



*MY
DRESS,
MY
IMAGE,
MY
CHOICE*

***EVALUATION REPORT
BRINGING MUSLIM AND
NON-MUSLIM WOMEN TOGETHER***

***SUPPORTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION
AND MULTICULTURAL AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS
LIVING IN HARMONY INITIATIVE 2005***



Young Muslims of
Australia

**YOU
ME
AUSTRALIAN**

living in harmony
An Australian Government Initiative



Australian Government

Department of Immigration and
Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs



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My Dress My Image My Choice
Evaluation Report
Bringing Muslim and Non-Muslim Women Together

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Table of Contents

BACKGROUND.....	1
Introduction	1
Event Program.....	2
Promoting the events	2
Selecting the venues	3
Understanding Islam in Australia	4
Hijab as an expression of faith	5
Promoting pride in Muslim women.....	6
A forum for learning.....	6
Promoting harmony	7

BACKGROUND

The event “My Dress, My Image, My Choice” was developed to bring Muslim and Non Muslim women together to increase harmony and tolerance within the broader community and to increase community understanding of Australian Muslim women and Islam - why they wear the hijab and what it means to practice Islam in Australia. The event developed over time in response to a growing distrust of Muslims and Islam that was particularly targeted at Muslim women in the streets due to world political events.

In 1999, the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) established an Arabic Women’s Group to work together to meet the needs of Arabic women particularly in relationship to health and social issues. The group met monthly during school terms over more than two years and planned and facilitated a range of projects and activities.

The group changed their name to the Muslim Women’s Group, as they believed that the issues impacting on Arabic women in Australia were consistent with the issues impacting on Muslim women in general regardless of their ethnic background including Australian born Muslim women.

Racism and acts of intolerance within the broader community were often discussed within the meetings. These fears expressed by the women became even more frequent after September 11th, the Bali bombing and the War on Terror.

“My Dress, My Image, My Choice” was developed over several years in response to these fears in partnership with the MIC’s Muslim Women’s Group, Network of Australian Muslim Women and Young Muslims of Australia Doncaster Branch. The first event was held in 2001 for Manningham Women’s Health Week to overwhelming success and then it was held in the Cities of Whitehorse, Boroondara, Knox, Monash and Maroondah. Young Muslims of Australia have presented the event in regional Victoria including Cobram, Shepparton and Colac as well as other metropolitan regions of Melbourne.

In 2005, the MIC received support from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Living in Harmony Initiative to hold three events to celebrate Harmony Day and to promote harmony and tolerance within the community. This report is an evaluation of those three events.

Introduction

The Harmony Day event was held on the 22nd March 2005 at the Box Hill Town Hall in the City of Whitehorse and the remaining two events on the 26th April 2005 at the Springvale Town Hall in the City of Greater Dandenong and the 14th June at the Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Community Cultural Centre in Upwey, Shire of Yarra Ranges.

Initially two events were planned as part of the Living in Harmony Initiative in 2005. However, further support was provided to hold a third event so that the ABC Compass Program could televise the event as part of a documentary on the work of Waleed Aly and Susan Carland. Susan had been a frequent speaker in the previous events and “My Dress, My Image, My Choice” was considered an appropriate background to showcase their work in bringing Muslim and Non Muslims together. This provided a further

opportunity to hold the event in a new area of Melbourne, which included rural and urban settlements.

More than 560 women attended the three sessions representing a “full house” at all three venues. Some women who expressed interest in attending could not attend, as there were no places available. Tables that seated 10 women were placed in a horseshoe pattern around the venues to enable the women parading the clothes to walk amongst the tables. Where possible, Muslim and Non Muslim women were seated so they could share tables.

Event Program

The program was developed to provide an:

- alternative view of Islam than those frequently shown in the media particularly images of war and distrust and anger by Muslim communities towards western cultures,
- understanding of the meaning of Islamic concepts free of political and cultural interpretations i.e. the Islamic meaning of Hijab and Jihad and the role of women in Islam, and
- introduction to Australian Muslim women and Islamic practices in Australia.

The program included a welcoming by a speaker from the Migrant Information Centre, speakers from Young Muslims of Australia and the Islamic Council of Victoria talking about why Muslim women wear Hijab and what Islam means to them and parades of Muslim dress including street wear, casual dress, sports wear, evening wear and wedding dresses. Each Muslim speaker and parade participant introduced herself and provided a brief insight into themselves as an Australian Muslim – their age, work and family background.

The parade was accompanied by contemporary Islamic songs and music and an integral part of each event involved a halal lunch where women could talk informally together. These lunches have been found to be just as important in breaking down barriers between women as the formal speeches and parade of clothes. In situations where tables were predominantly made up of Non Muslim women, the event participants sat at the tables to encourage further discussion.

Each participant was asked to complete a feedback sheet that was designed to gain an understanding on whether the event had changed their views and knowledge of Islam and Australian Muslims, their impressions of the event, venue, speakers and parade and how they found out about the event. Below is an analysis of the feedback received from the three events.

Promoting the events

A major challenge is promoting the event without emphasizing it as a Muslim fashion parade. The western concept of fashion parade does not apply to the event, as it is not associated with the modeling industry or designer clothing sales. In addition, there has been a strong attempt to include women of all ages and body shapes in the parade. However, as for all women, often this has been difficult, as older or larger women have

felt shy about participating and their sense of body image has impacted on their confidence. When developing the flyer, the fashion parade is not included as the primary focus in the wording or the title. Rather, the flyer targets promoting harmony in the first instance and the title of the event “My Dress, My Image, My Choice” was developed to reflect the message that the women wish to convey. Likewise, the graphic used on the flyer and designed by Adeeba Nabulsi, Prickly Pear Graphic Designs, depicts a bird flying from an open cage door to further reflect the freedom of choice and liberation of Muslim women in Australia.

The events were promoted through sending flyers to local churches, Mosques and other religious venues as well as people who had attended other Migrant Information Centre multicultural functions including Refugee Week events and the Communities Together program which was supported by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs Living in Harmony Initiative in 2004. Flyers were also emailed to local service providers including local government and community houses. In addition, articles were sent to local newspapers and for two events – Box Hill and Upwey – journalists and photographers attended the events and published follow-up articles.

When asked how people found out about the event, in Box Hill, 39% found out about the event through “word of mouth”, 23% had a flyer addressed to their home, 20% found out through their workplace, 12% through their club or church and 7% through local media.

In Springvale, 52% of people found out about the event through local media, 28% through “word of mouth”, 13% through churches and clubs, and 7% through a notice mailed to their home. As it was the first time that the event had been held in the City of Greater Dandenong, the Migrant Information Centre did not have an existing mailing list for this locality. As a result, a greater percentage of people found out about the event through local media. However, “word of mouth” remained a significant influence on encouraging people to attend.

In Upwey, 41% of people found out about the event through “word of mouth”, 27% through the workplace, 15% through churches or clubs, 14% through a notice mailed to their home and 2% through local media. Similarly to the City of Greater Dandenong, this was the first multicultural event the Migrant Information Centre held in the Shire of Yarra Ranges so an existing mailing list was not available. “Word of mouth” was the strongest influence and information about the event through the workplace and clubs and churches were also significant. The trend of relying on “word of mouth” to encourage attendance could be influenced by settlement patterns as the Shire of Yarra Ranges is made of outer suburban, semi-regional and regional areas i.e. smaller communities where many workplaces include local staff.

Selecting the venues

Selecting the best venues for holding the events is important for achieving a relaxing and inclusive atmosphere, which enables women to sit together and eat lunch as well as where all women can see the speakers and parade of clothes. From holding previous events, it was found that the best seating arrangements are round tables that can seat 10 women arranged in a horseshoe pattern around a centre front area that includes sufficient space for speakers, a podium and microphone and an area where the women can enter the

main room and parade the clothes moving around the tables freely from the centre to each side of the hall.

Other major factors in selecting a suitable venue included the design of the room to ensure privacy from the general public, a changing room and kitchen with easy access to the main room and a serving area where a buffet style lunch can be served at each table. Cost was also a major factor in selecting the venues as well as accessibility and parking considerations.

A number of statements were provided in the feedback sheet about the venue and participants were asked to mark those that best described their impressions – they could mark more than one descriptor. In Box Hill, people indicated the venue was in a convenient location and comfortable with less indicating it had good amenities and adequate parking. The venue was a large hall with columns and some people found it difficult to see due to the columns and parking immediately outside the venue was 2-hour meter parking and people had to go outside and move their cars. A car park was situated across the street from the venue but many people may not have been aware of its location.

In Springvale, all descriptions of the venue were identified by participants in significant numbers in order of preference from convenient location, comfortable, adequate parking, good amenities and accessible. Similarly, in Upwey, all descriptions were adequately identified by participants in the following order of preference – comfortable, convenient location, good amenities, adequate parking and accessible. The only negative comments received from the Springvale and Upwey events were that the music was too loud for some people and in Upwey there was not enough room between tables.

Understanding Islam in Australia

Approximately 82% who attended the event at Box Hill, 57% at Springvale and 73% at Upwey indicated that their attendance at the event changed their understanding of Islam in Australia.

“I always assumed that women wearing these clothes are forced to cover their bodies, I was glad to hear it was a sign of femininity and faith.”

“More depth of understanding in a personal setting. Great fun while I absorbed some of your culture.”

“Have not attended a function like this before. Found it very informative.”

A greater number of Muslim women attended the function in Springvale, which accounts for the lower percentage of women whose understanding of Islam did not increase by attending the event.

“As a Muslim woman my understanding of Islam is the same but I am happy that through this event we can get together and show and present Islam to others.”

Other common reasons given to explain that their understanding of Islam had not changed related to prior knowledge through attending other events, reading about Islam and having Muslim friends and relatives in their family.

“I already knew it all but it was nice to hear today.”

“I have already attended sessions at the local Mosque – and that answered some of my questions but not all.”

“I already have a reasonable knowledge of Muslim concepts – loved the clothes, food and additional information.”

Hijab as an expression of faith

Reasons people gave for whether attending the events had changed their understanding of Islam indicated a range of beliefs about Muslim women and their clothes particularly the headscarf. A number of Non Muslim women believed that Muslim women are oppressed, they are forced to dress the way they do and that they are not friendly towards Non Muslim women.

In most cases, the event changed the views of women who held those beliefs and the understanding of Muslim dress as an expression of faith rather than a form of female oppression was highlighted as an important learning from the events.

“Islamic women are more liberated and friendly than we thought. We are all the same in our hearts.”

“My impression had always been that the women were totally subjugated by men, obviously this is not so. These women have an inner peace that is obvious.”

“I always assumed that women wearing these clothes are forced to cover their bodies. I was glad to hear it was a sign of femininity and faith.”

“I had some biases about Muslim women that they are usually weak and obedient. But I came to know you are empowered and strong.”

“I have new understanding of the purpose of hijab and the importance of it to women rather than as a tool of oppression as it has been portrayed.”

Only a small number of women felt that the event was not a true indication of women in Islam particularly Muslim women overseas, as they felt that the Muslim women participating in the event were not a true representation of Muslim women in Australia or overseas.

“I felt that the Islamic views expressed were very idealistic/westernized. These were all Australian born or converts which isn’t a true representation of Islam in Australia – where are the migrants views, the women who have really lived Islam?”

“I felt I was already fairly aware of the Australian Muslim attitudes through the media. I would have liked to hear from some migrants and their experiences. We often hear very negative reports of women’s oppression in other countries – Islam or politics?”

“I felt that, naturally, we heard from the educated and liberated women. What about the women who are less free?”

As mentioned earlier, the number of women who expressed these views was small. Research completed by the Network of Australian Muslim Women in 1999¹ indicated according to 1996 Census data that 33% of Muslims were born in Australia and 12% had university degrees. This represented a higher level of education of Muslims than the Australian average at the time. Although mentioned when appropriate, differences in the treatment of women in Muslim cultures in Australia and overseas could not be fully addressed in the events. This issue would require another forum facilitated by Islamic scholars to generate further understanding and discussion.

Promoting pride in Muslim women

Although the Muslim women who attended the events indicated that their understanding of Islam had not changed, many mentioned the pride they felt in being an Australian Muslim by coming to the event and seeing the interest shown and goodwill of Non Muslim women.

“I am very proud of being a Muslim woman and even prouder today.”

“Very proud of being Muslim in Australia, proud of what’s happening here.”

“As a Muslim woman my understanding of Islam is the same but I am happy that through this event we can get together and show and present Islam to others.”

“To see so many interested women (Non Muslim) attending such events is wonderful. More and more people are understanding the Muslim Hijab issue.”

A forum for learning

Women were asked to indicate their overall impression of the event as a way of learning about Islam and Muslim women’s dress. 96% in Box Hill, 99% in Springvale and 98% in Upwey indicated that they were pleased with the event.

In relation to the speakers, 100% in Box Hill, 99% in Springvale and 100% in Upwey were pleased with the presentations. Similarly 100% in all three events were pleased with the parade of Muslim dress.

It is clear from these responses that the program represents an effective forum for bringing Muslim and Non Muslim women together to increase their understanding of each other and to increase harmony and tolerance within the wider community.

“Through communication and dialogue greater understanding is achieved.”

“I have much better understanding of the Hijab and I am delighted on what I have learned.”

“I did not have any understanding and now I wish to learn more. Thank you for the opportunity to start understanding.”

“Most of what I heard was what I already have an understanding of but it was presented in a very interesting way.”

¹ “Muslims of Australia”, Network of Australian Muslim Women, Preston Adult Multicultural Education Services, Migrant Resource Centre North East, Living in Harmony Initiative Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Victorian Multicultural Commission (1999).

Promoting harmony

In conclusion, “My Dress, My Image, My Choice” promotes harmony and tolerance between Muslim and Non Muslim women. It increases understanding of Islam and the Islamic dress code for women and it provides a personal environment where women can ask questions freely and meet each other when otherwise they might not have had the opportunity to meet in the wider community.

The event has been developed to maximize these opportunities and all components of the program including the talks, parade and informal discussions over sharing a meal together are equally essential elements for achieving increased understanding and tolerance of difference within the community.

The major challenge is holding the events in other areas of Melbourne, Regional Victoria and nation-wide so that a wider range of women can increase their understanding and tolerance of Muslim women who choose to wear hijab. At each session, women ask organisers if the event can be held in other areas. For example, after these particular events were held, other areas suggested included the City of Casey and the Mornington Peninsula.

The event is costly as it requires funding to cover venue and equipment hire costs, volunteer costs including transport, dry cleaning and repair costs for the clothing which is borrowed from members of the community, administration and promotional costs and the cost of providing a halal lunch. These costs, which do not include project management and salary costs, can be high and each event in Melbourne averages approximately \$4000. As a result, participants are asked to pay \$10 or \$5 concession to attend the event. Inability to pay does not preclude people from attending the event and door charges have been kept to a minimum to encourage women to attend. These charges do not cover costs and the event needs to be subsidized so that it can continue to be held.

In addition, the Migrant Information Centre as part of the Living in Harmony Initiative in 2004 developed a program to achieve the same aims as “My Dress, My Image, My Choice” which used a similar model and targeted families. This event entitled “Communities Together” enabled both men and women to attend and better understand Islam.² These two events should be more widely available to promote harmony in the wider community.

In conclusion, as reported by participants:

“Thank you very much for making exchange of ideas, information and cultural differences so pleasant.”

“Thank you so much for making this opportunity available to us. I believe that fear, which is the basis of prejudice and bad behaviour, has in ignorance and lack of understanding, caused the failure to see the humanity of the other. The event has in a pleasurable “girlie” way been very informative on levels I have not achieved in my travels in Islamic countries. I hope this continues to outreach to the main community and impacts on community perceptions of Islam.”

² The final report for the program is available on the MIC’s website www.miceastmelb.com.au.

“A very good initiative. Anything which helps foster building bridges between different ethnic groups must be positive for Australia.”

“Thank you – the more we women connect the stronger the world will be in peace and partnership.”