, there are many aspects of true multiculturalism that are yet to be realised. Systemic barriers to equality remain pervasive, and many individuals, families, and communities do not enjoy full inclusion, participation, and representation in Australian society, systems, and laws. This unfortunate reality is starkly relevant across much of the work we do at AMWCHR – through our community programs with Muslim, migrant, and refugee women and young women, to our family violence and settlement casework services.

This submission outlines AMWCHR's recommendations with regards to The Review, with key consideration given to the experiences of Muslim women, children, and families in Australia. While progress has been made in recent years, further and significant institutional, legislative and policy changes are required to advance a more equitable Australia. Such changes will enhance and incorporate the many social, cultural, and economic strengths that diverse communities provide, but which have traditionally been absent from recognition and inclusion in Australia's systems.

The content of this submission has been informed by consultation with AMWCHR's staff of diverse Muslim and migrant women, all of whom have deep knowledge of the impacts and consequences of Australia's inequitable services and systems. This document is also best read in conjunction with our previous submissions, research, and publications into many areas relevant to The Review, including:

- *Stand Out, Speak Up: Racism and Islamophobia in Victorian Schools (2023)*
- *Submission into the Early Years Strategy (2023)*
- *Submission into Australia's Humanitarian Program (2022)*
- *Submission into The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2021)*
- *Australian Muslims' Experiences of Policing and Surveillance (2020)*
- *Submission into Review of Terrorism Act 2003 (2020)*
- *Supporting Muslim Families and Children in Dealing with Islamophobia (2020).*

The content herein should be considered an extension of these publications, with additional focus given to topics which have particular relevance to The Review, but which we have not yet written extensively on.

Language and terminologies

Language is forever changing and responding to trends and shifting considerations. Certain terms such as social cohesion and other popular terms are often used to encourage assimilation into one homogenous society, with whiteness being the norm to aspire towards. AMWCHR believes that there needs to be a top-down approach to support the ground up resistance to terms that normalise whiteness and minimise or obscure complexity and diversity.

Multiculturalism:

The world 'multiculturalism' has many different meanings for different people. While some view multiculturalism in terms of the positive change it encourages, other view it as an ineffective and superficial ideal.

Some perceptions of multiculturalism include:

- 'Multiculturalism' is a westernised term that can obscure the ongoing issues of racism and Islamophobia.
- Multiculturalism can be weaponised as a form of othering of migrant and refugee communities.
- In its truest form, Multiculturalism must be reflective of an all-inclusive understanding of diversity that positions white cultures within the collective understanding of multiculturalism rather than its use exclusively for non-white cultures.
- Multiculturalism can obscure the multi-dimensional nature of diverse cultural identities and the interplay with other social identities for individuals and communities.

Recommendation:

Ensure that the term 'Multiculturalism' encompasses the complexities that exist among all cultures and language groups, both dominant and non-dominant, to provide a cohesive definition of the plurality and diversity that exists within this frame.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)

In some ways a word like CALD can be used to highlight the barriers that migrant, non-English-speaking people of colour experience. Yet in many cases, it instead homogenises very different cultures, and demonstrates that people lack knowledge and understanding of non-dominant cultures. CALD is a convenient way of flattening and reducing differences to a set language group or cultural identity rather than seeing identity through an intersectional and multifaceted lens. Putting everyone that is not white Australia under one label is not multiculturalism.

Some alternatives to CALD that have been promoted include CALM (culturally and linguistically marginalised) or CARM (culturally and racially marginalised), but these acronyms also have issues of their own – in some ways they delineate groups based on their marginalisation, and again, the different experiences of marginalisation may be flattened. Some people also reject the idea of being identified through a deficit frame of marginalisation.

Defining who has access to a service is often dictated by these inadequate terms that are then further limited by government definitions such as CALD being termed as first-generation migrants specific to funding agreements, excluding others who are or would identify themselves at the intersection of culturally and linguistically diverse despite perhaps being born in Australia. These definitions are often created and used with no community consultation, removing the rights of individuals themselves or organisations such as AMWCHR, a leading agency in this area, ultimately have no say who can and should be able to receive access to our programs. Not to mention individuals themselves identifying when that support may be needed, going out to seek that support, and being rejected. These parameters should be reviewed, and broader definitions applied to enable greater access to support programs on an as needed basis.

The flattening of experience can also be seen when 'refugee' and 'migrant' are put in the same category as CALD or viewed in similar terms. In reality, the experiences of refugees who have come to Australia through displacement are markedly different from the experiences of migrants – especially skilled and economic migrants – who have come to Australia through more active means.

Though both have struggles related to their settlement experiences, their journeys and needs are very different, particularly if there is trauma related to experiences of crisis and conflict.

Recommendation:

We should always be specific when describing the specific community we're referring to. We must resist overly used words/terms that are for the convenience of others – government, sector, people without lived experience of the challenges and systemic barriers people from non-dominant cultures face. This level of specificity allows for the tailoring of support services to meaningfully meet the needs of these cohorts.

Shared Australian Identity

As with Multiculturalism, Shared Australian Identity denotes an ideal of white Australia that 'other' cultures are required to assimilate to. There are ideals about what our country's identity should mean, including its rich pre-settlement, colonial history but the reality of diverse lived experience is yet to be embraced.

If we are speaking in a conceptual sense – we look to values of:

- Respect
- Taking pride in our universal access to healthcare, income supports and social safety nets
- Fair-go for all, is equal opportunity for all, regardless of gender, race, religion, sexuality, disability and age
- Treating others well and in the way that you would want to be treated.

It's also important to emphasise that until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are acknowledged as the custodians of this land and given rights as First Nations peoples and meaningful steps taken to address gaps and inequalities, our shared Australian identity will continue to fail to be more Inclusive and truly driven by the above values.

Recommendation:

Recognition that identity takes many forms and is often subjective within shared values of a society. Until the recognition of the historical and colonial history of this country takes place it is difficult to relate to this identity that seeks to erase First Nations peoples, as Muslim women and young people struggle to often recognise the duality of sitting at the intersections of hybrid diaspora identities.

Systemic barriers preventing Muslim communities' full participation in Australian society

There are many issues preventing Muslim communities from fully participating in Australian society. These issues have severe consequences for Australia's achievement of true multiculturalism. As mentioned, AMWCHR has published extensively on such issues, including related to:

- The inadequacy of settlement services
- Racism and Islamophobia across society but particularly within the services sector, legal system, and schools
- Risk factors and experiences of poverty and inequality, namely barriers preventing Muslim families from accessing basic needs related to food and housing
- Experiences of family violence and barriers to support.

The above list is non-exhaustive, but reflects some of the key concerns amongst our clients and communities. In addition to the above, the below sections highlight the persistent barriers that

Muslim – and especially refugee and migrant - individuals experience when attempting to gain employment, as well as the external pressure that government places on them doing so in the first instance. Further, in recognition of Australia's ageing population and the importance of preparation in this area, we have also highlighted the inequities, and opportunities, related to the provision of culturally appropriate aged care.

Barriers to entering the job market and developing skills

We often speak about multicultural communities – specifically migrant and refugee communities – in terms of their economic contribution to Australia. 'Success' and 'settlement' are defined by access to employment, and the 'value' that migrants bring to the country is frequently framed in monetary terms. We caution against this framing being the only one in which value is provided by newly arrived communities or even the main indicator of success during their settlement journey in Australia. However, we also recognise that in today's context, due to high costs of living and social expectations, having financial independence and access to meaningful employment is often necessary to access basic needs and contribute to a positive sense of self-worth. Many people from Muslim communities are not able to access employment due to the many social and systemic barriers.

The foremost issue when it comes to barriers to accessing employment – and even the services which are intended to facilitate employment – is language. Systems all still favour those with strong English and digital literacy. Schools, jobs and community events are prime examples. Accordingly, it positions women with low English literacy and confidence as not being engaged which doesn't support a pathway for them to enter the workforce in any capacity.

The English language courses provided to new refugees and migrants are currently ineffective in their aims, women often don't come out learning anything substantive or meaningful, or having only basic conversational English. They are then rejected in the job market for not being sufficiently fluent. Revisions are required to ensure that participants leave the courses equipped with not only basic skills, but also the tools to continue their independent learning. Additional changes that would improve the service include not having access to the courses time or hours bound, but rather on an as needed basis, due to differing capabilities in retaining and learning the language.

When individuals face these language barriers to accessing employment, there are intended welfare systems and services to support people. Yet these services are ineffective and, in some cases, impose an unhelpful level of stress and pressure. As an example, people on Jobseeker are required by Centrelink to look for a job, or risk their payments being cut off. This pressure is indiscriminatory and doesn't consider the experiences of those who are unable to complete job applications without language support, which balloons the time it takes to apply, and extremely limits the number of jobs they are eligible for, explicitly or implicitly. There are supposed to be supports for people who need assistance filling in applications and forms, but the demand is so high that they're inaccessible and often unavailable in certain languages. The experience is defeating and demoralising.

The barriers to accessing employment in the first instance has long-term impacts for Muslim, refugee, and migrants' levels of experience relative to the general population. Individuals are unable to get jobs because they lack local experience, yet are unable to get that experience in the first instance because of discriminatory language requirements and expectations.

This expectation around experience also feeds into how existing skills and qualifications are valued

(or rather, not valued) in Australia. International qualifications and experience are not recognised, unless you're from *particular* countries. Gaining that local experience is highly challenging, even when someone has a high level of overseas experience and the requisite skills to do a job. The federal government oversees the recognition of international qualifications and could do more to facilitate employment for migrants with such qualifications. This includes not only university degrees, but also existing experience relating to trades and other skills – hairdressing, beauty, carpentry, etc.

For those who can access employment, Islamophobia and discrimination remains an ongoing issue within industries. Many young women share extensive experiences of employers telling them to remove their hijabs. The high level of discrimination in work environments impacts how people contribute to those workplaces and the length of time they can commit to gaining skills and experience. The difficulty of fitting in, being marginalised because of accents, language skills, culture, religion, can make people disengage because their contributions, skills, and expertise are undervalued and unappreciated. This discrimination has a long-term effect on people's career trajectories, financial security and cumulatively, contributes to national data on disparities between Muslim communities' salary levels in comparison to their skills and qualifications (Hassan, 2018).

In Australia, we have a very narrow definition success by way of employment. It is not just about people entering the job market, the discrepancy between 'multiculturalism' and what it means to be truly part of the community and the economy. Multiculturalism would include supporting people to set up a business in their own language, as happened in earlier waves of migration in Australia. Business should not only cater to for the majority but should also be able to support their own communities through enterprise and innovation, large or small.

Recommendation:

English courses should be revised to ensure that participants leave the courses equipped with not only basic skills, but also the tools to continue their independent learning and access to these on an ongoing basis should be on an as-needed basis. Expanded scope of what 'success' looks like in the jobs and employment looks like should encompass additional support to harness existing skills and in home country experience.

Culturally appropriate aged care support

In many Muslim cultures it is an anomaly to put parents in aged care. This is due to norms around children caring for elderly parents, but also because there aren't any culturally appropriate facilities anyway. However, as we are an aging population, we should be preparing for the near future where many people will be caring for parents and require support, options, and resources that suit everyone's needs.

Currently, there are supports for people who are providing in-home care – i.e. carers payments. These supports are being accessed by some, but accessibility could be increased and improved through wider marketing of the scheme and removing language barriers, administratively burdensome evidentiary standards etc. Many people are not accessing payments because they are unaware that they're available in the first instance. For people who are living at home/with children, some also require professional in-home support. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of skilled healthcare workers who are able to provide in-language and culturally appropriate care. People would prefer support workers from the similar background as them.

Due to the shortage of appropriate facilities and norms around utilising facilities in the first instance, many women take on full-time caring roles in the home. This impacts women's career trajectories, access to paid employment, and is an intensely physical and mentally demanding role. People who are full-time carers should be provided with the appropriate level of financial support, in tandem with professional support of a healthcare worker, if required.

Inadequate support for carers, a lack of culturally appropriate healthcare, workers, and facilities, can increase risks of elder abuse. For those who speak languages other than English, and who are unfamiliar with Australian systems, there is a higher vulnerability to being abused. Isolation related to disability, mobility, and language barriers can make it virtually impossible to access support and interventions.

Recommendation:

Increased awareness of carers support payments should create pathways for culturally competent carers to enter the job market given the lack of culturally appropriate facilities for Muslim communities and families.

Engaging and communicating with multicultural Australia, including in languages other than English

Engaging and communicating with multicultural Australia, especially where policies and laws are likely to have a disproportionate impact on certain communities, is critical to identify and highlight issues of concern. When it comes to Muslim communities, we have seen some of the worst consequence of inadequate consultation and understanding – through “anti-terrorism” laws which targeted and criminalised our communities, to visa restrictions which impact access to basic needs and services. Consultation with Muslim, refugee, and migrant communities should be valued not as an exercise in inclusion, but with true and genuine acknowledgement that our community members have epistemic advantage in the areas of policy and legislation that impact them. The Federal Government can meaningfully and actively incorporate this situated knowledge, including from those who speak languages other than English.

The Federal Government has improved in recent years in terms of who they consult with, and the mechanisms for consultation. This Review is one example of a positive step forward in that consultation is open to everyone, the documents have been translated into 32 languages, and submissions may be given in any language in a written, audio, or video format. However, there are still improvements to be made to ensure that as many communities and experiences are represented and reflected within proposed changes.

One area where consultation approaches often falls short is with relation to capturing direct ‘on the ground’ experiences. Currently, ‘diverse’ consultation still favours English-speaking professionals working within the corporate sector. We hope to see more feedback from people from minority language groups, including those who speak little or no English, as well as people from lower socio-economic groups. Engaging these communities requires a more local approach, similar to how information was shared during the COVID Pandemic. For example, through engaging community members, trusted leaders and deeply embedded grassroots organisations on the ground to share information through local networks about how people can contribute their thoughts and experiences on a particular issue.

Current engagement methods – even the ones related to this Review – often also favour those with high levels of digital literacy. It is important to capture feedback from those who do not have access to digital devices, or who may be unable or unfamiliar with navigating online submission systems which requires time and resourcing.

Overall, the underlying issue of mistrust of government systems also needs to be addressed before meaningful and comprehensive consultation with our communities is achieved. Due to ongoing issues of targeting, Islamophobia, and discrimination from government departments and systems, many people do not see the value of or legitimacy of engaging with consultation efforts, even if these efforts do reach them. Government must repair these fractures with community if they are wanting to utilise the community's expertise within their initiatives. If consultation is occurring, then the outcomes of that consultation should be meaningfully fed into the resulting legislation/policy/program, rather than consulting as a box-ticking exercise.

Recommendation:

Greater accessibility to more meaningful engagement in consultations that directly impact multicultural communities in terms of reaching broader audiences of those with lived experiences. Ensuring that all modes of communication are being utilised beyond what is currently on offer as this will also restore faith in government processes. Closing the loop on how this feedback has directly impacted government policy for the betterment of society as a whole.