

MIGRANT INFORMATION CENTRE
eastern melbourne



SWIMMING FOR MUSLIM WOMEN

An Evaluation Report

**A Collaborative Project between Migrant Information
Centre (Eastern Melbourne) and the Network of
Australian Muslim Women**

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Swimming in an appropriate environment was made possible for Muslim women and their children through the work of the Network of Australian Muslim Women and the Banyule City Council. Nadia Tefaha volunteered her time to the Network and worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the swimming sessions. Her work meant that Muslim women knew about the sessions and they, and their children, could come, pay their entrance fees and use the two hours available to them to have fun, relax in the spa, swim in the pool and if appropriate, learn how to swim.

Many women from diverse backgrounds and countries of origin travelled from both nearby suburbs and suburbs some distance away - north eastern, northern, north western and eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Their on-going support and enthusiasm was greatly appreciated as it has made it possible to continue to hire the venue and make swimming available to Muslim women in Melbourne.

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Summary

In 2000, the Network of Australian Muslim Women received funding from the City of Banyule to provide women only swimming sessions for Muslim women and their children at the Olympic Leisure Centre in Heidelberg. No suitable swimming venue was available in the eastern suburbs.

The Olympic Leisure Centre in Heidelberg meets the needs of Muslim women because it provides:

- Curtains so the public cannot view people swimming in the pool, and
- Suitable changing rooms with partitions to ensure privacy.

Two five weekly sessions were held for Muslim women and their children during terms 3 and 4 of the 2000 school year. Over the two sessions, a total of 282 adults and 246 children used the pool, spa and sauna.

Participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with the facilities and the female pool attendants or lifeguards.

The attendance levels showed demand amongst Muslim women who were from a wide range of diverse backgrounds including Turkish, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Pakistani, Somali, Afghan, Syrian, Australian and Iranian backgrounds. These women resided in suburbs spread across a large geographical area of Melbourne including Heidelberg, Rosanna, Broadmeadows, Preston, Mill Park, Dandenong, Blackburn, Doncaster and Templestowe.

The Afghan community in Ashburton has also identified the need for suitable swimming facilities for women. However, as many do not drive a car they are unable to go to Heidelberg on Fridays.

As a result of the high demand for swimming amongst Muslim women, in 2001, the Network of Australian Muslim Women will continue to hire the Olympic Leisure Centre for five weekly sessions during terms 1, 2 and 4. Their ability to continue to do this will depend on the level of participation and whether entrance fees cover costs.

Community interest as well as the attendance levels for the sessions in 2000 demonstrates the need for swimming facilities for women only sessions to meet the cultural and religious needs of Muslim women.

The lack of appropriate swimming facilities prevents a growing population of Australian women from accessing swimming as a health and recreational activity that is available to the general population.

Introduction

The availability of suitable swimming facilities for Muslim women and their children is a major issue for Muslim communities across Victoria. Many Muslim women and their children including teenage girls are unable to use public facilities for swimming and as a result, they are unable to gain the health benefits of swimming or for some women, the safety benefits of learning to swim and supporting their children around water.

In November 1999, the Olympic Leisure Centre in Heidelberg¹ was hired for 2 two hourly weekly sessions from 6.15pm to 8.15pm on Friday evenings to enable Muslim women and their children² to go swimming. A third session was also held on a Saturday afternoon in March 2000. These three sessions were a pilot to measure the level of community interest and whether the community could meet the costs of hiring the pool facilities including the costs of a female swimming attendant or life guard. The sessions were subsidised by the Network of Australian Muslim Women³ who had limited on-going resources to meet any shortfall caused by low attendance to the swimming sessions.

In July 2000, the Network of Australian Muslim Women received a community grant of \$1000 from the City of Banyule to subsidise swimming for Muslim women at the Olympic Swimming Centre in Heidelberg. As a result of this funding, swimming sessions of five consecutive weeks were held to coincide with terms three and four of the school year in 2000.

This report includes an evaluation of the swimming sessions from both the perspectives of community organisers as well as participants, and it aims to raise the awareness of local government and other sport and recreational organisations to the needs of Muslim women in relation to swimming.

Background

In 1999, the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) completed a needs analysis of linguistically and culturally diverse communities residing in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne.⁴ Over 30 focus groups were held across the region with service providers and people from a wide range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds across the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

The Network of Australian Muslim Women facilitated a discussion group on behalf of the MIC with Arabic speaking women primarily residing in the City of Manningham. Issues raised related to women's health, social and recreational activities and access to information and services.

As a result of this discussion group, a women's group facilitated by the MIC was formed to address the issues raised at the initial meeting. The group, which has been meeting

¹ The suburb of Heidelberg is located within the local government area of Banyule.

² Boys under 7 years old were welcome.

³ The Network of Australian Muslim Women is a statewide community organisation that supports and advocates on behalf of Muslim women and their families

⁴ The needs analysis is documented in the report "Making a Future" (December 1999) and it is available on the MIC's web site www.miceastmelb.com.au.

monthly since August 1999, is represented by Muslim women from several countries including Afghanistan, Australia, Egypt, Iran, Jordan and Lebanon.

A major issue that was raised by the women related to access to swimming facilities that meet the religious and cultural needs of Muslim women. Muslim women require women's only swimming facilities that provide privacy for swimming and changing clothes. Many public swimming centres have glass walls where passersby can view into the swimming area. Muslim women require walls or curtains around the pool area so that members of the public cannot view them whilst they swim.

As a result of this need, the group developed and implemented an action plan for locating a suitable swimming venue, promoting the sessions and identifying and obtaining funding for longer-term sustainability.

Finding a venue

The MIC contacted all swimming facilities in the eastern suburbs to identify whether pools were firstly, available for hire and secondly, provided privacy from public view. Members of the group then visited each facility to assess its suitability.

The majority of swimming facilities were built with glass walls and some, with open shower and changing rooms. The designs of these types of facilities are not suitable for Muslim women unless curtains or partitions are made available. The only suitable venue was found at the Olympic Leisure Centre in Heidelberg located in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. As the centre was accessible to women residing in the northern, north eastern and eastern suburbs particularly women with cars and access to transport, the venue was hired through the Network of Australian Muslim Women.

Promoting swimming in the Muslim community

As mentioned earlier in this report, three sessions were held to promote swimming for women within the community and to generate greater interest, increase attendance levels and to minimise the funding required to subsidise activities. These sessions were widely publicised in Arabic media and Muslim web sites as well as through distribution of leaflets to Mosques, Muslim community organisations, mailing lists and Arabic language schools for children.

Through promoting short-term sessions before providing swimming on a longer-term basis, women were able to attend a session and tell other friends and members of their family about it. Word of mouth, personal invitations and support from community organisations were found to be the most successful ways of encouraging Muslim women to participate in swimming.

Meeting the costs

A major concern for the organisers was to collect enough entrance fees to cover the weekly costs of \$200 for hiring the facility including the costs of hiring a pool attendant or lifeguard and a swimming instructor, yet ensuring Muslim women paid the same for using the pool as members of the general public. Entrance fees were \$4 for adults and \$3 for children under 12 years of age plus an additional cost of \$10 for five swimming

lessons. Water aerobics was also available for an additional \$10 per person if 15 women booked in advance.⁵

The Network of Australian Muslim Women subsidised the first three sessions and the later two terms of swimming were subsidised through funding received from the City of Banyule's Women's Sport and Recreation Grants Program.

To encourage women to attend on a regular basis, discounts and family packages of \$17.50 per adult, \$10 per child or \$50 per family consisting of 2 adults and 2 children were offered to women who paid for the five weekly sessions in advance. Nevertheless, most women preferred to pay at the door. As the majority of people came at the same time, organisers had to provide receipts and in some cases the correct change as well as record participants' personal details such as names and addresses.

This situation caused considerable hardship to the organisers who were volunteers who wanted to access the facilities themselves yet they were forced to spend considerable time collecting, balancing and paying money and providing instructions to participants on the use of the premises as well as their responsibilities.

Attendance

Attendance in the first round of sessions was:

Session 1	28 adults	28 children
Session 2	30 adults	34 children
Session 3	27 adults	31 children
Session 4	32 adults	23 children
Session 5	22 adults	28 children
Sub Total	139 adults	144 children

Attendance in the second round of sessions was:

Session 1	22 adults	25 children
Session 2	35 adults	22 children
Session 3	35 adults	22 children
Session 4	24 adults	13 children
Session 5	25 adults	20 children
Sub Total	147 adults	105 children
Total	282 adults	246 children

The organisers were pleased with the attendance levels particularly as unlike the general public, Muslim women had to attend swimming at a set time and place each week if they wanted to take advantage of the program.

⁵ The level of entrance fees meant that approximately 50 women were required to attend swimming each week to cover the costs.

In addition, the attendance levels showed demand amongst Muslim women who were from a wide range of diverse backgrounds including Turkish, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Pakistani, Somali, Afghan, Syrian, Australian and Iranian backgrounds. These women resided in suburbs spread across a large geographical area of Melbourne including Heidelberg, Rosanna, Broadmeadows, Preston, Mill Park, Dandenong, Blackburn, Doncaster and Templestowe.

Levels of satisfaction

At the last session in the second round, women were asked to complete a feedback sheet to measure their level of satisfaction with the swimming activities. Twenty-four women completed the survey.

Swimming sessions

Participants were asked to describe their feelings about the swimming session by indicating whether they felt they were “excellent”, “good” or “poor”. Twenty respondents indicated they felt the sessions were excellent and four felt they were good. No respondents felt the sessions were poor. One person commented: “It was lots of fun. The kids loved it.”

Lifeguard

In the second question, participants were asked to rate the cooperation of the lifeguard by indicating “excellent”, “good” or “poor”. Thirteen rated the cooperation of the lifeguard as “excellent”, nine “good” and only two “poor”. One woman commented “Above average. We need more lifeguards – nice and caring.” During the sessions, organisers had to make signs to remind mothers that they were responsible for their children in the toddlers’ pool as some mothers believed the lifeguard would watch them. This perception may account for the low rating of two respondents.

Swimming lessons

In the third question, participants were asked to rate the swimming lessons. Of those who responded to this question, three indicated they were “excellent”, three “good” and eight “poor”. One person commented “Needs more attention and time”. The reason for the dissatisfaction with the swimming lessons was that some people wanted more personal attention.

In the future, organisers plan to ask people to organise their own lessons with the instructor so that their needs can be better met. Private lessons at a cost of \$16.50 per lesson for 30 minutes would be available compared to \$6.60 per person for 30 minutes for a minimum group of 6 people.⁶

⁶ In the previous sessions, people paid \$10.00 for 5 half-hour group lessons.

Future swimming sessions

In the last question, participants were asked whether they would be willing to participate in swimming sessions in January and February 2001. All twenty-four respondents indicated “yes” and some included comments such as “definitely - love to” and “like to”.

Other Muslim groups such as the Young Muslim Women’s Group in Manningham and the Afghan community in Ashburton have also indicated they would like to swim in appropriate swimming facilities for Muslim women. However, these groups require transport in order to attend the facilities in Heidelberg.

Community interest as well as the attendance levels for the sessions in 2000 demonstrates the need for swimming facilities for women only sessions to meet the cultural and religious needs of Muslim women. The lack of appropriate swimming facilities prevents a growing population of Australian women from accessing swimming as a health and recreational activity that is available to the general population.

Key findings

Muslim women and their children do not have equal access to public swimming facilities.

There is a demand and need for swimming facilities for Muslim women and their children.

Public swimming facilities need to develop strategies for providing privacy to Muslim women and their children i.e. provide women only sessions and privacy from being viewed by the public whilst swimming.

Swimming programs for people with special needs should be developed to meet the needs of Muslim women.

Group leaders, community support agencies, ethnic media, Mosques and mailing lists should be used to promote swimming to ensure high attendance levels.

Community transport should be provided for community groups who need to travel to other municipalities to access suitable swimming facilities that are not available in the local area where the group resides.

Public swimming facilities should provide staff to open the facility for public swimming sessions for Muslim women and their children including collecting entrance fees.

Future Directions

The Network of Australian Muslim Women will continue to hire the swimming facilities in the City of Banyule whilst the level of participation remains such that the costs can be covered by entrance fees.

The Migrant information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) will advocate on behalf of Muslim women through writing to VicSwim and local governments in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne requesting they provide appropriate swimming facilities that meet the needs of Muslim women and their children residing in their area i.e. provide women only sessions and privacy from being viewed by the public whilst swimming.

The Network of Australian Muslim Women will write to the City of Banyule requesting they provide staff to open the Olympic Swimming Pool for Muslim women on Friday evenings to collect entrance fees and to provide female lifeguards.