

## Chapter 3. Impacts and responses

This chapter examines both the impacts of the experiences described in Chapter 2 on Arab and Muslim Australian communities and individuals and the variety of ways in which they have responded to the challenges posed by those experiences.

### 3.1 Impacts

#### 3.1.1 General impacts

The biggest impact of prejudice on Arab and Muslim Australians is a substantial increase in fear. 'Scared,' 'isolated,' 'uncomfortable,' 'vulnerable' and 'alienated' were words commonly used by consultation participants to describe individual responses to racial abuse and violence. Almost 80 percent of survey respondents reported that, since September 11, they are more worried or afraid of something bad happening to them personally because of their race, culture or religion.<sup>1</sup>

*Everywhere you go, you have this constant fear that someone's going to attack you, or you expect everywhere you go someone's going to be racist to you ...<sup>2</sup>*

In consultations, participants described feeling fearful and alienated.

*We are citizens of Australia not strangers. We just want security because we are not feeling safe or secure at all. We walk in the street and we are afraid; we go into train stations and we are afraid; wherever we go we are afraid.<sup>3</sup>*

*Muslim women are portrayed as being oppressed by their husbands but in fact we are being oppressed by the society where we can't feel comfortable wearing our hijab and practising our religion. People are fearing for their lives.<sup>4</sup>*

*After September 11, it felt like our home, which Australia has been our home for almost all of my life and definitely all of their lives [referring to children] was somehow not home anymore ... I've started feeling more like a foreigner.<sup>5</sup>*

One of the major findings of the UWS research report, *Living with Racism*, was this widespread sense of fear and alienation reported by Arab and Muslim Australian interviewees and survey respondents.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.1.2 Impacts on women

Women identified as Muslim by their dress were especially afraid of being abused or attacked in public. Many restricted their movements in public, spending much more time inside their homes.

*My experience is if something happens to me on the street, I stay in for one week.<sup>7</sup>*

*I used to always go down to the city as a day out with my kids but a year ago I was physically abused and since then I no longer step out of the house alone, not a train to the city or anything.<sup>8</sup>*

Many women reported seeking safety in numbers, relying on friends and relatives to escort them while shopping or walking in public places.

*My mother is proud of taking my older brother, who is 23 years old, out with her shopping and stuff. She feels its more protective.<sup>9</sup>*

*If I go to the beach I go with a large group of people, and we'll go to a beach that is well known, and is really busy, and there are lot of, I know this might sound racist, but there's a lot of Arabic or Muslim people there. You know at least if there are people there you feel safer.<sup>10</sup>*

Some Muslim women found that their desire to adopt the hijab increased after September 11. Others felt pressured by what they described as a steady stream of abuse and discrimination to remove it.

*I thought long and hard about taking the scarf off after September 11 like many women ... I remember within one hour of going out I had been spat on, had someone threaten me as if they were going to hit me, the shop assistant at Coles would swipe my card and would not look at me in the eye. I remember coming home crying my eyes out and asking myself, 'Do I take this scarf off?'<sup>11</sup>*

*People are always going to pick on you for being different. Why should I change for this handful of ignorant people and they will never be happy with me anyway? A lot of girls have taken the scarf off after September 11. It's sad because they [the perpetrators] have won. These handfuls of ignorant people have won and why should we cater for their needs?<sup>12</sup>*

*Living in Australia it makes me want to wear the hijab less and I shouldn't have to feel that way.<sup>13</sup>*

### 3.1.3 Impacts on children and young people

Understanding the implications of racist violence, discrimination and abuse for children and young people is especially important given the high proportion of youth in Arab and Muslim communities. Damaging impacts on children and youth were widely reported in consultations. Many young Arab and Muslim Australians felt stressed and alienated and had lost confidence in themselves and felt less trust in authority.

*Young people, even kids have turned against the system because they have been left feeling alienated and scared. Experiences in schools have particularly alienated them.<sup>14</sup>*

*It's pressure on the children, not only the adults and the veiled women.<sup>15</sup>*

One mother described how her six year old son is being bullied at his local state primary school, making him angry and withdrawn. He stays home from school, wants to return to his country of birth (Indonesia) and change his name (Mohammed) to disguise his religious identity.<sup>16</sup> Another mother said:

*My daughter is terribly affected and now wants to have blonde hair so other students will play with her. I could not face those mothers every day so I was forced to change schools. I still have negative experiences because they know I am Muslim. Other mothers don't want to socialise with me although I try very hard so that my daughter will have playmates but the mothers do not want their children to play with mine ...<sup>17</sup>*

Many parents, fearing for their children's safety at school, have removed them from public schools and have enrolled them instead in Islamic schools.

*I know of parents sending their kids from my area pulling them out of public schools and sending them a far distance to Islamic schools. Most of the women wear a hijab and they go to pick up their kids from school and remarks have been passed ... and the kids have been bullied.<sup>18</sup>*

*The parents are saying they are moving the kids to Islamic schools not for the better education and that's the tragedy. The kids have to be moved from one school to an Islamic school which may not be that good a quality. It's about safety.<sup>19</sup>*

*There is a security issue – lots of parents don't feel comfortable exposing their children to the stress of being teased so it's more likely they'll go to Islamic schools. A school shouldn't be like a boxing arena where the kids have to learn to fight back. We need to focus on education without having to justify our religion.<sup>20</sup>*

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Fear, stress and anger were the most common reactions of young Arab and Muslim Australians to discrimination and vilification. Coping with these emotions can be especially difficult for young people developing their identities. A community-based counsellor has reportedly found that a growing number of Muslim girls are experiencing psychological problems as a result of discrimination. 'She talked to 13 girls in the last few months and six are suicidal due to their exposure to discrimination.'<sup>21</sup>

*A lot of young people are struggling and parents are saying 'We have our culture, but how can we pass it on to our children without them having to go through such a huge struggle?' We are creating a very angry generation who will eventually end up with psychological repercussions. I don't believe that anyone can endure this kind of pressure and come out feeling ok.'*<sup>22</sup>

Several young people reported feeling tired and frustrated by the constant pressure to explain their ethnic identity or justify their choice of dress.

*Everywhere you go and you have a new encounter with somebody new, 60% to 70% of your energy is putting in extra energy and effort to justify yourself. I can speak English; I am the most articulate person in the room; I am so well presented; I am educated; I am all this stuff. Why should you have to do that? You just can't concentrate on what you are there to do which is look for a job or study or whatever it is. You get sick of it.'*<sup>23</sup>

*If you wear the scarf you are representing the whole community. But we're not experts. We do not know everything about our religion. We always have to watch what we do and we always have to explain ourselves. Sometimes even if I make a little mistake they are like 'See she is a terrorist. Look what she does.'*<sup>24</sup>

*I'm sick of always having to justify my beliefs. I shouldn't have to. I don't make Jews or Christians justify their beliefs ...'*<sup>25</sup>

Some young people experienced frustration which caused them to occasionally lash out in anger.

*Sometimes when it gets really serious, like once I did something I regret ... she discriminated against me so bad, I used violence against her and I regret that.'*<sup>26</sup>

*They react violently. They've been abused a lot and the students have that limit.'*<sup>27</sup>

*I can see the students coming nearly every day to school and what they want is to let out their feelings to me in the classroom about what was news or on the front page ... 'Look, they are blaming the*

*Muslims again' or 'They are doing this' so they are all angry. I try to change the subject and say 'Look what happens outside, let's change it, don't get upset, it's the media' ... I can see the children being so angry. And it's really wrong because anger breeds anger and then violence ...*<sup>28</sup>

Young people frequently talked about the need to keep their anger in check to avoid a cycle of escalating violence and abuse.

*Take it in a calm way because [otherwise] people get more geed up...*<sup>29</sup>

*Don't retaliate. People believe that all Islam does is teach you violence, so it's important that people when they respond don't make themselves so noticeable.*<sup>30</sup>

Fear, not anger, was the more common response to discrimination and vilification by young Arab and Muslim Australians. Many young people expressed fears for their own personal safety and for the safety of their family members. Children were especially worried about violence or abuse directed towards their mothers.

*We're scared for ourselves and our family. How could I live my life if something happened to them?*<sup>31</sup>

*Women are the most important people in the world. I fear for my mum the most.*<sup>32</sup>

Some young people have also become more cautious and guarded in their personal relationships as a result of prevailing prejudices. One young woman explained how her experiences of racism feed her own prejudices making her mistrustful of people who are not Muslim.

*What I'm afraid of though is that it's breeding racism in me, where I don't feel safe with people who are not Muslim. Or I think if they're not Muslim they're going to be racist. I know mentally that they're not like that. I know there are a lot of good people ...*<sup>33</sup>

Several young Arab Australian men who participated in consultations described how they had become more cautious and guarded in their contacts with women since September 11 and particularly following reporting and media commentary on the gang rapes which occurred in south west Sydney in 2000.

*We were scared after September 11 and Bali ... and after the gang rapes meeting up with girls was hard. We had to watch our moves around a girl. It was hard to approach a girl. You had to be careful.*<sup>34</sup>

*[We] were having a friendly chat with these girls, and seriously it was just friendly chatting and it was out in the open in the public eye as*

*well and these police officers pulled up right beside them [in Parramatta Rd Sydney]. They ask 'Girls are you all right?' The girls say 'Yeah we're all right officer.' The cops ask 'Are you sure?' 'Yeah, we're all right.' They ask again 'Are you sure?' Something like six or seven times they asked them and then one of us said 'Yeah, they're all right officer.' And one of the cops said 'You shut your mouth mate.' It was like they were saying to the girls: just say the word and they're gone. They wanted to arrest us. They were waiting for the girls to say we were harassing them ... I don't think I've spoken to a girl without hesitating since.<sup>35</sup>*

The level of abuse against Muslim women in particular has also impacted on parental relationships. Some Muslim women who wear the hijab reported that their children did not want to be seen with them in public to avoid being harassed or having to defend their mothers from abuse.

*My son wanted to go watch the football but his brother didn't want to go with him because he doesn't like football. So I offered to go with him instead. My son was horrified. He said 'Yeah, I'm really going to take a veiled woman with me'. I only offered because I didn't want him to miss out but he refused because he said they'd all harass me.<sup>36</sup>*

### 3.1.4 Impacts on migrants and refugees

Around 160,000 Arab Australians were born overseas.<sup>37</sup> The majority of these Australians, particularly those born in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, migrated to Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently arrived migrants and refugees have come to Australia from Arabic-speaking countries such as Iraq, Sudan and Somalia. Approximately 180,000 Muslim Australians were also born overseas in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe.<sup>38</sup> In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Muslim migrants and refugees who have arrived from Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Malaysia.<sup>39</sup>

For many new arrivals, experiences of prejudice make it harder to negotiate the already difficult process of settling into a new country. However, some felt that this paled into comparison with the dangers they faced at home.

*They come out into this country to get the better life and they do. There are so many good things that they are experiencing being in Australia, they sort of just try and forget because they [incidents of racism] are not very important to them most of the time. Their focus is on something else, and sometimes these experiences can seem minimal compared to some things they have experienced before coming to Australia.<sup>40</sup>*

However, not all new arrivals felt so positive. Many felt alienated and isolated. Some were even contemplating moving elsewhere or returning to their countries of origin if possible.

*We feel very bad because we feel not welcome. We are considered second class citizens in this country ...*<sup>41</sup>

*It's very hard to live here. We came here to live in peace – we ran from our war to a war here. They promised us somewhere safe but where is the promise?*<sup>42</sup>

Even some long-term residents and citizens – people who had migrated to Australia decades ago – were contemplating leaving the country as they no longer felt welcome or at home.

*If someone has lived here for 30 years and has married his children off in Australia and even has grandchildren here, now after the September 11 incident where they have been stepping on Muslims, has anyone ever thought about leaving this country and going back to live in their own country? I know I have.*<sup>43</sup>

*I don't really feel like I belong. I don't want to live in a country where people automatically put you in the spotlight ... my country of origin shouldn't be something special ... When someone at work starts having this diatribe, criticism about the Middle East, or Arabs or Iraqis or Palestinians and linking it all together and making big generalisations ... it's not an exaggeration to say that at those moments I feel like 'what the hell am I doing in this country?'*<sup>44</sup>

Many refugees felt that Australian border control and immigration policies were the most serious form of discrimination. Consultation participants were asked about their experiences living in the Australian community, not specifically about their experiences in immigration detention. An investigation of the experiences of Arab and Muslim Australians in immigration detention was outside the scope of the IsmaU consultation process. However, some participants spoke about the impacts of immigration detention on their post-detention settlement experiences. Many also spoke about the difficulties posed by the temporary protection visa (TPV) system. The main issues they raised were uncertainty about whether individuals and families would be allowed to remain permanently in Australia and the lack of access to some services.

*I have made this my home and my children have made this their home too but it is difficult because we don't know when it will stop being our home; if we must find a new one.*<sup>45</sup>

*The difficult thing for us is that we are on TPVs for three years ... we all came by boat and there is no sense of stability or permanency. We were refugees who fled from Iraq to Iran and we never had a sense*

*of stability there. Now we come to Australia with our children – but it is useless for our children to learn here because of this, so they do other things and find work.<sup>46</sup>*

*Our children go to school and ask us all the time ‘What’s the point of going to school if we are going to leave here anyway?’<sup>47</sup>*

*Our biggest problem is the temporary protection visa. Yes we came here by boat which is against the regulations. But if Australia opened up its doors to us then we wouldn’t have come that way, especially with our children who are very young. Australia claims that it is a democratic country, but where is the democracy? What will solve a lot of our problems is getting rid of this visa . . . It abuses our rights as human beings and abuses our children’s rights also.<sup>48</sup>*

*The immigration policies are racist and that’s where it starts for us.<sup>49</sup>*

### 3.1.5 Impacts on communities

Discrimination and vilification have impacted on Arab and Muslim communities in two main ways. Some participants felt communities had turned inwards and become more insular in reaction to the real and perceived dangers ‘outside’. Others felt that divisions between communities, particularly between Christian and Muslim Arab Australians, had become more pronounced.

*I think actually that the Arab Christians these days want to separate themselves from the Arab Muslims. I think that there’s even racism within the Arab community. The Christians want to separate themselves from the Muslims and actually want to be known as Westerners and not as Arabs. They don’t want to be known as Arabs anymore.<sup>50</sup>*

*Before Iraq they [Arabic speakers and others from the Middle East, both Christian and Muslim] got on alright together. They were saying ‘We are all here. We all have the same reason that we left the country’. But especially now when there is no security in Iraq and some of them have a lot of problems from Iraq about their families, it’s started to get a little bit harder. They start talking about their religion now: Muslim and Christian.<sup>51</sup>*

## 3.2 Responses

Arab and Muslim Australians have responded to discrimination and vilification in a number of ways ranging from avoidance to making formal complaints.

### 3.2.1 Avoidance

Many consultation participants actively sought to avoid places or situations where they felt they might be targeted because of their race or religion.

*We're not taking holidays. We can't go anywhere. We feel out of place at the beach.*<sup>52</sup>

Many others have tried to shrug off and ignore abuse.

*I don't really pay attention to them because if you do they'll keep on doing it.*<sup>53</sup>

*I get called a 'dumb Lebanese' and I'm Egyptian, but I don't really get upset about it.*<sup>54</sup>

*If someone is game enough to see ten girls and start yelling abuse and carrying on, I was afraid that they might attack me, and rip my scarf off, or hurt someone, one of my other friends, and I didn't want it to escalate, so I just ignored them.*<sup>55</sup>

*I'm a little bit scared of pursuing my rights, like any other person. I don't want to pick fights in other words. If somebody does something wrong against me, I'd rather turn a blind eye and walk away ...*<sup>56</sup>

For some, abuse has become so commonplace that they have become desensitised. Many consultation participants reported that it was often too exhausting and time-consuming to respond to each and every incident and many cited the virtue of tolerance and restraint.

*Not everything we experience is big and there are many small things that happen that people don't take too seriously and the small things really don't matter sometimes.*<sup>57</sup>

*So much stuff has happened to us but now we are so used to it, so we might think we are being a bit paranoid and so that is why we might not want to speak out. ... We say to ourselves 'I'm not going to talk about this incident that happened on the train or when I was on my way to Uni or as I was walking'. We say ignore it and it will go away. For example, nobody knows what happens at schools. You tolerate your teachers and that is part of our practice. We respect and we tolerate even though they're in the wrong.*<sup>58</sup>

As a coping mechanism, some consultation participants literally 'switched off'.

*We used to sit down and watch TV and news 24/7. I don't even turn the TV on anymore. It's just sickening ...*<sup>59</sup>

*After September 11, Bali and the children overboard I stopped reading the [local newspaper]. It makes me feel as though the whole world is against me. I don't want to switch on the news ...*<sup>60</sup>

### 3.2.2 Speaking back

Not every consultation participant ignored or endured these experiences in silence. Some chose to confront the issue by answering back. Around 19 percent of survey respondents, for example, complained directly to the person or people responsible for racist abuse or discrimination.<sup>61</sup> One woman described how, after being mocked for wearing the hijab by a couple who said, 'A bit hot for that isn't it?' (referring to her hijab), she replied, 'Have you ever heard of slip, slop, slap?' The couple made no further comment to her. On another occasion, when asked by an old man in a shopping centre if she was a terrorist and carrying a bomb, the same woman responded with the equally ridiculous question, 'Are you a paedophile?'<sup>62</sup>

*The hijab makes me a target for sure, but I don't let people do things without me having my little response. If people have said stupid things to me [like] 'Go home terrorist!' I just say 'Are you talking to me? Is there something you'd like to say?' As soon as they realise I speak English and with an Australian accent, that's enough to shut them up ... I think a lot of people think Muslim women are really soft targets, that they can have their little power trip, say what they want to say, and the woman won't even understand what they're saying let alone respond. So when they're actually confronted back they find that quite intimidating.*<sup>63</sup>

Many young Muslim women have also challenged racism by 'speaking back'. A consultation participant in South Australia described how her young daughter fought a campaign to be accurately represented wearing her hijab in the annual school picture. The school had blacked out the young woman's hijab in the class photograph in an effort to make her blend in with the other non-Muslim girls. This attempt to literally erase her identity spurred both mother and daughter into action.

*I spoke to the photographer and he blamed the principal, and I spoke to the principal and he blamed the photographer. The principal in the end said 'Well, she stood out too much'. The uniform is brown and beige and what my daughter did, 'cos she's actually quite feisty, she went around and started a petition and this absolutely outraged the principal who called me at home and was so angry and said this was not going to continue. In the end I had to remove my daughter from the school.*<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2.3 Constructive engagement

Many individuals and community organisations have taken advantage of heightened interest in their culture and beliefs – both negative and positive – to create opportunities for providing information and fostering respect and understanding.

A Canberra mother described how becoming active at her son's school helped break down barriers with fellow parents and students. When her son first began school, other parents and children were not at all friendly. She felt that the fact she wore the hijab played a part in her and her son's social isolation. However, these relationships improved after she volunteered to run a craft class at the school during which she answered children's questions about her dress and religion.

*That one afternoon broke the ice – after that the kids would come up and start talking and the Mums would come up to me and say 'Hi how you going?'... So I think you need to start it young because they are just very accepting.<sup>65</sup>*

Another consultation participant turned what she could have perceived as workplace discrimination into a positive learning experience for her employer. As a new graduate in the legal profession, she was initially reluctant to wear the hijab to work. Once she had built up some professional experience and established trust with her employer, she felt more confident about wearing the hijab and gradually introduced the idea to her employer. To allay the firm's concerns, she took a photograph of herself in her hijab and gave it to one of the partners for consultation with the other partners. She was told, 'Look, I can't really say anything. You can go ahead and put it on if you like and see what happens'. She reported that the partners were initially uncertain about how clients would react and limited her direct contact with them. After a few months, however, they relaxed and she was given more client contact.

*Most people are just ignorant about it – they don't know how to react. The image that they have in their minds [of a woman in hijab] is just totally negative. When I prepared them for it I found it a really positive experience. They felt like they were part of the whole thing rather than just being forced to accept it.<sup>66</sup>*

### 3.2.4 Formal complaints

Despite reports from consultation participants and survey respondents that racist violence, abuse and discrimination escalated in the immediate aftermath of September 11, complaints to the Commission and to state and territory anti-discrimination agencies did not increase substantially. For example, in the two years prior to September 11 2001, the Commission received 31 complaints under the RDA from people who identified as being of Arab or of Middle Eastern background. This represented 6.5% of all complaints received during that period under the RDA.<sup>67</sup> In the two years after September 11, the number of complaints received dropped to 26, although this represented 8.7% of all complaints received during that period under the RDA.<sup>68</sup>

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In relation to complaints alleging discrimination in employment on the basis of religion under the HREOC Act, for the two years prior to September 11 2001, the Commission received three complaints from people who identified themselves as Muslim. This represented 9.4% of all complaints of discrimination in employment on the basis of religion received during that period.<sup>69</sup> In the two years after September 11, the number of complaints received by people who identified themselves as Muslim increased to eight, which represented 30.8% of all complaints of discrimination in employment on the basis of religion received during that period.<sup>70</sup>

State and territory equal opportunity agencies also noted that, despite anecdotal reports from community organisations of a substantial increase in discrimination and vilification against Arab and Muslim Australians after September 11, few complaints or even telephone enquiries were received. Some agencies identified fear and mistrust as the main reasons why so few formal complaints were made.

*While we have heard media reports and stories external to the [South Australian] Equal Opportunity Commission about anti Arab and Muslim activities post September 11, this has not been reflected in our statistics ... Our contact with groups such as the Islamic Women's Association and the Islamic Students Association suggests that the failure of Arab people and Moslems to complain is due to a decision to remain inconspicuous and draw as little attention to themselves as possible.<sup>71</sup>*

*Frankly post September 11th this organisation [Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland] knew a lot of vilification was going on. It went on and we heard about it, but people did not know us well enough or there was not enough trust there or the relationships were not strong enough for when they are feeling threatened to come and complain. It's my task to make sure that that doesn't happen in the future.<sup>72</sup>*

Available data from NSW police shows a sharp spike in reports of racially or religiously motivated incidents following September 11 and then a gradual tapering off in reporting. For example, in September 2001, the NSW Police recorded 196 incidents, including assault and malicious damage, where racial or ethnic prejudice was an associated factor.<sup>73</sup> This represented an almost 300% increase in the number of similar incidents reported in the August 2001 and was 20% higher than the number of incidents reported in October 2001.<sup>74</sup> This pattern of reporting was similar for incidents where religious prejudice was an associated factor. In September 2001, the NSW Police recorded 70 incidents where religious prejudice was an associated factor. This represented an almost 600% increase in the number of incidents recorded in August 2001 and was approximately 67% more than the number of incidents recorded in October 2001.<sup>75</sup>

Victoria Police reported that the number of racially or religiously motivated incidents pertinent to Arabs or Muslims were relatively few and continues to remain low.<sup>76</sup> No data on the number of racially or religiously motivated incidents following September 11 or the Bali bombings is available for Queensland, Tasmania, the Northern Territory or Western Australia.<sup>77</sup> The South Australia Police was made aware anecdotally of a range of hate mail and abusive telephone calls to mosques and individuals but none of these were formally reported.<sup>78</sup>

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) reported a number of incidents in the ACT such as property damage to the Canberra Islamic Centre and verbal abuse directed at attendees of the Canberra Mosque following September 11. Protective Security Intelligence (PSI) officers of the AFP also noted a number of incidents directed at Muslims around Australia. For example, in Melbourne, the Preston Mosque received anti-Islamic letters in October 2002, the Doncaster Mosque was firebombed on 17 October 2002 and a number of Muslims living in Melbourne's northern suburbs were verbally harassed. In Adelaide, PSI officers noted an arson attempt on the Windsor Gardens Mosque.<sup>79</sup>

Information gathered from IsmaU consultations, surveys and interviews indicated that Arab and Muslim Australians were more likely to report incidents of discrimination or vilification to their friends, family or local community organisations. These community organisations reported a sharp increase in calls for assistance particularly following September 11 and the Bali bombings. In the first week following September 11, the Sydney-based Australian Arabic Communities Council received 50 complaints of racist incidents on its 'Racism Register'. These complaints included concerns expressed by local Arab residents over a series of letters sent to them threatening violence unless they moved out of their neighbourhoods.<sup>80</sup> The Melbourne-based Australian Arabic Council recorded a 20-fold increase in reports of vilification made to their own Racism Register following September 11.<sup>81</sup> The Sydney-based United Muslim Women's Association was inundated with calls from women fearful of their own and their children's safety following September 11 and the Bali bombings. The organisation itself received abusive (and pornographic) phone calls, faxes, emails and mail.<sup>82</sup> The Adelaide-based Muslim Women's Association also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of calls for support as well as direct abuse.

*All the SA mosques, including our office and the people answering phones were bombarded with offensive language and even threats. Our social worker actually had people come to the office and verbally threaten her. She was quite frightened and we actually had to close the office for about two weeks because of that. It was directly after September 11, and we had another influx directly after Bali.<sup>83</sup>*

The information provided to the Commission by IsmaU survey respondents who participated in consultations and follow-up interviews helps to explain the

anomaly between the small number of formal complaints made to the Commission about racial and religious discrimination and the widespread anecdotal reports of discrimination and vilification from consultation participants, survey and interview respondents.<sup>84</sup> Arab and Muslim Australians have been disinclined to report incidents of racist violence, discrimination and vilification for a number of reasons including:

- fear of victimisation
- lack of trust in authority
- lack of knowledge about the law and complaint processes
- difficulty of complaint procedures
- unsatisfactory outcomes.

### 3.2.4.1 Fear of victimisation

Some consultation participants were afraid that complaining would expose them to even more discrimination and earn them the label of ‘troublemaker’.

*We don't say anything because we are scared that they [the teachers] will tell bad things about us if we complain.*<sup>85</sup>

*If you have a personal incident happen, the general tendency is that you want to put it behind you. Pursuing it can increase the discrimination.*<sup>86</sup>

*Once you complain you are victimised. You would never work again. Your name would be mud, especially in a small business community like Perth.*<sup>87</sup>

*We don't say anything to anyone about what happens to us because we are nervous about bringing attention to ourselves.*<sup>88</sup>

### 3.2.4.2 Lack of trust in authorities

Others expressed a lack of trust in equal opportunity agencies such as the Commission, and didn't necessarily differentiate between the Commission and government.

*We are reluctant to complain to the same people who make the laws that treat us in this way.*<sup>89</sup>

*There isn't much trust in the system that's saying 'Report to us.'*<sup>90</sup>

*Together with many Muslims in the community, we feel that the government has taken a backward stance [by joining the coalition forces in Iraq] ... we feel that it's very much a war against Islam. Therefore, a number of Muslims in the community are not coming forward ... what is the point?*<sup>91</sup>

Lack of trust in the responsiveness, reliability and independence of the police was often cited as a reason for not reporting incidents of discrimination or vilification. In some cases, people's mistrust stemmed from negative experiences with police in their countries of origin.

*The feedback is that the communities do not feel comfortable with police because of their experiences back home.<sup>92</sup>*

*I found many people are talking to me about their experiences and they say 'Please don't tell anyone'. Some people are afraid. They're frightened because of where they come from. In Iraq we do not have the right to complain.<sup>93</sup>*

Many were exasperated at the lack of action on complaints made to police and felt that their concerns had not been treated seriously.

*... none of them feel confident to go into the police to discuss it. No matter what I say, no-one will just go. They don't feel that they would get justice by talking to them.<sup>94</sup>*

*A Lebanese friend made a serious complaint about an incident to the police and he was humiliated left, right and centre. Nobody did anything.<sup>95</sup>*

Consultation participants reported that they were more likely to discuss their experiences informally with family, friends or people they trust in local community organisations.

*Since September 11 a lot of cases of discrimination and complaints have come to the group and not to police or other authorities as a result of fear ... Women complain to other women's organisations more than they complain to the Islamic Council of Victoria, but they were the ones that had the helpline. It won't work like that.<sup>96</sup>*

*Even when there are problems in the community, people tend to try and solve it in-house by going to the Imam or going elsewhere.<sup>97</sup>*

*[Following September 11] the Muslim Women's Association received a large increase in phone calls from anxious mothers and we advised them to call the [NSW Community Relations Commission] hotline. But everyone refused because of the fact that nothing is being done and they didn't want to cause more trouble.<sup>98</sup>*

### **3.2.4.3 Lack of awareness of laws and complaints processes**

In many consultations, participants reported that they had little knowledge about Australian anti-discrimination laws or how to access complaint processes.<sup>99</sup> They reported a similar lack of awareness about internal complaints procedures for government service providers such as Centrelink, police and education authorities.

*A lot of first generation Muslims, their English isn't that great and they don't know the processes [to complain] or feel comfortable with them.<sup>100</sup>*

*We've got to look at what you can complain about and who to go to. It's not just the police. There are other people and that's what you've really got to make people aware of – especially people who don't really speak English. I don't think they really know where to go if they've been discriminated against.<sup>101</sup>*

However, several participants cautioned that increasing awareness about anti-discrimination laws would not automatically encourage more Arab and Muslim Australians to complain. For example, New South Wales Ethnic Community Liaison Officers had little success in encouraging Muslims to report incidents of vilification to police despite broadcasting public information advertisements on two local community radio stations.<sup>102</sup> The NSW Anti-Discrimination Board helped increase awareness of the state's anti-discrimination laws in a six month Arabic and Islamic community education initiative. While the overall response to the program from community members was positive, doubts remained amongst some community members about whether the agency would take their concerns seriously and be able to deal effectively with complaints.<sup>103</sup>

*I know who to complain to, but I know they won't do anything. I know they'll be complacent or they'll name a legislation that gives a loophole for a person to escape ... sometimes knowledge is what gives you the pain and makes you unproductive because you can't do anything with that knowledge – no one wants to listen ...<sup>104</sup>*

#### **3.2.4.4 Difficulty in making a complaint**

Even when equipped with knowledge of the various federal and state anti-discrimination laws and complaints processes, consultation participants felt that accessing these laws was daunting.

*People do not want to take it to court. They are worried about the time it is going to take, the fact that they are probably going to have a newspaper column written about them and that it might even make the news. Who would want to go through that? And why do that when you probably go through that every day, every week?<sup>105</sup>*

In several consultations, participants argued that federal and state anti-discrimination agencies including the Commission should be able to initiate complaints on behalf of victims of discrimination or vilification rather than wait for aggrieved individuals to bring forward complaints. The fear of victimisation and the drain on personal resources and time all discourage individuals from coming forward to complain.

*Organisations like HREOC have no power to initiate complaints on behalf of clients ... we are marginalising people more if you don't allow organisations to take up complaints on their behalf.*<sup>106</sup>

*Generally, HREOC and similar agencies respond to complaints. That's reactive rather than proactive. Part of HREOC's role is to identify incidents of discrimination. HREOC should not just wait for someone to raise a complaint. For example, it doesn't take much effort to monitor some of the rubbish that you hear on talkback radio.*<sup>107</sup>

### 3.2.4.5 Unsatisfactory outcomes

One-third of survey respondents reported that they had not made formal complaints about discrimination or vilification because they did not think anything useful would come of it.<sup>108</sup> Several consultation participants agreed with this sentiment. Following September 11, a young Muslim woman reported being teased incessantly by a group of male students at her high school. She complained about the abuse to her school Guidance Officer who offered to counsel and discipline the perpetrators and make an announcement discouraging bullying at an assembly. However, she stated that she did not want to take the matter any further for fear of retribution and lack of confidence in positive outcomes.

*I don't feel that I could go and complain about any of it because I just feel that no-one will take me seriously and what's going to be done is going to take a lot of time, a lot of headache and I just don't want to go out of my way just for a bad outcome.*<sup>109</sup>

Many other participants felt that little could be achieved through formal complaints processes.

*People generally do not want to report incidents as they happen so often and it is not worth it.*<sup>110</sup>

*There is not much you [i.e. HREOC] can do, that if someone gives me a dirty look or makes me feel intimidated or uncomfortable; but if I come to you, I don't think that you're going to say 'Look, we will be fixing that situation up and it is never going to happen again'. Nobody can give us this reassurance.*<sup>111</sup>

In the following chapter, we examine responses by government and community organisations to help address the problem of discrimination and vilification against Arab and Muslim Australians and allay some of the more serious and harmful impacts on members of these communities.

### Endnotes

- 1 UWS Survey: 41% of survey respondents were 'a lot more' worried or afraid of something bad happening to them since 11 September 2001; 38% were 'a bit more' worried or afraid; 12.7% felt the same level of worry or fear as before 11 September 2001 and 8% felt less worried or afraid.
- 2 UWS interview with 'Latifa', Sydney, 31 October 2003.
- 3 Tripoli and Mena Association Seniors' Group, Sydney, 15 October 2003. See also, for example: Arabic Workers' Network, Sydney, 29 April 2003; Canberra Islamic Centre, Canberra, 2 June 2003; Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003; Consultation with Arab community members, Melbourne, 15 November 2003.
- 4 Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy, WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003.
- 5 UWS interview with 'Alya', Melbourne, 17 November 2003.
- 6 The UWS report *Living with Racism* is available at: [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial\\_discrimination/isma/research/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/research/index.html)
- 7 Consultation with Muslim women in northern Sydney, 26 June 2003.
- 8 United Muslim Women's Association, Sydney, 23 June 2003.
- 9 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 10 UWS interview with 'Latifa', Sydney, 31 October 2003. See also: Horn of Africa Senior Women's Program, Melbourne, 13 November 2003.
- 11 Women only consultation hosted by the SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 17 July 2003.
- 12 Women only consultation hosted by the SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 17 July 2003.
- 13 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 14 Muslim Women's National Network of Australia, Sydney, 5 April 2003.
- 15 Consultation with Arab Muslim women hosted by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, 12 November 2003.
- 16 Consultation with Muslim women in northern Sydney, 26 June 2003.
- 17 Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy, WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003.
- 18 The Muslim Council of NSW, Sydney, 21 June 2003.
- 19 The Muslim Council of NSW, Sydney, 21 June 2003.
- 20 Islamic Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 26 May 2003.
- 21 Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations, Sydney, 10 September 2003.
- 22 Consultation hosted by Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council, Wollongong, 9 August 2003.
- 23 United Muslim Women's Association young women's group, Sydney, 7 June 2003.
- 24 United Muslim Women's Association young women's group, Sydney, 7 June 2003.
- 25 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 26 Consultations with Lebanese Muslim children and young people organised by the Lebanese Muslim Association, Sydney, 12 June 2003. See also: Consultations with NSW primary school students (Years 5 and 6) at three Sydney public schools, August 2003; Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 27 United Muslim Women's Association, Sydney, 23 June 2003.
- 28 Consultations with NSW Teachers, Anti-Racism Contact Officers (ARCOs) and Community Information Officers (CIOs), Sydney, August 2003.
- 29 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 30 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 31 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 32 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 33 UWS interview with 'Latifa', Sydney, 31 October 2003.
- 34 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 35 Consultation with young Arab men, Brisbane, 18 June 2003.
- 36 Consultation with Arab Muslim women hosted by Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 12 November 2003.
- 37 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing, 2001*. Special data service.
- 38 *ibid.*

- 39 Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, *Immigration Update*, November 2003.
- 40 Consultation with refugee women hosted by the Ecumenical Migration Centre, Melbourne, 26 May 2003.
- 41 UWS interview with 'Inaas', Sydney, 11 October 2003.
- 42 Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy, WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003.
- 43 Tripoli and Mena Association Seniors' Group, Sydney, 15 October 2003.
- 44 UWS interview with 'Kefah', Melbourne, 14 November 2003.
- 45 Consultation with Afghan Elderly Men's Group hosted by Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), Sydney, 1 July 2003.
- 46 Consultation with Iraqi refugee women hosted by the Shepparton Ethnic Communities Council at the Goulburn-Oven's TAFE, Shepparton, 30 May 2003.
- 47 Consultation with Iraqi refugee women hosted by the Shepparton Ethnic Communities Council at the Goulburn-Oven's TAFE, Shepparton, 30 May 2003.
- 48 Consultation with Iraqi refugee women hosted by the Shepparton Ethnic Communities Council at the Goulburn-Oven's TAFE, Shepparton, 30 May 2003.
- 49 Consultation with Iraqi refugees in rural Victoria, 30 May 2003.
- 50 Consultation with young Arab men, Brisbane, 18 June 2003. See also: Lebanese Community Council, Sydney, 4 September 2003.
- 51 Australian Arabic Council, Melbourne, 28 May 2003.
- 52 Islamic Council of NSW, Sydney, 10 June 2003.
- 53 Consultation with NSW primary school students (Years 5 and 6) at three Sydney public schools, August 2003.
- 54 Consultations with NSW secondary students at three government schools, Sydney, August 2003.
- 55 UWS interview with 'Latifa', Sydney, 31 October 2003.
- 56 UWS interview with 'Joseph', Melbourne, 13 November 2003.
- 57 Consultation with refugee women hosted by the Ecumenical Migration Centre, Melbourne, 26 May 2003.
- 58 United Muslim Women's Association young women's group, Sydney, 7 June 2003.
- 59 Consultation with young Arab Muslims and Christians and non-Arab Muslims, Adelaide, 17 July 2003.
- 60 Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy, WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003.
- 61 UWS survey: 19.5% of respondents complained directly to the person or persons responsible for a racist incident.
- 62 UWS interview with 'Alya', Melbourne, 17 November 2003.
- 63 UWS interview with 'Alya', Melbourne, 17 November 2003.
- 64 Women only consultation hosted by the SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 17 July 2003.
- 65 Canberra Islamic Centre, Canberra, 2 June 2003.
- 66 Muslim lawyers group, Melbourne, 27 May 2003.
- 67 The Commission received 480 complaints under the RDA for this period.
- 68 The Commission received 296 complaints under the RDA for this period.
- 69 The Commission received 32 complaints under the ILO 111 provisions of the HREOC Act for this period.
- 70 The Commission received 26 complaints under the ILO 111 provisions of the HREOC Act for this period.
- 71 Letter from Linda Matthews, South Australian Equal Opportunity Commissioner, dated 12 September 2002, quoted with permission.
- 72 Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Susan Booth, in opening remarks at Consultation hosted by Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland (ADCQ) and Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ), Brisbane, 16 June 2003.
- 73 Information provided by NSW Police, 24 February 2004.
- 74 Information provided by NSW Police, 24 February 2004.
- 75 Information provided by NSW Police, 24 February 2004.
- 76 Information provided by Victoria Police, 3 December 2003.

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- 77 Information provided by Western Australian Police Service, 15 January 2004. Northern Territory Police, 17 November 2003. Tasmania Police, 10 November 2003. Queensland Police Service, 12 November 2003.
- 78 Information provided by South Australia Police, 15 January 2004.
- 79 Information provided by Australian Federal Police, 9 February 2004.
- 80 Information from Australian Arabic Communities Council, 5 February 2004.
- 81 Information from Australian Arabic Council, 17 November 2003.
- 82 Information provided by Muslim Women's Association, 2 February 2004.
- 83 Women only consultation hosted by SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 17 July 2003.
- 84 See: Consultation hosted by ACT Human Rights and ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs, Canberra, 3 June 2003; Consultation hosted by the SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 16 July 2003; Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association, Sydney, 23 April 2003; Consultation hosted by the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland (ADCQ) and Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ), Brisbane, 16 June 2003; Women only consultation hosted by the SA Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 17 July 2003; Islamic Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 26 May 2003; Australian Arabic Council, Melbourne, 28 May 2003; Consultation hosted by the WA Office of Multicultural Interests, Perth, 1 July 2003.
- 85 Consultations with NSW primary students (Years 5 and 6) at three Sydney public schools, August 2003. See also: St George Lebanese Joint Committee Women's Group, Sydney, 11 April 2003.
- 86 Muslim lawyers group, Melbourne, 27 May 2003.
- 87 Consultation hosted by the WA Office of Multicultural Interests, Perth, 1 July 2003.
- 88 United Muslim Women's Association, Sydney, 23 June 2003.
- 89 Consultation hosted by the WA Office of Multicultural Interests, 1 July 2003.
- 90 Lebanese Community Council, Sydney, 4 September 2003.
- 91 UWS interview with 'Ameera', Melbourne, 10 December 2003.
- 92 Consultation hosted by ACT Human Rights and ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs, 3 June 2003. See also: Women only consultation hosted by the Office for Women's Policy, WA Department for Community Development, Perth, 30 June 2003; Tripoli and Mena Association Seniors' Group, Sydney, 15 October 2003.
- 93 Australian Arabic Council, Melbourne, 28 May 2003.
- 94 Lebanese Community Council, Sydney, 4 September 2003.
- 95 Consultation hosted by the South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission, Adelaide, 16 July 2003.
- 96 Consultation with Islamic Girls/Women's Group Inc., hosted by the Victorian Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 28 May 2003.
- 97 Muslim lawyers group, Melbourne, 27 May 2003.
- 98 Islamic Council of NSW, Sydney, 10 June 2003.
- 99 Arabic Workers' Network, Sydney, 29 April 2003.
- 100 Muslim lawyers group, Melbourne, 27 May 2003.
- 101 Lebanese Community Council, Sydney, 4 September 2003.
- 102 NSW Police Ethnic Community Liaison Officers, Sydney, 9 April 2003.
- 103 NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, *Annual Report 2002-03*, page 30.
- 104 UWS interview with 'Zahra', Sydney, 18 October 2003.
- 105 Australian Arabic Council, Melbourne, 28 May 2003.
- 106 Arabic Workers' Network, Sydney, 29 April 2003.
- 107 Islamic Council of NSW, Sydney, 10 June 2003.
- 108 UWS Survey: 33% of survey respondents indicated that they did not report incidents of racism, abuse or violence because they did not think anything useful would come of it.
- 109 Consultation with young Muslim women, Brisbane, 17 June 2003.
- 110 Consultation hosted by Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commission, Hobart, 14 June 2003.
- 111 Consultation hosted by Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council, Wollongong, 9 August 2003.