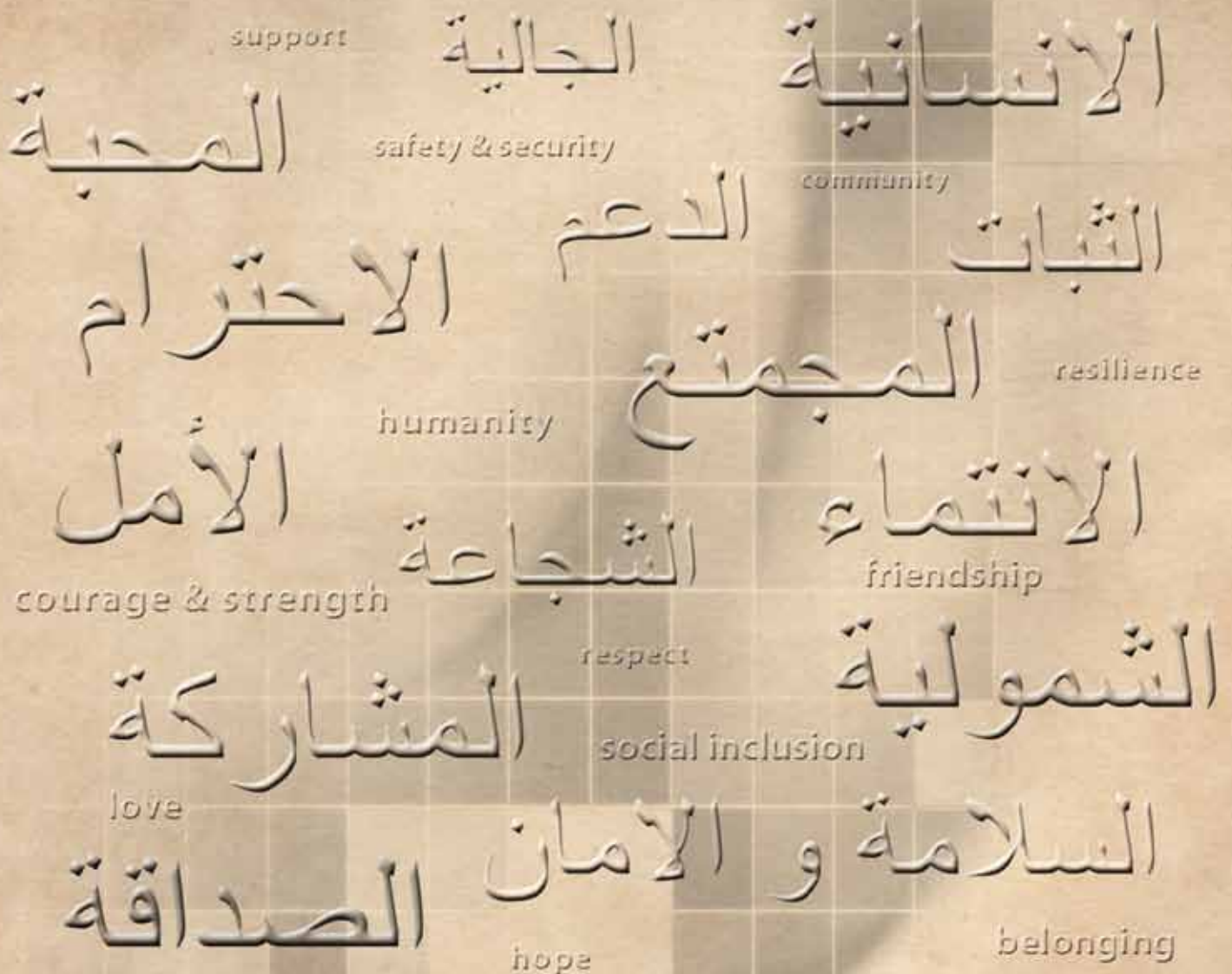


‘WE’RE FAMILY TOO’

The effects of homophobia in Arabic-speaking communities in New South Wales



BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY'S
HEALTH & WELLBEING

Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project (ACON)
July 2011

“ [T]here’s a little tiny bit of me that wishes for my parents to know that I’m happy. And I think if there’s any reason why you’d wanna come out, it’s to tell your parents; I’m fine, I’m happy, I’m content. My heart is full. But we don’t speak the same language as our parents and our parents don’t speak the same language as us. And issues of love are always tough things to talk about.

[women’s focus group]

”

“ I always remember when I was at school; I was picked on for being a Muslim and a wog. One day at school this guy was getting bashed for being gay. And I intervened and defended him. I took my stand against the other guys. So I’ve always strongly believed in the idea that people celebrating love is not an issue for me. I believe in justice. Because I grew up as a Muslim [...], I could empathise with being marginalised. But I didn’t meet many gay and lesbian people from the Muslim faith before my brother came out.

[interview with sister of a gay man]

”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Author: Ghassan Kassisieh

Research team

We acknowledge the dedicated work of the four research facilitators who conducted the women's and men's focus group, health workers' focus group, and interviews with family members, and community and religious leaders.

We give special acknowledgment to the work of one research facilitator who transliterated and transcribed all of the focus group and interview data.

Steering Group

This project has been guided by representatives from the following organisations: ACON (The Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project); Arab Council Australia; Beit el Hob; NSW Attorney General's Department, NSW Multicultural HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C Service; St George Youth Services (GLYSSN); Sydney South West Area Health Service (Bankstown Community Health, The Corner Youth Health Service).

At the request of members of the steering group, the names of steering group members and research facilitators have been withheld to protect privacy.

Special thanks to the NSW Attorney-General's Department for funding this research.

Our sincere gratitude to all the participants who contributed their opinions, experiences and stories to this research: community and religious leaders, health and community workers, and especially, same-sex attracted Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and their families.

GLOSSARY

ACON	formerly the AIDS Council of NSW. Now known as ACON Health Limited trading as ACON
AGD	NSW Attorney General's Department. Now known as the Department of Attorney General and Justice
AVP	The Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project (A project of ACON)
Beit el Hob	Arabic for 'House of Love'. A Sydney-based social and support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds
Club Arak	'Arak' is Arabic for 'sweat' and for an aniseed-flavoured alcoholic beverage. Club Arak is a Sydney-based queer Arab dance party (held since 2002)
G/L/B/T/Q	gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer
homophobia	refers to negative attitudes or beliefs and prejudices (including fear, hatred, disgust, disapproval, negativity or hostility) towards homosexuality or people who identify as (or are perceived to be) same-sex attracted (see also section 1.2.4)
honour	refers to one's standing as an individual and as a member of a collective (including familial, communal, ethnic or national collective), particularly in the perception of others
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now known as the Australian Human Rights Commission)
SSA	same-sex attracted

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PART ONE: ABOUT THIS CONSULTATION

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support
الجالية
safety & security
المحبة
الثبات
community
الدعم
resilience
المجتمع
humanity
الاحترام
الانتماء
friendship
الأمل
courage & strength
الشجاعة
respect
المشاركة
social inclusion
الشمولية
love
السلامة و الأمان
hope
الصدقة
belonging

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

In 2003, the NSW Attorney General's Department (AGD) released its landmark report on homophobic hostilities and violence against lesbians and gay men, *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe*.¹ The report was based on the results of a survey of 600 people and 8 targeted focus groups within NSW. The report found that lesbians and gay men continued to experience high levels of homophobic abuse, harassment and violence. One of the focus group discussions in *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe* centred on the experiences of ten lesbians and gay men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.² Unlike other focus groups that focused on street-based incidents or harassment from work colleagues, the participants of Arabic-speaking backgrounds primarily focused on hostilities and violence 'experienced within their own families and communities'.³

We're Family Too was commissioned to further investigate the themes raised by same-sex attracted (SSA) participants from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe*. To the best of our knowledge, this report represents the most comprehensive consultation to date on the effects of homophobia experienced by SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and their families.

This consultation comes at a time of significant challenges for people from Arabic-speaking communities.⁴ Socio-political events including the September 11 attacks in the United State (2001), the high-profile gang rape trials in Sydney (2001 – 2002), the Bali Bombings (October 2002) and the Cronulla riots (December 2005) have set the backdrop for significant expressions of hostility and prejudice towards Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Following September 2001, consultations with Arab and Muslim Australians by the Australian Human Rights Commission revealed increased levels of fear and a growing sense of alienation from the mainstream community amongst Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.⁵ Recognising this socio-political climate, this consultation has endeavoured to ensure that members and representatives of Arabic-speaking communities had significant roles in devising, steering and contributing to the project in a respectful and meaningful fashion.

1.1 About this consultation

Beginning in September 2004, ACON's Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project (AVP) has led a steering group to direct this project. The steering group comprised of representatives from ACON, the NSW Attorney General's Department, Arab-Australian welfare organisations, community health services and SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds living.

The steering group formulated a plan and methodology including an online survey, focus group consultations and individual interviews aimed at capturing qualitative and quantitative data. Data was collected from people of Arabic-speaking backgrounds, including SSA people, family members of SSA people, health and community workers, and community and religious leaders. Whilst this consultation was aimed at capturing the views of a diverse range of people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds across NSW, the sample was comprised almost solely of people with a connection to, or who resided in, Sydney. **Chapter two** outlines the complete methodological design for this consultation.

Chapters three to seven outline the results of this consultation. **Chapter three** considers key themes which underlie homophobia in Arabic-speaking communities. **Chapter four** analyses the rates and types of homophobia experienced by SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds who participated in this consultation. **Chapter five** discusses the disclosure of sexual identity by SSA participants from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. **Chapter six** discusses the levels of support and acceptance experienced by SSA participants of Arabic-speaking backgrounds from people within Arabic-speaking communities. **Chapter seven** considers the experiences of SSA participants from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) communities.

This project aimed to produce clear considerations and future directions for responding to the issues highlighted by the consultation. **Chapter 8** therefore discusses strategies for change recommended by the consultation participants.

1.2 Terminology and its limitations

All abbreviations and terminology used throughout this report are defined or explained in the glossary. However, as many descriptive terms used in this report have limitations, it is necessary to qualify and explain some terminology used.

1.2.1 Sexual and cultural identities

This report uses the term ‘same-sex attracted’ (SSA) to denote the range of non-heterosexual sexual orientations and identities. This includes gay, lesbian, bisexuals, queer or other variations of sexual identity. This report recognises that sexuality descriptors, such as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, may fit uneasily with Arab understandings of sexuality.⁶ Therefore, and wherever possible, participants are left to describe their sexual orientation in their own terms.

To describe cultural identities centred on Arab ethnicity and ancestry, this report uses the term ‘Arabic-speaking background’. ‘Arabic-speaking background’ is defined to include people who identify with an Arab ethnicity or ancestry, people who speak Arabic at home, or people who are born in an Arabic-speaking country. We acknowledge that the term ‘background’ may not give enough emphasis to the presently lived expressions of Arab identities in all their diversity. Again wherever possible, participants are left to describe their cultural identities in their own terms.

1.2.2 ‘Communities’

This report utilises terminology such as ‘Arab communities’ or ‘GLBTQ communities’. However, the report recognises that the term ‘community’ may homogenise a group of otherwise diverse people who may have more differences than similarities. Whilst accepting its limitations, this report accepts the term ‘community’ as still a useful descriptor for a group of people (that may be largely diverse) yet who nonetheless share common characteristics, such as Arabic-speaking backgrounds or GLBTQ identities. In recognition of this, this report also uses the plural form – ‘communities’ – to enliven the reader’s consciousness to this diversity.

1.2.3 Disclosure and the construct of ‘coming out’

Unless directly quoting from other sources or participants’ responses, this report uses the term ‘disclosure’ of sexuality, rather than ‘coming out’. ‘Coming out’ is generally understood as a process concerned with the personal identification and public proclamation of a SSA identity.⁷ However, some literature has identified that the construct of ‘coming out’ may not fit with experiences for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.⁸ This report’s chosen terminology also emphasises that the disclosure of sexuality may occur in everyday moments, largely unmarked by ceremony.

1.2.4 The concept of homophobia

The term ‘homophobia’ presented particular difficulties for this project as it has variously understood and contested meanings. It is generally used to describe attitudes, beliefs or prejudices (including fear, hatred, disgust, disapproval, negativity or hostility) towards homosexuality or people who identify as SSA. These attitudes, beliefs or prejudices may manifest in verbal or physical violence or abuse against people who are (or perceived to be) SSA.

The terms ‘heterosexism’ and ‘heteronormativity’ have also been used in addition to the term ‘homophobia’. ‘Heterosexism’ and ‘heteronormativity’ describe the sense of exclusion experienced by SSA people due to underlying assumptions that all people are (or will grow up to be) heterosexual. ‘Heterosexism’ and ‘heteronormativity’ describe the privileging of heterosexual ‘people, relationships behaviours and attitudes’ over same-sex relationships and behaviours.⁹ For example, the Arabic congratulatory expression used at weddings – ‘*mabrouk, ensh’Allah inta/inti*’¹⁰, which articulates the hope that a relative of the bride or groom will be next in line for (heterosexual) marriage – is an example of assuming heterosexuality is universal. Heterosexism and heteronormativity devalue same-sex attracted lives by rendering them invisible and unthinkable while providing a foundation for more overt homophobic expression.

For this project, the difficulties presented by the term and understanding of ‘homophobia’ were exacerbated by cultural and linguistic differences. As there is no comparative Arabic term, the project facilitators relied on English terminology when conducting interviews. At times, the research facilitators attempted to give meaning to the English terminology by describing homophobia as the lack

of acceptance of homosexuality. However there were moments where religious leaders appeared to use the words ‘homosexuality’ and ‘homophobia’ interchangeably as meaning the same thing. For example, when asked whether *homophobia* was a problem in Arab communities, some answered that *homosexuality* was not a problem as it did not exist in Arab communities. Some community and religious leaders explicitly said they did not know what the term meant and/or gave the term their own meaning, sometimes based on a literal understanding of the term ‘phobia’ as translating into ‘fear’. For example:

This is the first time I hear of this term, and I’m not quite sure what it means. But I’m guessing it’s something to do with acceptance and non-acceptance of people who practice homosexuality. [Christian religious leader]

I’m not very familiar with the term. But the way I see it, in relation to the subject matter [homosexuality] it can mean one of either two things. Either society is creating fear amongst homosexuals, or, homosexuals are creating fear within society as a result of their actions and practices. [Muslim religious leader]

1.3 Key themes from previous studies

Approximately 2.5 per cent of the NSW population is from an Arabic-speaking background.¹¹ A significant concentration of this population lives in Sydney, with 3.91 per cent of Sydney’s population speaking Arabic at home (Arabic is the most common non-English language spoken in Sydney’s homes).¹² This makes people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds a sizeable ethno-minority.

Despite the significant proportion of people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, the experiences of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds have largely been under-represented or completely absent in large Australian sexuality-related studies.¹³

Only a small body of emerging literature has documented the experiences faced by SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. This body of work includes the 2003 *You Shouldn’t Have to Hide to be Safe* study, two small unpublished academic studies¹⁴ and a small local community-based study¹⁵. Although largely preliminary findings, the key themes emerging from these studies include:

- **SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds share some similarities and some culturally-specific differences with other SSA people.** Like SSA people from other backgrounds, SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds face similar experiences concerning the discovery and expression of their SSA sexuality in a society which assumes or expects them to be heterosexual. However cultural values, such as rigid gender roles, the importance of getting married and having children for establishing one’s independence, a resistance to children moving out of home before marriage, and taboos surrounding the discussion of sexuality, add culturally-specific nuances to these experiences.¹⁶
- **Shame, honour and the ‘external gaze’.** SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds are concerned about the impact of their SSA identities on personal and familial ‘honour’ (or reputation), particularly in the context of wide communities built upon extended family members and family friends.¹⁷ Some findings suggest that SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds may modify their behaviour, by moving away or maintaining an ‘exile’ from extended familial and communal networks, to avoid often-disapproving and gossip-prone community surveillance (the ‘external gaze’).¹⁸ SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds fear bringing shame to their families.
- **Disclosure and support.** An interview-based study with a small sample of 10 participants, suggested that SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds were more likely to disclose their SSA identities to siblings, rather than parents or extended family members. Upon disclosure, preliminary trends indicated that there may be low levels of support within families, although siblings were more likely to be supportive than parents.¹⁹

- **Mixed experiences with GLBTQ communities.** Some SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds connect with wider GLBTQ communities and spaces. However, some SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds avoid GLBTQ spaces because they fear being 'outed' to family and community members or perceive these GLBTQ communities and spaces negatively.²⁰
- **Feelings of racial exclusion.** SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds maintain strong, positive connections to their Arabic roots and cultural traditions.²¹ Like other people from ethno-minority communities, SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds can experience feelings of racial exclusion in Australian society.²²
- **The importance of connecting with other SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.** Connections with other SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds are conceived as important and affirming opportunities for simultaneously experiencing cultural and sexual identities.²³

CHAPTER TWO:

Methodology

This consultation was led by a steering group over four years (between September 2004 and December 2008). Data was collected through an online survey, in focus groups and in interviews conducted over two years by bilingual and/or bicultural facilitators, who were selected by the steering group. Data was collected from a variety of groups with Arabic-speaking backgrounds, including SSA people, family members of SSA people, community and welfare workers, and community and religious leaders. This consultation has resulted in a large volume of mostly qualitative data and provides some of the richest insights into the effects of homophobia on Arabic-speaking communities to date.

2.1 The project plan

Between September 2004 and October 2005, the steering group met to devise a methodology and project plan aimed at targeting four main groups:

- SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds
- family members of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds
- community and welfare workers from Arab communities
- community and religious leaders from Arab communities

An original aim to collect data from general community members (particularly young community members) was later abandoned due to time and resource constraints.

2.1.1 The data collection framework

The steering group agreed on a data collection framework to gather information from the following people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds:

- an online survey targeting SSA people
- a female peer-facilitated focus group with SSA women
- a male peer-facilitated focus group with SSA men
- individual interviews with family members of SSA people

- individual interviews with community and religious leaders
- a focus group with community and welfare workers

The online survey, focus groups and interviews were conducted between November 2005 and November 2007 (**Figure 1**). The considerable length of the data collection process was as a result of staffing changes at the AVP, the need for considerable time to translate, transcribe and analyse large volumes of qualitative data, significant barriers in accessing participants, the nature of working with community and a community-based steering committee, as well as challenges arising in the working relationships between key partners.

Figure 1: Data collection timeline	
Online survey targeting SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds	November 2005 – February 2006
Focus group with SSA women from Arabic-speaking backgrounds	10 May 2006
Focus group with SSA men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds	10 May 2006
Interviews with community and religious leaders	May – October 2006
Interviews with family members	March 2007
Focus group with community and welfare workers	7 November 2007

2.1.2 Facilitators and project staff

The process of data collection and analysis was largely facilitated by people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds (some of whom were same-sex attracted) who were selected by the steering group. All the facilitators and project staff were bilingual and/or bicultural.

A female peer-based facilitator conducted the focus group with SSA women from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, with a female representative from the AVP present. A male peer-based facilitator conducted the focus group with SSA men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, with a male AVP representative present.

A further two facilitators conducted the focus group with community and welfare workers, and interviews with family members and community/religious leaders. One of the facilitators translated

and transcribed the interviews and results of the focus groups.

An author was commissioned in April 2007 to analyse the data and write the final report. Qualitative data was coded under general themes and survey data was analysed using an online survey analysis tool, surveymonkey.com.

2.1.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

In recognition of the potential consequences for participants and steering group members being adversely affected as a result of participation in this project, confidentiality and anonymity were of utmost concern. This was essential for successfully recruiting participants and to ensure that each participant could confidently contribute.

The online survey was hosted on a non gay- or lesbian-related website to protect participants from accidental disclosure via internet histories. In the report, names of steering group members, facilitators and participants have been protected and identifying details removed. In a small range of responses, the gender or other features of respondents have been left undescribed to minimise the risk of identification.

2.1.4 Authenticity of reporting

To maximise the authenticity of reporting, we have not changed any grammar, spelling, capitalisation or phraseology used by online survey respondents, or which appear in the focus group or interview transcripts.

Where editorial marks or suggestions have been made to clarify meaning these are enclosed in square brackets ([]) in this report. Ellipses (...) are used to denote edited quotes, and ellipses in square brackets ([...]) denote longer edits. Wherever possible, colloquial Arabic terms and figures of speech used by the participants have been included and given an English translation in footnotes.

Whilst maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, each quote is referenced with a general description of the participant who made it. Community and religious leaders are described as 'Christian/Muslim religious leader/s' for those sourced from religious institutions and 'Female/male community leaders' for those involved with secular organisations, regardless of their personal religious beliefs.

2.2 Online survey of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

An online survey was conducted between November 2005 and February 2006 (although remaining live until January 2007). Targeting SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, the survey asked quantitative and qualitative questions. The questions addressed the disclosure of sexuality; support and acceptance from family, friends and community members; attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Arab communities; sources and levels of hostility, violence and abuse from within and outside Arab communities; experiences with gay/lesbian and general health, welfare and community organisations; the availability of culturally-sensitive and SSA-supportive services; and how to improve services and support for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.²⁴

Links to the survey were advertised in GLBTQ press²⁵, and via email networks, including the Beit El Hob²⁶ and Club Arak²⁷ mailing lists. The survey was also promoted by the AVP at Fair Day²⁸.

Fifty-nine responses were received to the survey. Thirty-seven responses were included in the final sample based on participants coming from an Arabic-speaking background, living, and being SSA. Twenty respondents were excluded because they indicated a non-NSW postcode.²⁹ One respondent was excluded because they indicated an unambiguous heterosexual identity. One respondent was excluded because they left the survey mostly incomplete.

2.2.1 The survey respondents

The survey respondents were asked to provide a range of demographical information to ascertain the diversity of the survey sample.

(i) Gender identity

Twenty-six respondents identified as male and 11 respondents identified as female.

(ii) Age

Twenty-eight out of the 37 respondents indicated an age of 34 years or below. **Figure 2** highlights the number of respondents in each age bracket.

(iii) Sexual identity

Out of 37 respondents, 22 identified as gay, eight as lesbian, three as queer, one as bisexual, one as bisexual *and* gay, one as gay *and* queer, and one as lesbian *and* queer.

(iv) Country of birth

Out of 36 responses, 23 participants were born in Australia and 10 respondents were born in Lebanon. One respondent each was born in Egypt, Libya and Jordan.

(v) Languages spoken at home

Out of 37 responses to the question of language/s spoken at home, 24 of the participants spoke both English and Arabic at home, six spoke only Arabic at home and seven spoke only English at home (three indicated that French was also spoken at home.)

More than half (17 out of 30) of those who spoke Arabic at home were Australian-born.

(vi) Cultural identity

Participants were asked to define their 'cultural identity' in their own terms. The responses to the question revealed a diverse range of cultural identity markers.

Out of 36 responses:

- **Sixteen respondents defined their cultural identities as Arab** (either exclusively, or as a hybrid between two Arab identities). Of these responses, respondents were specific about

Figure 2: Respondents by age

Age bracket of respondents	No. of respondents
15 – 19 years	4
20 – 24 years	12
25 – 29 years	4
30 – 34 years	8
35 – 39 years	3
40 – 44 years	3
45 – 49 years	2
50 – 54 years	0
55 – 60 years	1
Total	37

the 'type' of Arab identity. Only two described themselves as generally 'Arab/ic'. The remaining fourteen described specific localities and sub-groupings e.g. 'Lebanese', 'Egyptian/Palestinian'.

- **Thirteen respondents described their cultural identity as hybrids combining 'Australian' with another Arab identity.** Again, respondents specified their 'type' of Arabness; with four indicating 'Arab Australian' generally, whilst the remaining specifically indicated 'Lebanese Australian' or 'Australian Lebanese'. Those who specified a Lebanese-Australian hybrid also ordered their identity differently. Five described themselves as 'Lebanese Australian', three described themselves as 'Australian Lebanese' and one described themselves as 'Australian, half Lebanese'.
- **Four respondents defined their cultural identities as exclusively 'Australian'.** Three of these respondents were born in Australia, and one was born in Lebanon.
- **Other responses.** One respondent described their cultural identity as 'Middle Eastern/European' and one respondent described their cultural identity as 'none in specific'.

(vii) Religious background

To ascertain the religious diversity of the sample, participants were asked to state their religious background. Out of 36 responses, 22 stated a Christian background (including Orthodox, Maronite, Catholic and Coptic denominations). Ten nominated an Islamic background and four stated no specific religious background.

Respondents (18 out of 22) who stated a Christian background mostly specified their denomination, whilst all respondents who stated an Islamic background described themselves as 'Muslim'.

(viii) Postcode of residence

Out of 36 responses, 35 respondents lived in suburbs of Sydney whilst one lived in the Wollongong region. **Figure 3** highlights the spread of respondents living in Sydney.

Figure 3: Postcode of residence (Sydney residents)

Region of Sydney (local government area/s)	No. of respondents
South west (Canterbury, Bankstown, Fairfield, Campbelltown)	15
City/inner west (Sydney, Leichhardt, Marrickville)	9
Central/west (Ryde, Parramatta)	4
South/St George (Rockdale, Sutherland, Hurstville)	3
North west (Baulkham Hills)	2
East (Woollahra)	1
Greater west (Penrith)	1
Total	35

Of the Sydney residents, very few respondents lived in the traditionally gay centre of Sydney (suburbs surrounding Oxford St). Of the nine respondents who lived in city and inner west suburbs, only two respondents lived in Surry Hills or Darlinghurst, whilst the majority were situated in inner west Sydney.

2.3 Focus groups

2.3.1 SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

Two separate focus groups were held at ACON for SSA women and SSA men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds on 10 May 2006. The focus groups included five women and seven men respectively.

The focus group participants were recruited through email invitations sent via the Beit el Hob and Club Arak mailing lists. Some participants also recruited other participants from their own personal contacts.

The aims of the focus groups were to further explore themes raised by survey respondents and to consult with SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds about potential future actions.

Questions were asked about participants' personal experiences of homophobia; personal experiences of support or acceptance surrounding SSA sexualities; how participants negotiated their sexual and cultural identities; experiences in broader GLBTQ communities; and what initiatives participants would like developed based on their experiences as SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.

2.3.2 Community and welfare workers

A focus group was held with community and welfare workers from Arab communities on 7 November 2007 at the Arabic Council. This focus group was recruited through information sent via the Arabic Worker's Network, facilitated by the Arab Council Australia.

Eleven people (five women, six men) attended the focus group. Attendees were from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and ranged from 18 years to 55 years. The attendees included Christians and Muslims who worked in a variety of community and welfare roles, including in government and non-government (secular and religious) sectors.

This group was asked about their understanding of homophobia and its impacts (particularly in the context of Arabic-speaking communities); their interactions with SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds; their current knowledge of avenues of support available to SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds; and their roles (if any) in relation to addressing homophobia and/or providing support for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and their families.

2.4 Interviews

2.4.1 Community and religious leaders

The steering group devised a broad list of community and religious leaders, including public figures, representatives from community organisations, and Christian and Muslim religious leaders from Arab communities. Following an invitation, five community leaders and four religious leaders agreed to be interviewed at a location of their choice.

Community and religious leaders were asked about their understanding and impacts of homophobia in the context of Arabic-speaking communities; their experiences with SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds; their opinions on violence against SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds;

what they would do if a community member came to them for support on the issue of homosexuality; and whether they would support anti-homophobia initiatives.

2.4.2 Family members

SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds who were focus group participants were invited to approach their family members who they felt may be willing to be interviewed. This strategy sought to ensure that SSA people would have control over which family members were approached to participate to minimise the risk of inadvertent disclosure.

Using this strategy, six family members (five women, one man) from three families were recruited including four siblings, one parent and one niece. Family members were given a choice of interview location, with most choosing phone interviews.

Family members were asked about their understanding of homophobia and its sources; their experiences as relatives of SSA people; their processes of understanding their relative's sexuality; how they provide support to their SSA relative(s) and challenges they face in doing so.

2.5 Limitations of the methodology

2.5.1 Online survey sample

Due to the small sample size of the online survey, the quantitative measurements and statistics in this report is limited and cannot be generalised beyond the sample. The survey sample is also limited by an under-representation of female respondents, and a relatively large concentration of younger respondents as well as respondents living in Sydney.

Therefore, to address these quantitative limitations, this reports uses the following measures. Firstly, this report preferences the use of numbers (rather than percentages) to describe the quantitative results. This recognises the risk that random chance factors may have impacted the results. Secondly, this report does not make definitive comparisons between respondents based on markers of difference, such as gender or age. Thirdly, this report clearly articulates where results are tentative or merely suggestive of trends. Finally, this report emphasises the significant qualitative online survey data and compares these survey responses with data gained from the project's focus groups and interviews, in addition to other literature findings.

2.5.2 Recruitment strategies

To counteract some of the difficulties in recruiting and accessing participants for the online survey, focus groups and interviews, specialised recruitment strategies were adopted. For example, advertisements targeted particular communities and networks and included specific Arab GLBTQ e-mailing lists, health workers' networks and personal networks of existing participants. These strategies may have limited the overall diversity of the sample.

Furthermore, as the recruitment of family members was contingent on SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds approaching their own families, this strategy was likely to result in a sample of family members who knew about, and were more likely to be accepting of, their relative's sexuality. This may have resulted in members from only three families being successfully recruited.

Despite these limitations, it is important to note that this is the first consultation to report on the views and experiences of family members, community and welfare workers, and community and religious leaders from Arabic-speaking communities on these issues.

PART TWO: THE RESULTS

الإنسانية
support
الجالية
safety & security
المحبة
الثبات
community
الدعم
resilience
المجتمع
humanity
الاحترام
الانتماء
friendship
الأمل
courage & strength
الشجاعة
respect
المشاركة
social inclusion
الشموولية
love
السلامة و الأمان
hope
الصدقة
belonging

CHAPTER THREE:

Understanding homophobia in Arab communities

This chapter analyses the key themes emerging from this consultation which underlie homophobic attitudes in local (Sydney) Arab communities. The first section reports on attitudes said to be held towards gays and lesbians by people in Arab communities, as described by the survey, focus group and interview participants. The second section reports on what participants said were the reasons underlying attitudes held by people in Arab communities towards SSA people. The final section outlines reasons offered by the participants to help explain the persistence of certain attitudes towards homosexuality and/or SSA people which may exist in local Arab communities.

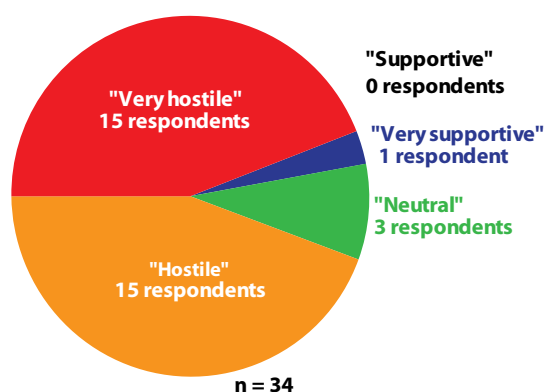
It is important to stress that this chapter does not compare levels of homophobia in Arab communities with other ethno-religious cultures or communities. There is currently no available evidence to suggest that certain cultures or communities in Australia are more homophobic than others.³⁰ However, the data from our consultation does suggest that homophobic attitudes are widespread and prevalent in Arab communities consulted (as they may be so in other Australian communities).

3.1 Attitudes towards lesbians and gay men within Arab communities

3.1.1 Survey of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

Survey respondents were asked what they thought was the usual attitude towards gays and lesbians in the Arab community. **Figure 4** highlights the results.

Figure 4: 'What do you think is the usual attitude towards gays and lesbians in the Arabic community?'



Out of 34 responses to this question, 30 respondents said they thought the usual attitude towards gays and lesbians in the Arab community was either 'hostile' or 'very hostile'.

One respondent who marked 'hostile' provided a detailed explanation for his choice:

I'd choose the option somewhere between 'Hostile' and 'Neutral', based on the habitual homophobia of ... [my] classmates ... [at a school with a significant proportion of Arabic-speaking background students] ...; based also on the long-running taboo ... surrounding homosexuality in general ... There is, on the other side, too much warmth and tolerance in the vast majority of [Arab] family and friends I know (speaking as much from how I personally have been received as from general observation) for me to select anything more severe than 'Hostile'. [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

The theme of 'warmth' was echoed by other focus group participants.

Participant 5: Because I always felt that, in our communities, everybody is always sort of nice to you, kisses you on the cheeks, you know. Gives you coffee. You know. A very hospitable nature. And you feel like even when you absolutely hate the person they still have some kind of superficial connection with you. [*Men's focus group*]

Three respondents said they thought the usual attitude towards gays and lesbians in the Arab community was 'neutral'. One respondent who marked 'neutral' said:

I am open with my partner wherever I go, and I haven't noticed Arabic communities be any more intolerant than others. [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

One respondent said they thought usual attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in 'the Arabic community' were 'very supportive'. This respondent also indicated he had received 'very negative' ideas about gays/lesbians/queer growing up, had 'sometimes' experienced homophobic discrimination and hostility from within the Arab community, and had not told anybody about his sexuality.

3.1.2 Interviews with family members

The focus groups and interview findings supported the survey results. Family members interviewed spoke about homophobic attitudes within their immediate and extended family, as well as in the broader Arab community, which resulted in their own marginalisation as the supportive relatives of SSA people.

One sister reflected on the prevalence of homophobic attitudes even amongst her university-educated relatives. She said:

You've got educated people in the family, which come up with those attitudes. They're academics and who still have these opinions. My brother in law is very homophobic. He can't stand gay people. He's a graduate of [university]. How can he come up with attitudes like that? He uses derogatory words to refer to gay people all the time. [Sister]

3.1.3 Focus group with community and welfare workers

Most community and welfare workers who participated in the focus group stated that SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds faced significant levels of homophobic attitudes from people within their ethno communities, and the issue of homosexuality was largely 'in the closet' within Arab communities. Some community and welfare workers suggested that the real levels of hostility towards SSA people may be hidden, as families may attempt to 'solve' the 'problem' of homosexuality internally to avoid bringing shame to the family (see section 3.3.3).

One participant was unsure if male homosexuality was a learned behaviour, an imitation of women or an illness, and he referred to heterosexual men as 'normal guy[s]'. A small number of this focus group's participants made similar comments, however most of the participants were empathetic towards issues facing SSA people.

3.1.4 Interviews with community and religious leaders

As discussed in section 1.2, the concept and terminology of 'homophobia' (which does not have an equivalent in Arabic) limited some interviews with community and religious leaders. Some said they were unfamiliar with the term, attempted to

guess its meaning or confused the term 'homophobia' with 'homosexuality'.

A few community leaders who were more familiar with the term 'homophobia' described it as including negative ideas, disgust, discomfort or ignorance about homosexuality and/or fear, hatred or violence towards homosexuals. One community leader said she understood homophobia as originating from ignorance:

Homophobia in my view starts from the feeling of ignorance. Once ignorance is there, it will lead to the fear. Later on fear will lead to hatred. In other words, it's hatred that was caused by fear which originated from ignorance. [Female community leader]

The interviews with community and religious leaders affirmed the survey findings; that hostile attitudes were held towards gays and lesbians by people in local Arab communities. Out of the nine community and religious leaders interviewed; three saw *homophobia*, rather than *homosexuality*, as 'the problem'. One community leader also suggested that 'violence [towards SSA people] is there and it is not only physical'.

One said there was a reluctance to address the issue of homophobia or homosexuality within the Arab community. However, this community leader also emphasised homophobia as a cross-cultural problem, and not exclusive to the Arab community:

Homophobia is present inside all communities in all countries, it is also present in the Australian community as well, and the Arabic community is part of that community. Nevertheless, in the Arabic community we do tend to ignore and not to think about the issue of homophobia or homosexuality but when we talk about it [it is] usually in the negative because it is against our traditional and community beliefs. [Male community leader]

These three also expressed concern about any anti-homophobia campaign targeting Arab communities, with one commenting that Arab communities would 'not be prepared' for such an initiative. The reasons for this included concern that the Arab community had other priorities, such as issues of socioeconomic disadvantage and increased media scrutiny in recent years.

Homophobia is not a priority at this point in time (2005). The Arabic community is [going] through a lot and other priorities are there. The Arabic community still struggles with its identity. Other issues are unemployment, financial hardship, media focus and over-coverage and dealing with the image media creates. To be honest, homophobia and homosexuality is the least on the list, and again I say at this point in time. In addition and as I said earlier, homosexuality and thus homophobia is ignored and hidden, so the issue now is to find the correct timing to raise such topics. We should go with the pace of the community. Let us deal with other priorities first. Do not 'shake' this matter now because the community is not prepared. [*Female community leader*]

The remaining six community and religious leaders had views ranging from moderate compassion (yet disapproval) to hostility towards lesbians and gay men.

I know that the Arabic community doesn't accept homosexual acts. And that's normal, I think, because it is something is strange and foreign to it. On a personal level, I can tell you that I'm almost 60-years-old, and it has only been in the last few years that I got exposed to the existence of homosexuality. And I think that's the case for the Arabic community as well. I think that the way this non-acceptance manifests itself in the community is sometimes wrong and inappropriate. There is little understanding that only education and rehabilitation could fix a problem like homosexuality. Instead, some people make fun or harass gay people, and that doesn't lead to anything positive. [*Christian religious leader*]

This Christian leader and another Muslim leader stated that physical violence would be unacceptable. However, the same Muslim leader did not believe that violence existed against SSA people in Arab communities in Australia.

I don't support any kind of violence. I believe in constructive discussion. I don't think violence is so much an issue today. Although the Arabic community hates homosexuals because of the community's religious beliefs, I don't think that they reside [sic] to violence as a way of expressing that. They would isolate such individuals, but it wouldn't go further than that. To be honest with you, personally, I get disturbed when I'm in the presence of a

homosexual, but I get over that and try to speak to them. Years ago, I didn't accept that there was homosexuals in the Arabic community. But then I started hearing things about people and incidents. But today, I still think that the Muslim Arabic community has the least number of homosexuals in Australia. If you go to the annual parade on the Oxford St strip, you wouldn't find a significant number of Muslim people in the parade. The Muslim people you would see would only be spectators watching what is going on.
[*Muslim religious leader*]

In some cases, homophobic prejudice was expressed as a positive virtue or something of which to be proud. It was also stated by some participants that homosexuality was not indigenous to Arab communities.

I wouldn't teach my people to accept a homosexual. I would tell them to pray for him or her to be cured because it's a kind of disease. If someone gay was being attacked in front of me, I would defend him. Not because of love or compassion but because he's sick and his life needs to be changed. [*Muslim religious leader*]

I wouldn't initiate any steps towards the acceptance of those people. On the contrary, I would encourage organisations and institutions to address the problem [homosexuality], so that we can work towards a better society that is free of it. [... H]omosexuality is a deviant sort of behaviour that we have to protect our children from. I encourage media institutions to not allow homosexual[s] to spread [their] opinions and lifestyles through them. [*Male community leader*]

Such thing [homosexuality] is non-existent in the Arabic community, so of course the community is homophobic and not accepting, because it's something that goes against the community's convictions and beliefs, and because homosexual acts are wrong and morally unacceptable. [*Muslim religious leader*]

... we see homosexuality is an abnormal relationship that may indicate degeneration in the community values. [*Female community leader*]

3.2 Reasons underlying attitudes towards gays and lesbians

All survey, focus group and interview participants were asked to identify what they thought were the key reasons underlying the attitudes held towards gays and lesbians by people in Arab communities. These were open-ended questions and common themes emerged.

As most participants believed that attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were hostile in Arab communities, they generally gave reasons they believed caused these attitudes. These reasons included:

- an interconnection between religious and cultural values (see **section 3.4**)
- the centrality of heterosexual relations for life progression
- patriarchal structures and rigidly defined gender roles
- a lack of understanding or education about sexuality in general

Some community and religious leaders who disapproved of homosexuality, or thought that hostile attitudes towards homosexuality were a positive virtue, identified the following reasons for these views:

- traditional cultural and religious values against homosexuality
- feelings of disgust towards homosexuality
- the perception that homosexuality is foreign to Arab communities
- the perception that homosexual attraction is contagious
- the perception that homosexuality is unnatural
- a perception that children are at risk from (homo)sexual predators
- the risk of contracting AIDS as a result of homosexual behaviour

Some community and religious leaders who stated these reasons said they personally held these beliefs,

whilst others stated they were held by others in Arab communities.

3.2.1 Centrality of heterosexual relations

Participants in the survey and focus groups noted that the importance given to heterosexual relationships and 'the family' negatively impacted community understanding and acceptance of homosexuality. This echoed the findings of *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe*.³¹

Some of these participants said that there was significant pressure to marry and form a family as a way of demonstrating successful progression in life.

Like every other community, heterosexual relations are seen as a normative activity (so long as they are practiced within the parameters of gendered morality). All other relations are seen as deviant... [40 – 44 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

[T]he position of the family is fundamental. There is a lot of pressure on being married and having children as a natural (and only) progression in life. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

In some cases homosexuality could be seen by others as a choice not to have children and as such disturbing of cultural norms:

Participant 1: Procreation is a huge part of our culture and having a family. And taboo is also a person who doesn't have children or has the choice not to have children. It's not really understood. 'Why wouldn't you?' *[Men's focus group]*

One community leader interviewed understood homosexuality as a choice away from a 'normal productive relationship'.

It was also noted by a small number of participants that legal sanctions against homosexuality in the Arab world³² reinforced cultural condemnation of homosexuality in Arab communities.

Homosexuality is illegal in the middle east. [45 – 49 years, gay male, survey respondent]

Similarly, legal discrimination in Australia was also said to reinforce negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships by Arab communities.

Participant C: To get married within our communities, we need to be f***ing recognised by the government to start with. That's a long shot away. [*Women's focus group*]

3.2.2 Patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles

Some survey, focus group and interview participants said that hostility towards homosexuality was closely tied with culturally appropriate ways of behaving as men and women, thereby suggesting that patriarchal structures and strict gender roles resulted in homosexuality being seen negatively. For men, homosexuality was viewed as conflicting with masculinity:

Generally Lebanese cultural [sic] is patriarchal and quite macho – men are 'men'. I think gayness is seen as not being a 'man'. [30 – 34 years, gay/queer man, survey respondent]

Several male participants in the men's focus group and one community and welfare worker note that a culture of tolerance may extend to discreet sex between men, so long as it did not disrupt the trajectory to heterosexual marriage. In this way, (male) homosexuality could be explored with some impunity (particularly for men who adopted the 'active'³³ sexual role), so long as it remained hidden and a person did not openly identify as gay or bisexual:

In most of the macho communities, if you're an active gay, you are fine. You are one man and a half. [...] But the difference is couples who are gay couples, and living openly as a gay couple, no matter who's active and who's passive, this is not very accepted yet in Arabic-speaking communities. [*Community and welfare workers' focus group*]

However, this subculture of acceptable discretion was not mentioned in relation to women or their relationships.

Some women in the women's focus group also articulated patriarchal values as part of the reason attitudes in the Arab community were hostile to lesbians and gay men. Some participants in the women's focus group said that women could be viewed with a degree of pity – as 'poor single girls' – for being without men, particularly past the age when other family members were getting married. Not being able to introduce girlfriends or

take female partners to family functions reinforced the invisibility of these women's relationships and contributed to assumptions made by others that these women were *single* because they did not have *male* partners:

Participant B: I feel good about my sexuality, but to be accepted – back to that other question – [involves] being with your family, being with your girlfriend, maybe having kids and ... [it not] being a problem. You know? Visiting; ...being invited to weddings...

Participant E: Having weddings!

Participant A: Having weddings...

Participant B: I'd love to... they're so boring! I'd love to take my girlfriend to something like that. Just so I've got someone to show off at a wedding! Do you know what I mean? And I'm not like, 'Oh, poor her!' or...; F*** off! Do you know what I mean!?

Participant C: 'Poor single girls'... [*Women's focus group*]

3.2.3 Lack of education or understanding about sexuality in general

A large proportion of survey respondents and focus group participants perceived that a widespread lack of understanding and education about sexuality in Arab communities contributed to hostile attitudes towards gays and lesbians. One persistent belief was that homosexuality was 'unnatural' or an illness. These ideas were observable in comments made by one community worker and several community and religious leaders. These ideas were often reinforced by the belief that homosexuality was a (potentially contagious) lifestyle choice, which could be corrected.

Take nature for example, do you see any homosexual activity going on between plants and animals? That demonstrates that nature's way is not respected by people who have homosexual tendencies. [*Muslim religious leader*]

The reason why people are not accepting of homosexuality, is because they are afraid that their children might be affected by it and start going the wrong way. [*Christian religious leader*]

[I]f being homosexual will lead you [to] hide and to feel isolated, then why to go for it? [*Female community leader*]

Several survey, focus group and interview participants perceived a widespread belief that homosexuality did not 'exist' at all in Arabic cultures and that homosexuality was seen as a '[W]estern sickness'.

Another issue was that a general taboo or silence existed regarding the discussion of *any* matters of sexuality. Survey respondents commented that discussing sexuality generally could be considered 'rude' or 'evil'. This appeared to be an issue for both women and men and was also highlighted in the men's and women's focus groups.

Participant 4: There's not even a conception of what sex is like. I remember when I grew up, there was just nothing. I learnt about puberty from a book I read in year 4. And my dad walked in when I was reading this book, picked it out of my hands, looked at it, and gave it back to me and then went out and closed the door! That was the conversation about sex! (Laughs) [Men's focus group]

Participant A: I think in our family, we don't talk about sex. Full stop. Whether heterosexual or homosexual. So the fact that you can't talk about sex means that, regardless of your sexual persuasion, sex is not an issue to be discussed. [Women's focus group]

3.3 Reasons for the persistence of hostile attitudes

Some survey respondents and focus group participants made comments regarding the perceived persistence of hostile attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in Arab communities. Several SSA participants noted that some Western and Arab cultures (including in some Arab countries), were understood to be developing a greater acceptance of sexual diversity.

Participant E: People who migrated, thirty or forty years ago, their mentality is stuck in their home country; thirty or forty years ago. [...]

Participant A: But there are some shifts happening in the Middle East. When you look at Helem³⁴ for instance in Lebanon, who's probably the first gay and lesbian rights lobby in the Middle East [...] A couple of weeks ago [...] there was an] article that was written in an Arabic newspaper called *Al-Mustaqbal*, and it was all written in Arabic. [...] It talks about the isolation of the homosexual community in the Middle East, and how difficult it is for some

people to even step out of their flat. You know what I mean? And it was a very sympathetic article, in a major daily newspaper in Lebanon. And that newspaper doesn't only get sold in Beirut but throughout all the big Arab capital cities. So there is a talk. [...] Ten years ago no one talked about homosexuals. Now you go to Lebanon and everyone – your aunty, your neighbour – go, 'See Aunty? There's a poof! Everyone knows he's a poof except his wife!' [Women's focus group]

Despite some changes in countries like Lebanon, some participants noted that attitudes in Arab communities remained unchanged. Respondents highlighted some themes which they used to explain the persistence of hostile attitudes towards gays and lesbians in these communities. They included:

- socio-economic and cultural marginalisation
- views of elders which were passed down to younger generations
- the importance of personal and familial reputation or 'honour'
- a strong interconnection between religious values and cultural mores which mutually reinforced each other (see **section 3.4**).

3.3.1 Socio-economic and cultural marginalisation

As noted in the introduction, socio-political events (e.g. the September 11 2001 attacks and the Cronulla riots in Sydney (2005)) have presented great challenges to Arabic-speaking communities in Australia. The Australian Human Rights Commission has found that socio-political events such as September 11 and the Bali Bombings (2002) have been backdrops to increased reports of racism and abuse directed at Arab and Muslim Australians. The subsequent public and political responses to such events have contributed to a sense of fear and alienation amongst some Arab and Muslim Australians.³⁵

Resistance to changing attitudes towards homosexuality may partly be a result of this wider fear and alienation, resulting in a defensiveness to re-evaluate prejudices held within local Arab communities:

Participant E: I think that the last five or six years (interviews were conducted in 2004) in Australia has been a very difficult time for the Arab community. And that has made it more insular. [*Women's focus group*]

[A] couple of people didn't want to attend [the community and welfare workers' focus group] because they don't want again to see; Ah, Arabic-speaking communities, they're also violent against gays. Ah, they're violent against women. They're violent against this... and they are terrorists and they are this...' [*Community and welfare workers' focus group*]

One participant said that labelling the Arab community as 'more homophobic' than other ethno-cultural communities served to further marginalise SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds:

Homophobia like racism and sexism is rampant in every community and I think sometimes the Arabic community is pathologised [sic] as somehow more homophobic than every other community. This makes it doubly hard for Arabic gays/lesbians/queers because they get homophobia from the inside, racism from the outside.

[40 – 44 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

Other socio-economic marginalisation such as unemployment, financial difficulties and struggles to generate positive images of the Arab community, were also highlighted as making the challenging of homophobia a lesser priority. For migrant families, socioeconomic and political difficulties in countries of origin did not help:

So a lot of Arabic people didn't confront homosexuality as a concept in the same way as people in other (mainly western countries) have. It is still seen as part of "entertainment", and people accept to see it on tv as long as it doesn't touch their lives. The political situation in the Arab world throughout the last century didn't exactly help neither. people were too busy worrying about war, poversity [sic], etc... so sexual revolutions were not really on public agendas. [15 – 19 years, queer man, survey respondent]

Homophobia served to compound cultural marginalisation of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, and their supportive family members. One sister spoke about her mother,

whose social isolation as a Muslim woman was furthered by negative community attitudes towards homosexuality:

Mum feels like she is alone with this. She cries. She feels like she doesn't have anyone to go to. So support for mums and for the families. And creating culturally sensitive spaces for those family members to interact. My mum wears the *hijab*³⁶, therefore wouldn't feel comfortable going to Beit el Hob³⁷ which is [was] at the Newtown Hotel. [*Sister*]

Community and family members expressed concern for their own safety and the impact of homophobia within Arab communities. One sister said that she was constantly looking for ways to 'protect' her sibling from the community and other family members, which left her caught in between. One male community leader also acknowledged that SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds were forced to 'suffer unnecessarily' because of homophobic attitudes.

3.3.2 The views of elders

It was suggested that another reason for the persistence of hostile attitudes towards gays and lesbians was the importance given to the views of elders passed down to younger generations. These elders, including parents, community members and religious leaders were characterised as morally and religiously opposed to homosexuality. Some were characterised as simply 'uneducated' about homosexuality or sexuality in general.

Younger members, at school, need to be given a convincing alternative to any unthinking hangovers from their elders. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

I dont think there's much that can be done about the older generation as they seem to be set in their way. [25 – 29 years, gay man, survey respondent]

the main issue is not the young, our parents need to be educated!
[35 - 39 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Challenging the views of elders (such as parents), it was noted, could be difficult as this was connected with cultural notions of familial honour (see section 3.3.3):

There is simply less room to be different as this is seen as a dishonour/shame upon your family... [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

My family ... say, if you got a big problem, do not always tell it, just try to hide it and keep it to yourself... [35 – 39 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Many participants noted that supportive community and religious leaders were required to drive a change in community attitudes.

3.3.3 Collectivist orientation and honour

A range of participants suggested that the primary importance on familial and extended communal networks made challenging homophobia or claiming an SSA identity extremely difficult, particularly if that information was spread in a community.

its all about god and what people are gona [sic] say. [25 – 29 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

[...] my brother, he had a gay friend. I did ask him [my brother] to stay away from him, [so as] not to get labelled by our family members, neighbours or our community as being with a company of a gay person. [Female community leader]

you have to be careful who you tell [about your sexuality] – if you tell people in the community who aren't okay with it, they will tell everyone else and it will cause big trouble [25 – 29 years, lesbian/queer woman, survey respondent]

It was also noted that claiming an SSA identity could be seen as a betrayal of family and cultural heritage, leading some to keep silent.

Participant 4: [Homosexuality] is a transgression of ... it's a denial of your culture. It's seen as ... you've become westernised. You've denied your roots. You've dishonoured your family. [Men's focus group]

Familial and personal reputation or 'honour' was said to be extremely important. There was little incentive to challenge homophobia as it had potentially negative consequences for maintaining personal and familial honour. It was said that SSA people or family members would be reluctant to speak about

homosexuality, or defend their relatives against homophobia, in extended familial or communal networks:

I'm not as comfortable within the Muslim community to be open about it. And my brother wouldn't be comfortable with that neither. Because I would be concerned about the whole family being targeted by the community. Especially my Mum. She would have a hard time. [Sister]

As a result of this fear of being 'targeted', there was a reluctance to discuss issues of sexuality openly. The general invisibility and taboo nature of issues concerning sexuality, and the belief that gays and lesbians did not exist in Arab communities, were therefore reinforced.

One community and welfare worker specifically suggested that a concern for maintaining honour left homophobic violence and hostilities deeply hidden within the private sphere. The extent of the problem may be underreported because families may attempt to 'fix' a relative's homosexuality internally:

[T]here's a lot of situations where you will not hear about it because they already fix it inside the house. [...] But then the family would consult and seek support when there's a problem, like say an uncle, they would normally be called on if there is a problem in the family. The extended family might not know, but they will keep it in [the family] because it's their problem and it's bringing shame to the family; degrading the family. [Community and welfare workers' focus group]

3.4 Interconnection between religious and cultural values

The issue of religion was highlighted by nearly all participants. Whilst many participants said that religious values, institutions and leaders fuelled homophobic attitudes, other participants said that religious values helped them to challenge homophobic cultural attitudes. The overall picture reveals a nuanced and complex interaction between religious and cultural values relating to homosexuality.

Religious values were the most commonly cited explanations given by participants for the perceived hostility held towards gays and lesbians in Arab communities. Participants said there was a widely-held belief that homosexuality was

contrary to religious values which in turn fuelled negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Many survey respondents from Christian and Muslim backgrounds said that homosexuality was seen as a 'sin', 'an abomination against God' and in some cases, was considered justifiably 'punishable' by death.

Some respondents felt that there was a lack of interrogation of religious interpretations condemning homosexuality, leaving a dominance of conservative interpretations in Arab communities.

My experience has been the expressions of Christianity and Islam in Arab communities is more conservative than western interpretations of the same religions.

[20 – 24 years, gay male, Christian background, survey respondent]

It was also noted that an infusion between religion and culture, which saw cultural and religious values closely tied, contributed to the perceived persistence of homophobic attitudes:

... even when families are not that religious, religion plays a big role.

[20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

However, one woman in the women's focus group said that referencing religious values helped her challenge homophobia within her own family.

Participant D: Actually I am using the [religious traditions] now to complain to my parents, to stop, to stop ...

Participant A: Harassing you?

Participant D: Not me, but the gay community. Before, if there was any movie or anything about gays or lesbians on TV, they would start to curse them and say, 'Why can't God burn them all now?' And it really upset me and I couldn't say anything. But now I just tell them, 'Jesus said, who are you to judge others?' Because they were really angry and me [sic] angry too! I told them, 'Who are you to judge others? Why you think you're better than them?' And they really change. They stop completely saying anything bad about gay or lesbian [people]. *[Women's focus group]*

Significantly, relatives of SSA people reflected on how religion helped them gain acceptance of gay or lesbian family members. Whilst one relative said she felt forced to reject her Christianity altogether,

two other family members felt their birth faiths continued to play an important role in their lives. For one Muslim family member, faith was not a barrier to acceptance. Instead, the core tenets of the faith allowed this family member to challenge and rethink mainstream interpretations of Islam which were hostile to homosexuality:

*The religion that I was born into, if I was to see it from a perspective that Islam is a religion of peace, it would definitely influence my views on homosexuality. But positively. That aspect of religion would and does make me very accepting. If I was to consider it in the mainstream religious sense, then I would say no. Because in that sense there's a lot of hatred towards homosexuals in the religion. *[Family member]**

Faith was also important to one Christian mother:

*I don't go to mass. I do believe in religion, but I don't think it's a sin. My religion helps me a lot. As long as people are good I don't care. *[Mother]**

These stories highlight the complexity of the interactions between religious and cultural values in relation to homosexuality. Whilst in some cases these values and beliefs are used to justify homophobic attitudes, in other cases they are used to analyse or challenge non-acceptance of homosexuality, or specific homophobia-related attitudes and hatred.

3.5 Summary of findings

Most participants perceived that hostile attitudes existed towards gays and lesbians in Arab communities. Many participants saw the key reasons underlying these attitudes as:

- an interconnection between religious and cultural values
- the centrality of heterosexual relations for life progression
- patriarchal structures and rigidly defined gender roles
- a lack of understanding or education about sexuality in general.

Participants noted that it was difficult to challenge such attitudes due to:

- the socio-economic and cultural marginalisation of Arab communities in Australia, particularly in light of events such as September 11 and the Cronulla riots
- the cultural mores views of elders passed down to younger generations
- a collectivist cultural orientation where maintaining familial and personal honour were considered important
- religious and cultural values mutually reinforcing each other (see further below).

Participant responses revealed a complex and nuanced interaction between religious values and homophobic attitudes. Whilst in some cases these values and beliefs are used to justify homophobic attitudes, in other cases they are used to analyse or challenge non-acceptance of homosexuality, or specific homophobia-related attitudes and hatred.

Some community and religious leaders believe that homophobic attitudes serve to maintain community morals. However, most family members, most community and welfare workers, and some community and religious leaders believe that homophobic attitudes 'unnecessarily' marginalise SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, and their families.

Some community and welfare workers, and community and religious leaders, understand homosexuality as abnormal or an illness (particularly, one that is 'curable'). Some community and religious leaders also believe that homosexuals do not exist in Arab and/or Muslim communities, or do so in fewer numbers than those existing in 'Western' cultures.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Experiences of homophobia

This chapter analyses homophobic incidents experienced by SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds who responded to the online survey. This data is supported by stories from the focus groups and the interviews with SSA people, family members, community and welfare workers, and community and religious leaders.

The 2003 *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe* study reported on lesbians and gay men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds experienced homophobia from their families and communities rather than from the street or workplaces.³⁹ This chapter also considers homophobia experienced by SSA participants from people outside Arab communities.

4.1 The prevalence of homophobic experiences

In the online survey, SSA respondents were asked whether they believed they had experienced particular types of behaviour or conduct directed at them which was related to their sexuality. **Figure 5** shows these reported levels of homophobic experiences arranged in order of prevalence.

Respondents reported comparably similar rates of verbal abuse, threats of violence and actual physical violence as the larger cohort in *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe*.⁴⁰

Our inclusion of a greater range of homophobia-related experiences provided a broader snapshot of the extent of homophobia for respondents. For instance, more than two-thirds of respondents had rumours spread about them because of their sexuality and nearly two-thirds of respondents felt pressured to act 'straight'.

Respondents were also asked to identify sources of homophobic experiences as either from within or outside Arab communities. **Figure 6** highlights the proportion of homophobic experiences recorded by these respondents according to source.

Figure 5: Homophobic experiences reported by SSA survey respondents from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

Type of behaviour	Number of respondents that have experienced	Total responses
Rumours spread about you	26	33
Personal insults or verbal abuse	24	34
Been pressured to act 'straight'	21	32
Been excluded socially or ignored	16	30
Threat of violence or intimidation	15	33
Threats to 'out' you	10	32
Physical attack, or other kind of physical violence	10	32
Taken to a doctor/religious leader to be cured	7	32
Been subject to blackmail	7	32
Obscene mail or phone calls	5	32
Sexual assault	4	30
Been kicked out of your home	4	32
Been asked to leave a cultural event	3	32
Been asked to leave a religious site	2	32
Received hate mail	2	32
Rape	1	31

Figure 6: Homophobic experiences recorded by SSA survey respondents according to source (multiple responses allowed)

Type of behaviour	Number of participants that have experienced:		Total responses
	by people within Arab communities	by people outside Arab communities	
Been pressured to act 'straight'	21	8	32
Rumours spread about you	20	16	33
Personal insults or verbal abuse	19	19	34
Been excluded socially or ignored	15	9	30
Threat of violence or intimidation	12	8	33
Threats to 'out' you	8	3	32
Physical attack, or other kind of physical violence	8	5	32
Taken to a doctor/religious leader to be cured	7	0	32
Been subject to blackmail	7	1	32
Been kicked out of your home	4	1	32
Been asked to leave a cultural event	3	0	32
Obscene mail or phone calls	3	2	32
Been asked to leave a religious site	2	0	32
Sexual assault	2	3	30
Received hate mail	1	1	32
Rape	0	1	31

The data suggest respondents were more likely to experience pressures to act 'straight' from people within Arab communities.

However, the sample size does not allow a comprehensive comparative analysis of these figures. Homophobic experiences may be the result of random chance factors such as geographic proximity, and/or levels of interaction of respondents with members of their own family or community.

4.2 Experiences of homophobia

4.2.1 Rumours spread about you

Survey respondents reported that rumours being spread about them were the most common type of homophobic experience. Out of 33 respondents, 26 respondents reported that rumours had been spread about them.

I don't really mix very much with the arabic [sic] community, however I have experienced whispers about me in an occasional gathering [45 – 49 years, gay male, survey respondent]

4.2.2 Personal insults or verbal abuse

Personal insults or verbal abuse were the second most common type of homophobic experience reported by survey respondents.

I get told a few times a week that im going to hell ... and that im living the wrong life [25 – 29 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

Both my parents will often refer to lesbians and gays in derogatory ways. or use words like 'lesbian' as an insult to someone [25 – 29 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

Every conver[s]ation with Taita⁴¹ and Juido⁴² is homophobic, derogatory etc. and the rest of the family, whom i am out to[,] do nothing to stop it. [15 – 19 years, gay man, survey respondent]

4.2.3 The pressure to act 'straight'

The pressure to act 'straight' was the third most common homophobic experience reported. However,

as stated in **section 4.1**, survey respondents were more likely to experience the pressure to act 'straight' from people within Arab communities than from people outside Arab communities.

[G]rowing up has led me to play down my sexuality in Arab community. The kind of discrimination I would suffer is generally invisibility and my emotional needs around sexuality stuff not being taken into account [30 – 34 years, gay/queer male, survey respondent]

I am still pretty closeted [...] i guess feeling like i am forced to be in the closet is a form of discrimination in itself [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

Participant A: I'm far older than all of you, so I've got this period of my life where I tried to pretend within my culture, even as far as getting married and doing all the things that were expected of me. [Women's focus group]

4.2.4 Socially excluded or ignored

The fourth most common occurrence reported by survey respondents was experiencing social exclusion or being ignored.

My family (siblings) treat me like they will tolerate me but do not & will not ever accept my lifestyle. Every other Heterosexual Arab won't tolerate or accept it, so they avoid me, and have treated me differently since finding out, sometimes with contempt & hatred. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

Participant A: Your cousins, your family, knows you're a lesbian. They won't deal with it. But they won't invite you to the Christening. That's their way of dealing with it. [Women's focus group]

4.2.5 Threat of violence or intimidation

Out of 33 survey respondents, 15 indicated having been threatened with violence. Which were sometimes from close or extended family members:

Family found porn when i was younger, threaten to kill me etc if i was gay. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Mother stalked, threatened and harassed me at

work ... don't see anyone else in the arabic [sic] community and hope not too [sic]! [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

My cousin came out and one of my other female cousin said she 'felt sad' as if he was diagnosed with a terminal illness! he was also threatened with violence from my male cousins. things like that put me off of ever telling them. [24 – 25 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

I was on TV at a GLBT event and my father's extended family came to our house being abusive and trying to shame our family. They were slightly threatening. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

One man in the men's focus group was threatened with violence if he attended his father's memorial service:

[I]t was just before the memorial mass for my dad who passed away. [...] M[y] relatives and everything, told me not to go to the mass because 'your uncle is gonna bash the s**t out of you if you turn up'. [Men's focus group]

One survey respondent said the threat of physical violence came from his own suicidal thoughts:

Suicidal at the moment there is no way of telling anyone. I wish i had never been born. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

4.2.6 Physical attack or violence

Out of 32 survey respondents, 10 had been victims of direct physical violence. One woman spoke about being bashed by her family for bringing shame to her family's reputation:

I have been bashed by a family member for shaming the family[.] Talks at family gatherings that being GLQ is due to corruption of the WEST[.] The Imam and sheikh claiming that the death penalty is the punishment for GLQ. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey participant]

A community leader admitted that gay bashings were not unheard of:

I do recall an event not so long ago, when a gay person was beaten by members of his community just because he was gay. [Female community leader]

4.2.7 Threats to 'out'; blackmailed; kicked out; 'cured'

Out of 32 survey respondents, 10 respondents had been threatened with being 'outed', 7 respondents had been subject to blackmail, 7 had been taken to doctors or religious leaders to be 'cured' and 4 had been 'kicked out' of home.

The belief that homosexuality can and should be cured was mentioned in several interviews with religious and community leaders.

One participant in the men's focus group spoke about being taken to a religious leader to be 'cured':

Participant 6: My mother took me to the mosque. [...]I was pulled out of school. Because I was going to a pretty good school and that was apparently a privilege. [...] But yeah, she took me to the mosque and sat me down with Sheik [name removed]. [...]He started asking me questions like, when was the first time I had sex with a guy and how old were my friends. And I was honest. I said my friends were in their thirties and forties (laughs). He didn't like that one! So his solution was basically to instil me with [sic] the Arabic Muslim community and hope that being around other kinds of people ... would cure me.
[Men's focus group]

Participant 4: My mother thinks that something has gone terribly wrong; that she can fix it one day. [Men's focus group]

A Christian religious leader who was interviewed described counselling a young man about his sexual behavior and desire for men.

Not long ago, a young guy approached me and spoke to me about his sexual desire for men, and about his habit of going to places where you could have sex with men. I took the opportunity to speak to him and guide him. I made him understand that he has to go back to living in the right way, and that his desires are not important and they will eventually end up ruining his

life. He seemed to be taking everything I said seriously, and we spoke more than once about the subject, but then the contact between us stopped. I personally think that he hasn't changed. Once you get trapped in that world of desires and let yourself be controlled by it, it's hard to change. [Christian religious leader]

4.3 Frequency of homophobic experiences

Survey respondents were asked how often they experienced homophobic discrimination, prejudice, harassment and/or violence from 'the Arabic community'. Out of 28 responses, eight said they experienced homophobic discrimination, prejudice, harassment and/or violence 'often' or 'very often' (Figure 7). Twenty-two respondents had experienced this from 'the Arabic community' at some point in their lifetime.

The figures do not refer to the effects of individual behaviour modification or severity of attacks.

The *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe* report showed that lesbians and gay men often modify their behaviour to avoid risk, such as concealing their sexual identities or adopting gender-conforming modes of behaviour.⁴³ Previous research has suggested that SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds also choose to avoid extended familial and communal networks altogether to mitigate against the risk of community surveillance.⁴⁴

The frequency of harassment, discrimination, prejudice and/or violence in this report does not reveal the frequency or impact of underlying heterosexism. As the focus groups and survey responses highlighted, familial silence and social invisibility surrounding homosexuality was cited as manifestations of homophobia.

Out of 31 responses, 25 said that the acceptance of their sexuality in 'the Arabic community' was 'very important' or 'important' to them. Six respondents said it was 'not important'.

Figure 7: Frequency of homophobic discrimination, prejudice, harassment and/or violence experienced by survey respondents from 'the Arabic community' (n = 28).



Two survey respondents further added:

I think that everyone, not just Arab community need to learn about UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. I resent the thought of being tolerated or accepted for being gay, my sexuality doesn't define me. I should be treated no differently to anyone else, coz [sic] after all it shouldn't matter. I am like everyone else. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

4.4 Summary of findings

SSA people surveyed reported high rates of homophobia, including rumours being spread about them, experiences of verbal abuse, feelings of pressure to act 'straight', experiences of threats of (or actual) physical violence and being taken to be 'cured'.

Out of 28 survey responses, 22 had experienced homophobic discrimination, prejudice, harassment and/or violence from within 'the Arabic community' at some point in their lifetime, with 8 respondents stating this was experienced 'often' or 'very often'.

Out of 31 survey responses, 25 respondents said that the acceptance of their sexuality in 'the Arabic community' was 'very important' or 'important' to them. Six respondents said it was 'not important'.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Disclosure

This chapter discusses the rates of disclosure of sexuality by SSA survey respondents to family members, friends, colleagues and other significant persons. The chapter also considers reasons given by SSA people for the disclosure and non-disclosure of their sexuality, drawn from both survey responses and the focus groups with SSA men and women.

5.1 Rates of disclosure

Survey respondents were asked who they had told about their sexuality from a list including family members, friends, colleagues, community/welfare workers, and broader community members. Respondents could select from three options: 'have told', 'have told some' or 'haven't told'. (Figures 8, 9 and 10.)

It is important to note that some participants did not feel disclosure was necessary or even desired by them.

*For me this is a strange question because there is an assumption here that a person has to tell / needs to tell people about their sexuality.
[40 – 44 years, queer woman, survey respondent]*

to parents due to a lesser generational gap. Some participants in the focus groups characterised their non-disclosure to parents as an issue of respect and duty; a way of 'protecting' parents. One participant reflected that she did not feel that siblings needed the same level of protection. The desire to 'protect' parents was particularly strong when deciding to not disclose to extended family. Out of a sense of duty and respect for parents, homosexuality was to be kept discreet within the immediate family, to prevent bringing shame or dishonour to the family from the extended family or community:

Participant 2: Personally I never had any problems with my family. 'It's fine. You're gay. We love you.' It's just the extended family. My parents never forced me to get married or have a girlfriend. Just keep homosexuality in your family only. [Men's focus group]

These themes are further investigated in **section 5.2**.

5.1.1 Family members

Some participants in the focus groups spoke about reasons they didn't disclose their sexuality to some family members and not others. One women's focus group participant said that the disclosure of her sexuality to siblings was easier than disclosing

Figure 8: How many of the following have you told about your sexuality? (Disclosure to family members)

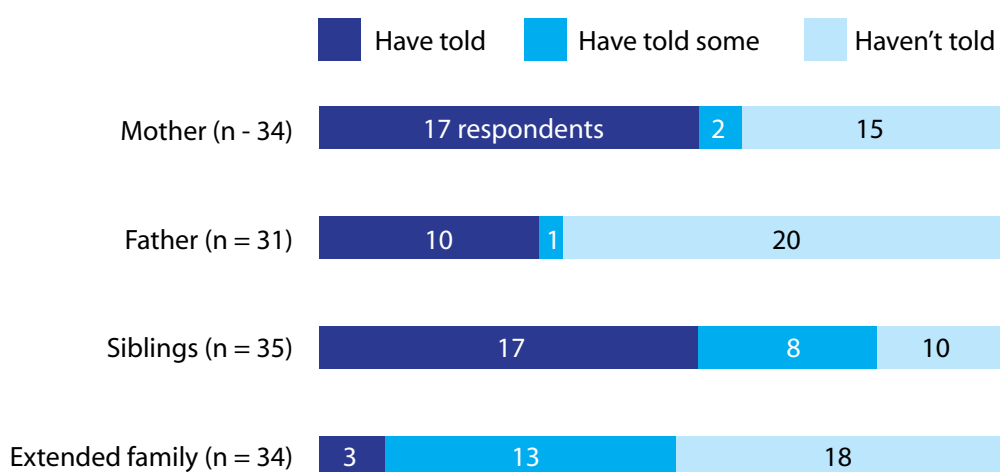


Figure 8 shows the rates of disclosure by SSA survey respondents according to familial relation.

5.1.2 Friends and colleagues

Several participants said that while they could not choose their families, they could choose their friends. This meant that participants were less likely to accept homophobia from their friends or to continue friendships with people who made them uncomfortable.

Participant B: Our parents, of course, I accept it [homophobia]. I accept it completely because it's tradition. Because there's just no other way, you know, that they can't see this. So I accept it from my parents. That's why you don't come out. That's why. You just go, 'it's all right.' But from our peers, I don't accept it. That's ignorance, because they're living here and they've lived here like you have. [Women's focus group]

5.1.3 Community/welfare workers and community members

Few survey respondents had disclosed their sexuality to religious leaders. Participants said the lack of disclosure was partly due to a feeling that religious leaders were likely to be judgmental, conservative or out of touch:

Participant A: Because predominantly the leadership of the community is quite conservative, quite religious-based, it makes it really hard for us to communicate with them.

Participant C: Honestly, I don't think that's gonna [sic] change. Because when you've got religious leaders preaching a religion that's three thousand, four thousand, five thousand years old – don't get me wrong on the dates, I'm not sure how long they are! – and they're preaching a religion with the mentality of what they had two thousand years ago, I don't think there's gonna [sic] be much progression there. [Women's focus group]

5.2 Reasons for disclosure and non-disclosure

Survey respondents were asked to give reasons for disclosing (or not) their sexuality. Twenty-three respondents indicated that disclosure was carefully contemplated and negotiated and a combination of various reasons were given for why disclosure was important, or not important, to them. Focus groups for SSA people provided further exploration of the reasons for disclosure and non-disclosure.

Overall, the decision on whether to disclose sexuality or not was influenced by certain themes and included:

- fears of a negative reaction
- a need to balance a sense of duty to family with one's individual desires
- a need to be open about sexuality for a variety of reasons

Figure 9: How many of the following have you told about your sexuality? (Disclosure to friends and colleagues)

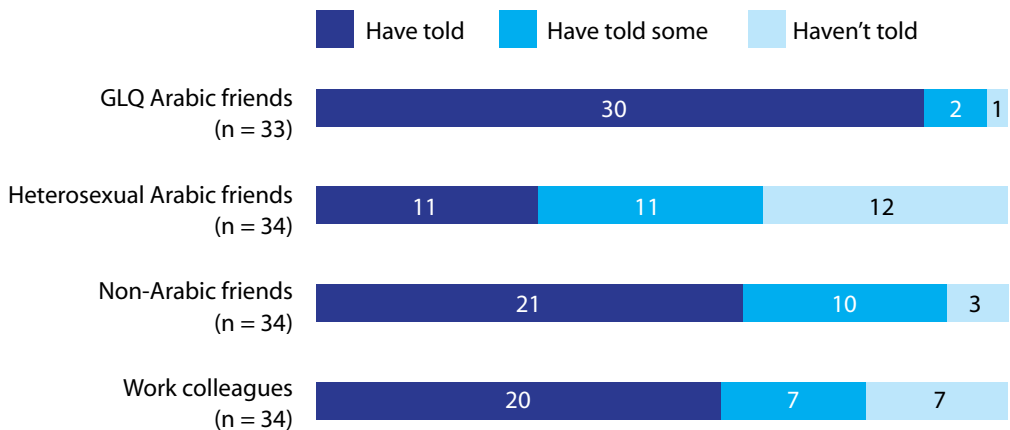


Figure 9 shows the rates of disclosure to friends and work colleagues by SSA survey respondents.

- a sense of being unready or a sense of discomfort with one's sexuality
- a sense that disclosure was not in accordance with Arab cultural understandings of sexuality as 'private'.

Some participants wanted to avoid awkwardness or discomfort in their relationships with others close to them:

There is no way in hell I would tell my Taita.⁴⁵ I'm not sure who it would kill first, her or me. I did introduce her to my partner... that was bad enough and she thought he was a friend from University! [15 – 19 years, gay male, survey respondent]

5.2.1 Fear of negative reactions

The most common consideration for SSA survey respondents in making the decision to either disclose their sexuality or not was the possibility of a negative reaction. Non-disclosure was therefore a way for some participants to avoid likely or potential violence, harassment, scandal, rejection or exclusion:

[I'm] Scared of the outcomes[,] always a connection to family etc, have been threatened with violence when i was younger from family [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

Scared of telling my parents and extended family for fear of being excluded. I don't think my cousins would want me around anymore, i don't [think] they would let me see their children anymore. i also fear that my parents will just give me a lecture about how i can change etc... and that what i am 'doing' is wrong and 'unnatural'. [25 – 29 years, queer female, survey respondent]

In some cases, 'coming out' was seen as a choice between sexuality and family. For some, putting sexuality 'on the table' was almost guaranteed to result in rejection:

Participant B: *It's like we know what we're gonna [sic] lose before we even go there. They don't even have to put the cards on the table. Sometimes, we just give in. [Women's focus group]*

5.2.2 A sense of duty

For some participants, remaining discreet about their sexuality was about honouring a sense of duty and commitment to their families. A sense of duty to maintain collective harmony and familial honour by tempering individual needs and desires has been noted in literature as characteristic of collectivist

Figure 10: How many of the following have you told about your sexuality? (Disclosure to health/welfare workers and other community members)

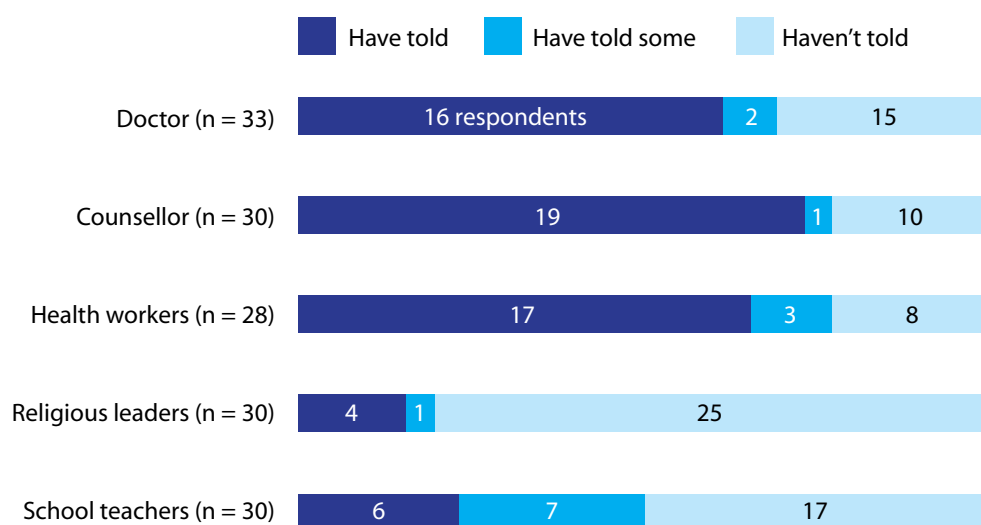


Figure 10 shows rates of disclosure by SSA survey respondents to community/welfare workers and broader community members (such as school teachers and religious leaders).

cultures, such as Arab cultures.⁴⁶ Previous research suggests that SSA Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds experience difficulty in mediating the tension between the cultural expectations put upon them to maintain honour, and their individual desire and need to assert SSA identities. This tension has been described as resulting in an 'exile'; a feeling of living 'in between' one's sexual and cultural identities, and an inability to find spaces in which to reconcile both identities simultaneously.⁴⁷

One female participant described not disclosing her sexuality as maintaining 'diplomacy':

Participant A: One way I look at it sometimes, is like... we know who we are, but sometimes our relationship with our families matter more than our own personal individual freedom. Sometimes we play a kind of diplomacy with them. Whereby it's easier for them not to know, because then it ruins our relationship with them. [*Women's focus group*]

Also important was the need to avoid bringing shame or dishonour to the family:

Participant E: And the other thing I would say about coming out as well, is that coming out to your immediate family is one thing, but the community is a lot harder. And especially if your family is quite prominent in the community, and people know who you are, and that makes it a lot more confronting to your parents. Because it's gonna [sic] reflect on them; that they raised a bad daughter. [*Women's focus group*]

5.2.3 A need for openness

The most common reason participants stated for the desire to disclose their sexuality was the belief that disclosure was an act of self-affirmation and self-determination:

i dun wanna [sic] live a life lying. [20 – 24 years, bisexual male, survey respondent]

Participant 2: I came out three years ago, when I was thirty [...] or so I think. My experience has always been huge. I've always been – I've just been disconnected from myself. And in a sense I wasn't real. Everything, I was just an actor. Everything was fabricated. [...] I think it's so liberating for me to be me – and to give the best of me to my family. And to have the

opportunity to be loved and respected for who I am. I just found it hugely liberating. [*Men's focus group*]

Another participant also desired openness with his family and felt that disclosure was an act of loyalty concurrent with his sense of familial duty, as well as a way of mediating the possibility of being 'outed' by others:

My family were the first I told, out of love and loyalty and a loathing for the idea that they live in ignorance while my friends would know and/or that they find out from anyone but me. [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey participant]

One participant, who never had the opportunity to 'come out' to her parents, expressed that disclosure also reflected a desire to share joy with family:

Participant A: It's interesting that my parent's death has freed me to a far larger extent than I ever thought. And it gave me the opportunity to not only be out, but also be active, and be outspoken, and do whatever. But at the same time, there's a little tiny bit of me that wishes for my parents to know that I'm happy. And I think if there's any reason why you'd wanna come out, it's to tell your parents; I'm fine, I'm happy, I'm content. My heart is full. But we don't speak the same language as our parents and our parents don't speak the same language as us. And issues of love are always tough things to talk about. [*Women's focus group*]

These responses suggest that the concept of 'coming out' or being out remains relevant for some participants in their understanding of the disclosure of sexuality.

5.2.4 A sense of being unready or uncomfortable

The decision to not disclose was also predicated on how comfortable participants felt about their sexuality. One participant said:

Im too ashamed, not yet comfortable identifying as gay. [35 – 39 years, gay male, survey participant]

Another participant had not told his parents, but intended to tell them in time:

havent told my parents because they wold [sic] shoot me .. but i will tell them when the right person and right time comes .. I am not 100% sure about myself so I am not goign [sic] to them ['i am gay['] and then bring a gal home. [20 – 24 years, bisexual male, survey respondent]

5.2.5 Cultural understandings of sexuality

One participant expressed the belief that sexuality was a private issue and not everyone felt the need to publicly disclose their sexuality. This participant notes that her decision to not disclose should not be seen as a lack of self-acceptance but as a desire to keep with Arab cultural norms:

I identify as Arab, and while i had a supportive mother and could have told her anything, and i have a supportive family of siblings and some in the extended family, it is not within my cultural upbringing that I have ever thought to announce that i am queer. For me, discussion about my sexuality in particular has always taken place within the private sphere and mostly with close friends. Though i support and encourage the public discussion of sexualities and the campaign against homophobia, i think there must be recognition as well that not everyone feels the urge or need to publicly come out. [40 – 44 years, queer female, survey respondent]

For the above participant, who described her Arab identity as her 'primary identity', cultural understandings of sexuality as private mitigated the need to 'come out'.

However, for other participants, non-disclosure was characterised as less of a choice. For example, one participant aligned non-disclosure with avoiding problems:

being gay and from middle eastern background tends to come with pressure. Sometimes it is better to keep quiet and lead life with an intention [to] not create unwanted problems within ones community. [45 – 49 years, gay male, survey respondent]

5.3 Summary of findings

SSA survey respondents were most likely to disclose their sexuality to siblings than other family members.

SSA survey respondents were generally more likely to disclose their sexuality to friends and work colleagues than family members. Respondents were also more likely to disclose their sexuality to GLQ Arabic friends and non-Arabic friends than heterosexual Arabic friends.

A significant proportion of respondents had not disclosed their sexuality to some or all of their doctors, counsellors and health workers. Approximately half of the respondents had disclosed their sexuality to some or all of their school teachers. Religious leaders were the least likely to be told.

The key reasons given for the non-disclosure of sexuality by SSA survey respondents and SSA focus group participants from Arabic-speaking backgrounds were:

- fears of a negative reaction
- a sense of duty and commitment to family members to not bring shame upon the family (honour)
- a sense of being unready, either because of discomfort with sexuality or ongoing processes of discovering sexuality
- a desire to keep with cultural norms of sexuality as 'private'.

The key reasons given for the disclosure of sexuality by SSA survey respondents and SSA focus group participants were:

- a need for openness, including a need to avoid the sense of 'living a lie' and the desire to share positive aspects of lives as they related to sexuality
- disclosure as an act of self-affirmation or self-determination.

CHAPTER SIX:

Support within Arab communities

This chapter looks at how supportive the various consultation participants were of SSA people's sexuality. Stories of support and acceptance are drawn from the survey responses, focus groups and interviews with SSA people, family members, community and welfare workers, and community and religious leaders.

The survey asked respondents to indicate how supportive members of 'the Arabic community' were towards their sexuality. Responses ranged from 'very supportive' to 'not at all supportive'. However, due to a discrepancy between the phrasing of the survey question related to disclosure and the question related to support⁴⁸, most of the data is not reliable.

Therefore, this chapter only reports on the support and disclosure questions which match and which therefore produced reliable results.

This chapter includes results on:

- the *actual* levels of support received from people to whom respondents had disclosed their sexuality

- the *perceived* levels of support from people to whom the respondents had not disclosed their sexuality.

6.1 Support and acceptance from family members

6.1.1 Survey data with SSA people

Figure 11 shows the levels of support survey respondents reported receiving from family members after they had disclosed their sexuality to their mother, father or all their siblings. Three respondents had disclosed their sexuality to all of their extended family members, but this number was not sufficiently large enough to report on.

Figure 12 shows the perceived levels of support in relation to respondents' sexuality, reported by survey respondents who had not disclosed their sexuality to their mother, father, all siblings or all extended family members. Amongst this group, most respondents perceived their family members as 'not at all' or 'rarely' supportive of their sexuality.

Figure 11: Levels of support of sexuality by family members (as reported by respondents who had disclosed)

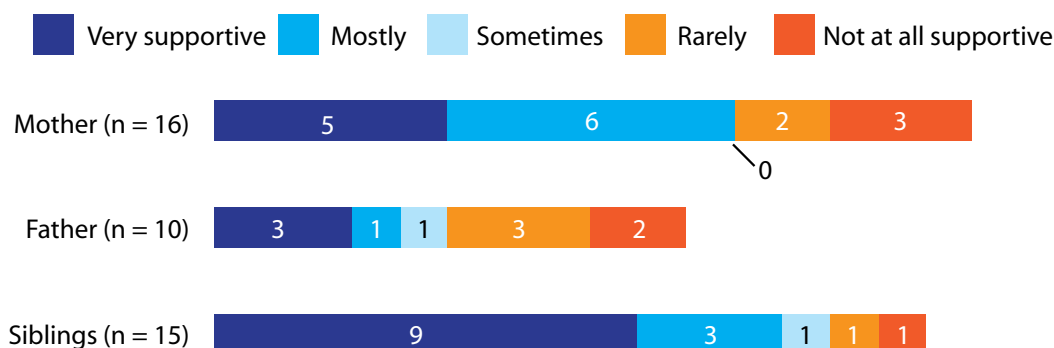
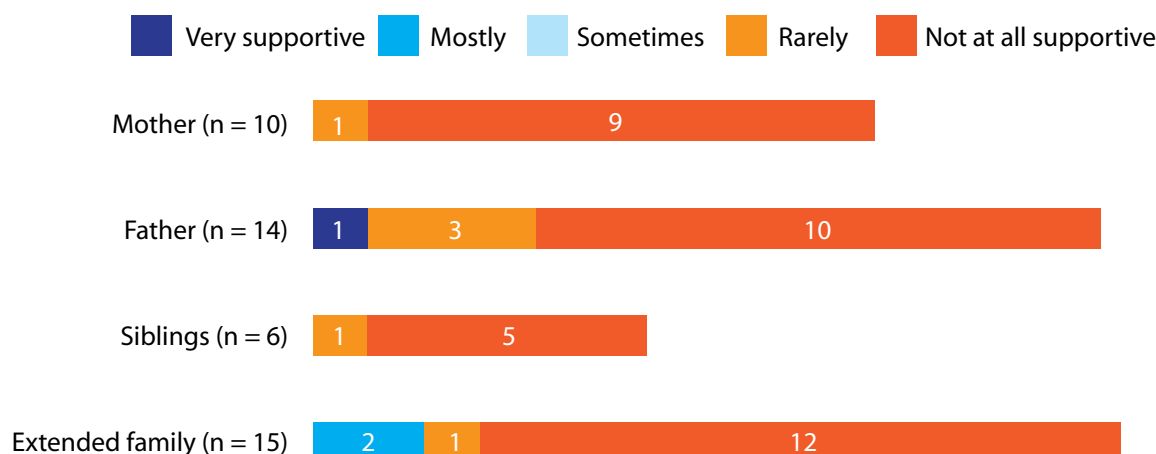


Figure 12: Perceived support of sexuality by family members (as reported by respondents who had not disclosed)



6.1.2 Personal stories

(i) Varying levels of support and acceptance with families

In the survey, interviews and focus groups, SSA people and some supportive family members spoke about the levels of support and acceptance towards lesbians and gay men in their families. One participant said all his family was supportive of his sexuality:

*Excellent – very well accepted and supported by my arab family, cousins and friends.
[30 – 34 years, gay man, survey respondent]*

Some family members also sought to defend their gay and lesbian relatives. One sister said her brother's coming out inspired her to 'give a voice' to her support for gay and lesbian people:

I developed a really stronger pursuit to giving it a voice after my brother came out. To generate some kind of honouring for him and for how beautiful he is. [Sister]

Inspired by their relative's experiences one family member also disclosed speaking out against discrimination towards lesbians and gay men in their workplace.

One mother said she would act in support of gay or lesbian people if necessary:

If someone was expressing their hatred towards gay people in my home, I'd show them the front door. I think everybody should live their lives. I think gay people should be left alone to live their lives. [Mother]

Whilst some immediate family members demonstrated support, participants often did not disclose their sexuality to extended family due to a fear of resulting negative reactions:

Participant 3: *My compromise is that I'm not out to my cousins or to my extended family. [...] I can't stand it. I'm not able to just be myself. [Men's focus group]*

[I have experienced acceptance] only from my brother and he's good but struggles with the rest of the family knowing [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

In some families, a demarcation between those that were more supportive arose along gender lines. One sister admitted that not everyone in her immediate family accepted her brother's sexuality to the same extent:

The girls, we're cool. The boys in the family kind of accept it but they don't understand. They've still got issues about it which come up every now and then. But we're not the family who would kick him for being gay. I love him to death. I love his boyfriend. [Sister]

This example of gendered acceptance or support follows research findings that (among other markers of difference) attitudes to homosexuality may vary according to gender and age.⁴⁹

(ii) Concern for familial honour and reputation

A concern for the family's reputation was often mentioned by SSA people and their supportive family members. One participant who had a supportive sister still did not feel he could disclose his sexuality to anyone in broader Arab networks:

My sister has been very supportive. Although she was very ignorant about the issue, she has since told me that i have opened her eyes etc. I dont feel i could ever be "Out" in the arabic community without bringing my family to shame. It does make you feel somewhat trapped. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Some supportive family members said that while they may be comfortable in speaking out in support of their gay or lesbian relatives in the context of this consultation or amongst some of their immediate family, they would be less comfortable speaking out in support in extended familial or communal contexts. Of most concern was the risk of the family being victimised or dishonoured:

I'm not as comfortable within the Muslim community to be open about it. And my brother wouldn't be comfortable with that neither. Because I would be concerned about the whole family being targeted by the community. Especially my Mum. She would have a hard time. [Sister]

(iii) Different processes of acceptance

SSA people and their supportive relatives spoke of processes of acceptance. For this sister, drawing analogies between her own struggles as a Muslim Arab woman and the struggles of her brother helped her in being empathetic to her brother's 'difference' and identifying the similarities rather than the differences between them:

I found out 4 years ago that my brother is gay. It didn't surprise me. I always suspected. I've always been tolerant. I understand difference. I've always felt different myself in my community. Different from the expectation people have of a Muslim Arab woman. So I completely understood. I've always been accepting of different people. [...] Being a strong woman or being gay is, in a way, the same in terms of the way it challenges people. [Sister]

However, most supportive family members spoke of a long and difficult process of gaining an acceptance and understanding of their gay or lesbian relative's homosexuality. One mother reflected with a degree of regret:

I was so cruel to [my son] when I found out and I apologised. Now I'm tolerant. [...]
Initially I was horrified. And then terrified that he was going to get AIDS. Then he did a lot of walking and didn't drive his car, and I thought people would bash him up. I was concerned. I hated it. Then I thought; he's a good person, he hasn't done anything wrong. I love him dearly, and he looks after me and his siblings. So I accepted it.

I dealt with it myself with a bit of time. I don't need help with it. It's fine. I just want [my son] to be happy. I'd like to see him find a partner and settle down. [Mother]

(iv) Cultural silences around sexuality and secrecy

For some participants, a family's silence after disclosure was particularly painful. One participant expected to feel 'liberated' after 'coming out', but instead found himself feeling trapped by the taboos surrounding any discussion of sexuality. His mother could not speak openly to him about his homosexuality, which led him to feel burdened and to question his own self-acceptance:

Participant 4: I didn't have that experience of liberation after coming out. Because not only that, but I took on my parent's homophobia again. My mother has a huge problem with even articulating the word ['gay'], let alone accepting it. It came to a point where I was taking on her homophobia. It was my burden again. It was my shame. I was in that space where I was so angry at her for not accepting me. And yet at the same time, so hurt because I felt rejected. But at the same time not sure what to do because I loved her as well. So I was kind of split in the middle. [Men's focus group]

Cultural silence around sexuality also made it difficult for some family members. Tensions arose for those who were aware of their relative's homosexuality and were supportive. For In such situations family members also reported playing mediating roles:

In the family, it's just about protecting my father. And there's no point in raising it at this point in his life. I do it to protect him and to protect my brother as well. And to keep the relationship between him and my brother operating on at least some kind of level. [Sister]

Another sibling said:

I think the most challenging thing has been the secrecy. I love my brother. But he's gone through such a hard time. It's predominately the secrecy that's been really challenging. Looking for ways to protect him from the community and from other family members. The fear of being outed because I'm worried about him being attacked by the community. So maintaining a kind of secrecy has been hard. [Sibling]

In one family, a mother maintained secrecy over her child's homosexuality from her husband. This compounded her own sense of isolation. The mother blamed herself for her child's homosexuality, believing it to be a learnt behaviour. This left her with little support and a sense of personal failure as a mother.

A community and welfare worker also noted a similar family situation where the client was a young gay man, who had become depressed and started to fail in his studies. His mother – the only one to know about his sexuality – began to feel particularly concerned.

I had a client who developed a mental illness [...] only one person in the family knew [about his homosexuality] and that was the mother. And she kept it from [everyone], even her husband for so long. And then after a while he [the client] couldn't make it [...] Every time he [would] go to a course, he would drop out... [His] mother then got affected because she's the only one who [knew about his homosexuality]. [She tried...] to be brave and ... support her son. [But in the end, she ...] ended up telling the rest of the family and the father. And it was a disaster because it put more pressure on him [the client]. [...] But then [it cost the mother and the father] their marriage. So it affected the whole [family], you know. So probably for [the son], feeling already bad that he can't ... have the freedom or the choice [to be himself]; feeling guilty that the whole family reacted like that... And at the same time feeling guilty that this ... happen[ed] between his father and mother. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

Homophobia and cultural silences around homosexuality can leave family members feeling vulnerable and accutely isolated.

[A]t the end of the day, the parents [of a child who has 'come out' as gay] are lost because you can't refer them anywhere. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

(v) No acceptance or support

Many participants spoke about a lack of familial acceptance and support, which in some cases did not improve with time. One male participant whose father was described as more supportive (although not accepting) had more difficulty with his mother:

My father says he doesn't understand but supports my decision – no matter what it is and that he loves me regardless. But we don't really talk about it. My mother is really negative. She thinks its [sic] a western disease. She blames coming to Australia. She doesn't want to talk about it much either – and she wants me to go to a doctor to get fixed up. She's convinced that there are no gays in the Arab world. I've tried to talk to her, but it's very difficult as she thinks she's protecting me when she's actually really hurting me. *[20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]*

Siblings could also be extremely unsupportive. One participant said his brother used homophobic insults against him to reinforce his own sense of masculine superiority:

Participant 5: I say that with my brother as well. At home, we were very different people and he was always trying to prove himself by being really offensive to me, by calling me all these names. [...] [H]e saw that I was a bit different and all the name calling was just his way of proving that he was 'normal'; that he was a man. *[Men's focus group]*

Even after many years, one participant said his sister continued to react with disgust:

Participant 1: My sister says that it makes her physically sick when she thinks about it. And I came out to her when I was [teen years]. And that was [a number of] years ago. [...] And my sister is still – for somebody who grew up completely in the West. She's physically sick, she says, when she thinks about two men together. *[Men's focus group]*

For some SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, rejection was complete:

I had, in one case, where the whole family ganged [sic] on that [SSA] person. They [the SSA family member] ran away. Came back – no one is accepting that person. And I think that family will never accept that person. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

Amongst all the stories offered by SSA participants and family members, stories of complete familial acceptance were rare and that silence needed to be maintained to preserve familial reputation amongst extended family members and community networks. Several said that one or two immediate family members (particularly siblings) could be supportive, however many SSA participants found acceptance was limited.

6.2 Support from friends within Arab communities

Figure 13 shows reported levels of support of SSA survey respondents' sexuality as reported by those who had disclosed to all of their gay, lesbian, queer (GLQ) or heterosexual Arab friends.

Figure 14 shows the perceived levels of support in relation to SSA survey respondents' sexuality, by those who had not disclosed their sexuality to all their heterosexual Arab friends. The one respondent who had not disclosed his sexuality to GLQ Arab friends did not answer this question.

Friendships with GLQ Arab friends were described as very important to SSA respondents from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. It was reported that these friendships allowed participants to forge links with others who understood their culture and personal situation:

[O]n my first day of university I met two fellow Arabic queers [...] The friendships that I made with these two men has been long lasting and has helped me through the past three years at university. We would blend cultures. We would speak arabic in bars when checking out hot guys, go to belly dancing classes, smoke shisha⁵⁰ in [suburb with high Arabic-speaking population] and then go clubbing.
[15 – 19 years, gay man, survey respondent]

However, in one case, a participant said he had been having an ongoing sexual relations with an Arab man who reacted negatively towards the participant's 'coming out' some years later:

Participant 3: I think for me it was my best mate. He's a Lebanese guy and we used to fool around quite a bit over many years. Then he got married. [...] When I came out to him, he said, 'No, you're not.' I said, 'Yes I am.' He said, 'No, you're not!' Then we just went through that thing where he said, 'I'll call our mates and we're all gonna [sic] bash you. Bash it out of you! Because you're wrong. You're mistaken.' And I don't know. Anyway he was my mate. And in fact, two years later, he did contact all my Leb mates, who I went to school with. And he stirred it out, '[Participant 3's] a poof! A faggot! Can you believe it?' And anyway, my mates called me and said, 'Look we think there's something wrong with [the friend]! (laughs) He's just lost it'. By the way, some of them said, 'Look we've heard. We don't like it or understand it, but you're a top bloke so that's cool'. [Men's focus group]

Figure 13

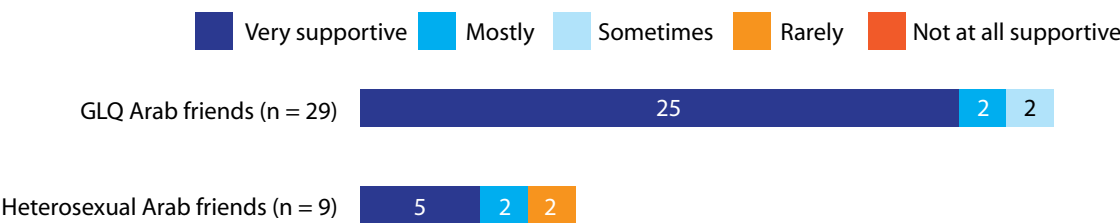


Figure 14



6.3 Support from community and welfare workers who work with Arab communities

6.3.1 Varying levels of support amongst workers

The focus group with community and welfare workers from Arab communities highlighted that varying levels of understanding of sexual diversity could be expected regarding SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds depending on the worker. One participant described heterosexual people as 'normal' and was unsure if male homosexuality was a learned behaviour, an imitation of women or an illness:

But I have a question. A guy – normal guy – he got sick, some part of his body stop working, okay? So, he just ask his sister, how the woman feel? And she tell him. Okay? And he start doing this by himself and after that he start to enjoy. So, I can say this is a normal guy or a gay? [Everyone talks at once] Is a gay a sickness or something in the DNA? *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

One community and welfare worker expressed apprehension that dealing with homosexuality may make it 'acceptable' or encourage others to be like them:

Okay. We have a problem, we are trying to deal with it, but we don't wanna [sic] make this problem accepted by others. For example, I will try to ... to help this gay or this lesbian in this or that. I don't want to give them the feeling that what they are doing is acceptable and try to let others acting like them. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

However, many community and welfare workers in the focus group were supportive. One worker emphasised the need for a non-judgemental and non-discriminatory provision of service:

[Y]our values should not count in. You don't be judgmental even when you don't accept what they're doing. You still have to provide the services for them regardless. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

6.3.2 The need to support community and welfare workers in doing their job

Nearly all the community and welfare workers in the focus group agreed that they wanted more resources and support in addressing homophobia and to know *how* to provide support to lesbians and gay men. One worker however emphasised that they were not prepared to risk their job to pursue the issue:

Participant A: I think we need some kind of training, like, the same kind of training we do for our work. We need training to learn how to deal with homosexual[s].

Participant B: I think it is ... the gay and lesbian community's responsibility to try to raise the awareness and to try [and create] an education campaign ... to empower me and give me some information. If the need arise, I'm gonna [sic] do it, but I'm not gonna [sic] lose, or forget my job... *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

The positive impact of education was clearly demonstrated when one worker recounted their own story of re-education, with the assistance and support of a senior colleague:

I wanna say something... First time I start working as a community worker. This is my first job. And as a person who come from a particular part of the world who do not accept that situation. And I got a client, and he openly say he is gay, and I was furious. I nearly want to hit him. That's twenty years ago. And I jumped and I asked him to leave. He leave; he was scared to death. He run. And then my boss, I remember, she's a lady, she took me aside and she lectured me. And I remembered since then, I've learned a lot and I've changed my attitude and I've moved along. The fact of me being here is a big achievement. And yeah, so I look at that experience and what I get from that I think people who learn, and even community members from very conservative communities they start to know about the issue and then change their way of dealing. So I think education... education... education... It's very important. It changes people's attitudes. *[Community and welfare workers' focus group]*

Community and welfare workers were particularly interested in knowing which organisations and resources would be appropriate for referring clients and client's families.

6.3.3 A gap in services

Several community and welfare workers commented on a lack of services which adequately addressed sexuality and cultural issues simultaneously. Many SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds who were surveyed agreed saying there was a general absence of programs that sufficiently targeted them.

Arab community organisations were perceived by some community and welfare workers (and SSA participants) as potentially homophobic or not trained to deal with gay and lesbian issues. One worker suggested that a gay and lesbian liaison officer position could be established in mainstream Arab community organisations to begin to bridge a perceived gap in service provision:

Participant A: The other point I wanna [sic] raise is, most of the programmes run by community organisations like this [an Arabic community organisation] is not specifically tailored to suit the need of gay and lesbian people. So I don't know. Should we have a gay and lesbian worker maybe included in some of the organisations?

Participant B: Like a liaison officer or something.

Participant A: A liaison officer. [*Community and welfare workers' focus group*]

However, other workers felt that non-Arab organisations could also provide the added benefit of anonymity, particularly if clients felt unsafe to access services within close-knit Arab community circles:

See also, most probably gays and lesbians who are from Arabic-speaking backgrounds wouldn't come to services that are Arabic-specific. They will probably go to something and make sure it's not in their area, where no one is gonna [sic] know that they're coming to ... [*Community and welfare workers' focus group*]

There was however also a concern that gay and lesbian organisations may not provide culturally-sensitive services. One worker highlighted the need for a multicultural sexuality service:

I think if it's a multicultural community centre could be, initiated or built or whatever, by the gay and lesbian community, and they can employ officers or health workers of psychologists from all different backgrounds,

you know, ethnic backgrounds, and then all these organisations can refer to them.

[*Community and welfare workers' focus group*]

The impact of health and welfare services that addressed clients' cultural and sexuality needs simultaneously could be profound moments of 'homecoming' for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in the consultation.

When sexuality issues were addressed in a culturally-sensitive way there were real and positive results, as one gay man spoke about in the survey:

I had an Arab muslim [sic] doctor. I changed doctors because I didn't feel comfortable going for STI⁵¹ checks etc. Similarly, when I go to a non-Arab doctor, they don't really understand Arab culture. However, I went once to [Sydney-based] Sexual Health Clinic and saw a lebanese [sic] social worker there. She was amazing. She was the first (straight) Arab person to tell me it was OK to be gay and to point me towards resources for Arab gays and lesbians. That was like a homecoming! [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

6.4 Support from religious and community leaders from Arab communities

Interviews were conducted with four religious leaders and five community leaders associated with secular institutions and government from local Arab communities. SSA participants spoke about isolated experiences of support from community and religious leaders.

6.4.1 Instances of support from religious and community leaders

One Muslim religious leader had quietly welcomed a participant into a mosque after he had 'come out' to him:

Participant 2: My brother was a strong practicing Muslim and me coming out. He found a sheikh who supports, not promotes homosexuality. So I came out to him and said, 'I'm a gay Muslim man'. And he walked me into the mosque. So, he doesn't promote. He just supports. He doesn't say, 'Get out of my mosque'. [*Men's focus group*]

Some Christian leaders within Arab communities had attempted to welcome gays and lesbians into the Church. One participant mentioned a special service for SSA people was organised by a particular parish and supported by some people from the congregation. However, another participant spoke about one supportive religious leader from an Arabic-speaking background who had been personally harmed and forced out of the Church for opening the Church's doors to gays and lesbians:

Participant A: There are individuals within the church, we know someone on a personal level, who had counselled quite a few people, and opened the church's door to gays and lesbians regardless of their religion. What happened to him? First he gets bashed and gets pushed out of the church. So there are individuals within the religious circles who are capable of it. [*Women's focus group*]

Three community leaders interviewed from secular institutions showed an understanding of homophobia and its impacts on the health and wellbeing of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. One community leader said:

The Arabic community ignores the fact of homosexuality and that it does exist and do not acknowledge it. This leads the Arabic community to treat homosexuality and homosexual[s] in a discreet way. When you do ignore and not openly talk about a matter, you simply discriminate against it. For a homosexual individual ... the sense of isolation supervenes, this sense of isolation could accompany that individual for years which in turn affect his or her quality of living, and thus the productivity of that individual. [*Female community leader*]

When asked what they would say if a SSA person from an Arabic-speaking background approached them for advice, the three community leaders said they would counsel the person to be careful of who they chose to disclose their sexuality to. Most were not convinced that 'coming out' would be a positive experience for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds:

I'll be shocked in the start, after coming out of the shock, I will advise them to watch themselves and to be careful to whom they should talk to in relation to this matter. Because the understanding, the listening ear, we gave

here would not be possibly given to them by someone else. [*Male community leader*]

One community leader said they would direct the person towards community services outside the Arab community.

If a gay or lesbian person came to me, I'll tell him or her not to tell their family about the matter. I'll suggest talking instead to other people who can see the human that lays in them... I'll also forward them to community services that offer counselling and assistance... I will never forward them to another Arabic community organisation that deals with such matters. [*Female community leader*]

One supportive community leader doubted that violence was used against SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.

The common feeling in the Arabic community of homosexuality is the feeling of disgust, unacceptance; to desert them and not to deal with them, isolate them. Yet these feelings will not evolve to violence against them or against their acts. [*Male community leader*]

6.4.2 Absence of support

The survey and focus groups responses by SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds suggested that religious and community leaders are perceived overall as largely unsupportive.

As indicated in **section 1.2.4**, several religious and community leaders did not have a clear understanding of 'homophobia'. This required the interviewers to describe it in the absence of a specific Arabic translation.

One community leader appeared to confuse the word 'homophobia' with 'homosexuality'. When the interviewer sought to clarify this his views became clearer:

[Homosexuality] is a deviant and immoral social problem. [Homosexuality] and its stupidity creates a feeling of disgust. [*Male community leader*]

Some leaders did understand the concept of 'homophobia' but described it as a positive religious or social asset:

I don't think homophobia is the problem. Homophobia is not negative. On the contrary, it's homosexuality that is negative. *[Muslim religious leader]*

When asked what advice these six community and religious leaders interviewed would give to people who came to them for support, they said they would try and counsel SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds towards 'normal' or heterosexual lives. These six leaders indicated that they believed homosexuality was a chosen path, an illness or an adoption of deviant ideas:

I would welcome him or her, because I would consider them to be sick and in need of help. I would work with them and their families to restore their normal lives, and help them get back to the track that God has chosen for them. *[Male community leader]*

All 9 community and religious leaders were interviewed about their understanding of violence against SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and the same six stated that they personally did not condone physical violence. Two community leaders understood such violence as a corrective measure or a reaction to the 'immorality' of homosexuality:

I do not support any kind of physical violence against any persons or groups. Yet, if we took the wider view of violence as the controlling of someone's life, then for us it's considered as an advice and way for correction. *[Female community leader]*

The four religious leaders interviewed also did not condone physical violence but preferred 'the power of the mind and ... persuasion ... to educate people about what's right and what's wrong.' All the religious leaders spoke about 'education and guidance and positive interactions to solve those kinds of problems.' That is, religious leaders largely sought to 'cure' homosexuality.

Fighting homophobia can be done through programs of awareness targeted at the community and spoken in Arabic. For example, using the Arabic radio stations to express the point of view of Christianity and Islam on homosexuality, and to advise people not to deviate from the right path. *[Christian religious leader]*

I would try to help them change themselves and go back to the normal way of life. After all, it has been proven that homosexuality creates AIDS. People with AIDS are costing normal communities a lot of money. Plus, these sorts of acts are an obstacle in the way of procreation. It's not my job to help homosexual. I would probably direct them to appropriate medical organisations that could deal with their problem. *[Muslim religious leader]*

6.5 Summary of findings

Of survey respondents who had disclosed their sexuality; GLQ Arab friends, siblings and heterosexual Arab friends were the most likely to be supportive, followed by mothers. Fathers were the least likely to be supportive. Almost all survey respondents who had not disclosed their sexuality to family or friends reported that they perceived family and heterosexual Arab friends as 'rarely supportive' or 'not at all' supportive.

Levels of support from family members varied:

- Some family members supported their SSA relatives to the point of speaking out to defend SSA people. However this was not the typical experience and many SSA people spoke of partial or complete familial rejection.
- The support given by family members could be mitigated by concern for maintaining familial reputation or honour amongst broader Arab communities.
- Some family members may be immediately supportive or gradually become more supportive over time. However, not all family members became more supportive after disclosure.

Supportive family members who knew about their relative's sexuality faced a tension between supporting their SSA relatives, protecting their SSA relatives from homophobia, concealing their relatives' sexuality from other family members, and maintaining familial honour.

Friendships with other SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, who shared and understood the tensions between sexual and cultural identity, were highlighted by SSA participants as great sources of support.

The community and welfare workers' focus group showed varying levels of support towards SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. They spoke about the need for resources, education and assistance in providing better support. However, some community and welfare workers were concerned about losing their jobs as a result of supporting SSA people.

Community and welfare workers and SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds noted a gap in health and welfare services which simultaneously addressed sexuality and cultural needs. Gay and lesbian community and welfare organisations were perceived as not necessarily providing culturally-sensitive services, and community and welfare services within Arab communities were perceived as not sensitive to the needs of SSA people. Some community and welfare workers and SSA people said that sexuality services outside Arab communities provided greater anonymity. Some participants expressed significant satisfaction with sexuality based services, they had perceived to be culturally sensitive.

There were isolated stories and experiences of support from religious and community leaders within Arab communities, however many religious and community leaders were perceived by SSA people as largely unsupportive. Some interviews with community and religious leaders confirmed these perceptions.

Six of the nine community and religious leaders interviewed did not have a clear idea of what homophobia meant or described it as a *positive* cultural value. These interviewees favoured counselling and rehabilitative practices for SSA people. These six interviewees said they did not support violence against SSA people, however two said, if violence was understood in a 'wider view as the controlling of someone's life', they supported such 'controlling' measures for the 'correction' of SSA people towards heterosexuality.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Experiences in GLBTQ communities

SSA survey respondents and focus group participants were asked a range of questions about their interactions and experiences within GLBTQ communities. They were asked about their experiences of being from an Arabic-speaking background and in 'the gay/lesbian/queer [GLQ] community', as well as whether GLQ organisations adequately addressed issues facing Arab gays and lesbians.

Responses included comments about GLBTQ communities in general, and specific aspects of these communities, such as the commercial 'scene' (e.g. bars and clubs), community organisations (e.g. ACON), and sub-communities or networks (e.g. GLBTQ Arab communities). This report's SSA participants were from, or made references to, Sydney and Sydney-based communities, organisations and networks.

7.1 'The scene' and 'the community'

For several participants, experiences in the commercial 'scene' and GLBTQ communities had been positive:

I've never had a problem in the community .. i think the community accepts every one no matter what or where they come from .. [25 – 29 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

i've never experienced real racism addressed towards me because i'm from arabic [sic] background. I'm happy with both my sexuality and my ethnicity. I enjoy that in the Arabic community and in the larger queer community [15 – 19 years, queer man, survey respondent]

Thank God i am living in Sydney, I do not know how my experience would have been if i was not here!! [35 – 39 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Some participants distinguished between 'the scene' and 'the community' and identified particularly positive aspects of GLBTQ communities away from the commercial 'scene':

Generally, I've had a good experience. I have had one racist remark in all my time on the scene (I've been out since 2003). I find I'm more into the community side of the things (like the organisations, theatre groups) rather than the actual scene. [20 – 24 years, gay male, survey respondent]

Some participants felt that the commercial scene offered little. This was not always in relation to their ethnicity, rather a general difficulty in making connections with others due to 'the scenes' perceived culture, characteristics or impersonality:

pretty ok, though very fake with the scene society. Sometimes very hard to find a friend or even a boyfriend cos [sic] most gay guys are not genuine human beings and are too busy looking for a quick fuck or worried about what they wear. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Others felt 'the scene' and GLBTQ communities in general had restrictive behavioural and body image codes that fostered a sense of exclusion or difference:

I have avoided the gay/lesbian communities mostly because I don't identify within the confines of these codes. i identify queer multicultural and feel much more comfortable here because by its very nature it is more open, less codified about behaviour and identity. [40 – 44 years, queer female, survey respondent]

Apart from that, a 50% Lebanese gene pool also donated a little more hair than I might have chosen! [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Several respondents mentioned that it was very difficult to maintain a simultaneous connection to GLBTQ and Arab communities. Respondents referred to living a 'double life':

the two don't mix, you live a double life or you completely let go of one to be the other... [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

Out of 31 survey responses to the question of respondents' experience of being from an Arabic-speaking background in 'the GLQ community', six described the GLQ community in general as racist. The most common expressions of racism were exclusion, exotification⁵² and ignorant attitudes and/or remarks.

Generally I find the gay/lesbian/queer community quite racist. Either I am ignored/invisible or people want to fuck me because i am a "wog" boy. I find the community is generally really ignorant about race issues and how to behave in a non-racist way. [30 – 34 years, gay/queer man, survey respondent]

There is a lot of racism and ignorance about us in the wider queer community. A lot of the time I feel ignored, invisible or sometimes we're just there for the exotic pleasure of white queers [25 – 29 years, queer female, survey respondent]

One respondent suggested that Arab people were seen as 'suppressed' or 'violent' by people in the GLBTQ community:

It's very hard especially when gay people get jailed overseas [sic] in the middle east[.] people tend to treat you as suppressed and violent and after especially [sic] after september 11. when the Haword [sic] introduced [sic] the anti terror laws. [30 – 34 years, gay/bisexual man, survey respondent]

One focus group participant spoke about two ideas about Arab men that he felt were prominent in 'the scene' and GLBTQ communities; that Arab men were more likely to only perform certain sexual roles, or that they were discreet and uncomfortable with their homosexuality:

Participant 4: I can think of two instances of direct racism that I've experienced. Once at Stonewall⁵³ and once at a social thing, where misconceptions about how Arab men... and it usually comes from this idea that Arab men are only tops and they're closet cases. That kind of impression keeps running. And yeah, the fetishisation aspect; that they expect you to perform a certain role. [Men's focus group]

Some participants felt a sense of exclusion from GLBTQ communities as a result of a perceived lack of understanding about Arab culture and its challenges by others in GLBTQ communities:

I don't fit in. The GLQ community has support for issues of coming out, etc, but if you're Arab and Muslim noone [sic] understand how challenging that is, unless you have lived that life. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

Lonely initially, better now but still a bit isolating. I've had the feeling of not belonging due to different cultural background, traditions, values and principles. There is some stereotyping of ethnic minorities. [30 – 34 years, gay man, survey respondent]

One respondent said that, although she felt her experience in the GLBTQ community was 'usually OK', sometimes there was not enough appreciation of the importance of culture to her:

Usually okay, but sometimes people in the queer community just don't get how important the culture is to me. They can also have racist ideas about Arab culture and how we should act/exoticise [sic] ourselves for them. [25 – 29 years, lesbian/queer woman, survey respondent]

7.2 GLBTQ community organisations and service providers

While the question offered ACON and New Mardi Gras as examples, the question was directed to GLQ organisations generally.

Out of 31 responses to this question, 14 respondents said ‘no’ and 16 respondents said ‘partly’. One respondent said ‘yes’ (Figure 15.) 27 respondents provided reasons for their answers.

7.2.1 Culturally appropriate service provision

The respondent who felt that GLQ organisations responded to issues facing Arabic gays and lesbians said:

homosexuality is homosexuality regardless of race. [15 – 19 years, gay man, survey respondent]

The most common theme emerging from the remaining 16 respondents who said ‘partly’ related to racism or culturally inappropriate service provision.

I think they dont get the complexity of living as an Arab in the current climate (eg fear of terrorism, gangs created by media, politics) today and to add to that I’m Muslim [sic]. There is only a couple of people I know who try and advocate for rights. We cant come out as I have been instructed to do by some queer groups and there is noone [sic] from the community represented in these organisations, esp Muslim people to help with the delivery of services. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

Because they can’t deal with difference of any colour, ethnicity or race. If we are not being exoticified [sic] then we are being vilified [sic]. They don’t make it their business to look into themselves and ask if they are being racist. and when they are told they are being racist, they get deffensive [sic] and accuse us/me of being too emotional and sensitive [sic]. [45 – 49 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

I think that these organisations are not trained, do not have the resources and unwilling to challenge their own racism. [30 – 34 years, gay/queer man, survey respondent]

Several respondents referred to a lack of campaigns, information or services specifically for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.

There aren’t any Arab-specific campaigns, and much of the information and resources seem to be concentrated in the inner-city area. [25 – 29 years, lesbian/queer woman, survey respondent]

I’ve never seen any community programs or ads or anything directed at any Australia[n] with an Arabic background. [30 – 34 years, gay/bisexual man, survey respondent]

Two respondents said they felt that GLQ community organisations had a ‘limited agenda’ and focussed on only certain ethnicities and genders. The theme of ‘tokenism’ was also mentioned:

I think there is so much deeply embedded racism, paranoia, prejudice and fear of the Arab, that sometimes in Sydney it is safer to be a lesbian than a Lebanese. [...] I don’t trust mainstream organisations because they have their own agendas, they are tokenistic and service the white community. So what if they say they are multicultural? What does that mean? [A] bit ... [of] colour for the Mardi Gras? No thanks. [40 – 44 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

It seems that they are only interested in a very limited agenda that does not include us. my impression is that the majority of queer organisations are only interested in what the middle class white gay male wants. [25 – 29 years, queer female, survey respondent]

Several respondents noted emerging work in this area. Two respondents commented that this consultation was the first community initiative they had heard of beginning to address issues facing SSA

Figure 15: ‘Do you feel that gay, lesbian and queer organisations/community (e.g. ACON, New Mardi Gras) respond to issues facing Arabic gays and lesbians?’ (n = 31)



people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. One young male respondent noted that whilst 'not a lot [had] ... been done', things were 'moving'. He noted a community forum on racism organised by ACON as an example.

A few respondents suggested that whilst GLQ community organisations had been slow to provide culturally appropriate services, SSA Arab community-initiated projects, such as Club Arak, had helped to fill the gap.

ACON has just started to look at the arab [sic] community but they had a few other community awariness [sic] projects eg Asia. [...] We have been supporting ourselves but it is hard if you dont [sic] know were [sic] to turn to. It has been word of mouth where you can get support. I felt I had no support till I happen to have a conversation with an Arab queer organiser. [30 – 34 years, lesbian, survey respondent]

I've noticed Arab floats in Mardi Gras, and Club Arak has been a regular occurance [sic]. I think a program like Silk Road⁵⁴ but for Arab-identifying people would be fantastic. I think ACON does fantastic work generally; Arabs have been a little forgotten, but mainly because they have been invisible. Slowly, as more come out, ACON should probably be more proactive in responding to their needs. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

Another respondent said more cross-cultural work needed to be done:

I think ACON has started to do good work towards dealing with these issues. [...] Often there is an expectation for ethnic groups to assimilate into mainstream and stereotypical gay culture. There is not much effort by gay community groups to raise awareness and resolve this discrimination. Nor is there much effort from gay community groups or leaders to engage the ethnic groups, and integrate and assimilate into ethnic culture. Cultural integration, acceptance and support must work both ways. The mainstream gay community should be exposed to other ethnic gay cultures, and should be encouraged to integrate, accept and support gay ethnic cultures in their original form. Holding cross-cultural gay events, social and community groups and projects will help towards achieving greater understanding,

acceptance and support - further integrating and enriching the gay and broader community. [30 – 34 years, gay man, survey respondent]

One female focus group participant said that any future initiatives must be sustained and not tokenistic:

Participant A: You can't do it in a tokenistic way, whereby, this year is the year of Arab gays and lesbians, next year they can all get f***ed. Do you know what I mean? You have to be consistent. Because what you're doing here is that you're attempting to change people's minds and people's hearts [...] Even with women that I know, who have come out to their families, who had been physically attacked and bashed. Ten years down the track their parents are still finding it hard to accept their sexuality, but they just don't hit them anymore. [Women's focus group]

7.2.2 Other reasons

Other respondents provided various reasons for their answers. A few respondents said they were not generally familiar with available support programs.

One gay male respondent also felt that the priority should be on educating the '[A]rabic community ... about [the] gay community'.

Another respondent was dissatisfied with the priorities of GLQ organisations:

Its all about sex or safe sex ..or drugs.. celebrating being gay NOT supporting curing the myths..just further adding fuel to the fire by protraying [sic] gays as sexually perverted in leather briefs and havibg [sic] sex on floats. Even im ashamed of that. Not to mention the drugs! [35 – 39 years, gay man, survey respondent]

7.3 The GLBTQ Arab community

A theme arising in the focus groups with SSA people was that participants were forging their own GLBTQ Arab communities. Several times, participants spoke about events, social and cultural organisations, and people who had helped them to find a sense of 'home'.

The importance of connecting with other SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in culturally-

familiar environments was described as helping ease isolation. An example frequently mentioned was Club Arak, a queer Arab dance party held in Sydney.

The importance of safe spaces which allowed SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds to affirm and celebrate their identities and cultural markers such as music and hospitality was evident in an exchange in the men's focus group:

Participant 1: Yeah, I had never experienced anything like this except in Sydney when my friend told me about this Club Arak. [...] When I showed up there, it was the most... it was the greatest, greatest, greatest! I didn't think it existed. And when I arrived it was this bunch of lesbians and gay guys. They were Arab. They were sitting there having drinks. Just chatting. It wasn't a rave. It wasn't drugs or drunkards. It was just great. People just hanging out. Nice introductions, music, pool... It was fantastic. [...]

Participant 4: And the music you grew up with is playing in the background.

Participant 5: Yes, the first time I went to Club Arak. I don't think I'd ever been happier in my life.

Participant 4: Isn't that the best thing? For me, that's the best thing about our community; that close-knit aspect. When that close-knit aspect can be used in a positive way, it's actually really beautiful.

Participant 1: When we're allowed to be close-knit as gay people. Allowed to behave as Arabs as we are in our heterosexual community – which [is] close and caring. When we're allowed to behave like that as homosexuals, and not cast out of our own community, and as Easterners in the West. When we're allowed to do that it's quite good. [*Men's focus group*]

7.4 Summary of findings

Participants had varying experiences of GLBTQ communities, generally and specifically, such as 'the [commercial] scene'. Whilst some enjoyed being part of GLBTQ communities and 'the scene', many expressed a sense of exclusion from GLBTQ communities or disappointment with the commercial scene. Some did not enjoy features of 'the scene' itself (e.g. drugs, an emphasis on image), whilst others felt excluded as a result of their ethnicity.

A significant proportion of survey respondents felt that racism towards SSA people from Arabic-speaking

backgrounds was evident in GLBTQ communities in Sydney. This took the form of either being ignored or made to feel invisible, or being fetishised and stereotyped into certain roles as a result of ethnicity or racial appearance.

Out of 31 responses, 14 respondents said gay, lesbian and queer organisations and service providers did not adequately address issues concerning Arab gays and lesbians, whilst one respondent said that service providers did adequately address such issues. Sixteen respondents said GLQ organisations 'partly' addressed issues concerning Arab gays and lesbians. Several respondents perceived GLQ service providers as racist, providers of culturally inappropriate services or providers of no services which targeted issues facing SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. A few respondents positively acknowledged emerging work by GLQ service providers. Several respondents said this consultation was the first such initiative they had heard of targeting SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.

Several SSA participants spoke about participating in, and helping to create, GLBTQ Arab communities in Sydney. These community spaces were perceived positively by focus group participants, who saw them as places where their sexuality and cultural identities could coexist.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Participants' suggestions for action

All participants in the survey, focus groups and interviews were asked about actions which might be taken to support SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. A few community and welfare workers, and six of the nine community and religious leaders said they would not support initiatives which promoted greater acceptance of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, particularly within Arab communities. However, the majority of these respondents did say that violence (characterised as physical violence) was unacceptable. By contrast, SSA people, family members, most community and welfare workers and a few community leaders did offer a wide range of suggestions for action and supported at least some initiatives. This chapter discusses these in detail.

8.1 What can be done?

8.1.1 Public education

(i) Ideas about homosexuality

Consultation participants spoke about certain persistent beliefs about homosexuality which existed in Arab communities. These included:

- Homosexuality is not natural. It is not found in nature (e.g. animals) and relies on unnatural physiological uses of the body.
- Homosexuality is the result of Western influence. It is not indigenous to Arab and/or Muslim cultures, or does not exist.
- Homosexuality is an illness and potentially 'contagious'. Homosexuality can therefore be 'cured'.
- Homosexuality is a choice.
- Homosexuality hurts Arab families.
- Young people are vulnerable to being converted to homosexuality or children victimised by (homo)sexual predators.
- Homosexuality is a sin and against God.
- AIDS is a 'homosexual disease'.

(ii) Public education campaign

One common suggestion by SSA participants, family members and some community leaders

was the need for a public education campaign to address misconceptions and misinformation about homosexuality. Participants stressed the need for starting with basic awareness about sexual diversity:

Participant A: I think you have to create an awareness. And I think the biggest thing that the community, most of the Arabic community needs to know, more than anything, is that we exist. A lot of them, because they think it's such a sin or such a bad thing, are in denial as of our existence. But when they start hearing facts and figures on the ground, and go, there are thousands of Arab gays and lesbians in Australia. [...] People would start to think, ah, it's not just one person who's weird, or two people who are weird. It's actually; we're talking about a lot. You know what I mean? [*Women's focus group*]

Participants thought that such a campaign could be run in Arab Australian newspapers and radio, and would bring personal stories into the public domain.

Participants emphasised the need for educative campaigns to come from within Arab communities (the 'grassroots') to ensure credibility and not perceived as an 'influence of the West':

Participant 4: Whatever it is, it has to come from Arabic voices. Because I think the Arabic community is very suspicious of Western voices on homosexuality. [*Men's focus group*]

The theme of 'partnership' was emphasised by one community leader who supported practical measures:

We need incentives in practical terms to start to make cultural and attitudinal change towards homosexuality and thus homophobia. As an example, I am not ready to hang a poster in my [office] to tackle the issue of homophobia, but, if a [professional] is sent by government, agencies etc, to my [office] to sit with [people] and to discuss, answer, resolve those issues and [this] generates a fruitful debate, then I am ready to hang the poster. Practicality, not token gestures, are what I am asking for. If there is an effective, well-planned, sensitive program that will achieve rewarding results, then I'll be for it. [...] It will need a lot of courage, commonsense and incentives for people to tackle this issue. [*Male community leader*]

Participants also emphasised the need for the messages to be viewed as authoritative. Heterosexual allies were therefore highlighted as essential. Health professionals, community leaders and other senior people in Arab communities were also considered important to such an initiative, as were supportive religious leaders, although it was suggested that finding supportive religious leaders may be a difficult task:

Participant 4: It has to have some sort of authority. That's the way our community works. If it comes from above... [*Men's focus group*]

With communities that are so entrenched in tradition, you've got to have the courage to take that step. I think the most influential person is the person at the mosque. I think it starts with the individual. You'd have to find a progressive sheikh to start implementing change in people's minds. But good luck finding one! [*Sister*]

It was also noted that Arab communities were diverse. Apart from the need to recognise the diversity of Christian and Muslim communities, there were also differences by country. A campaign as suggested would need to consider the diversity within Arab communities:

Participant A: And you gotta [sic] remember, if we're talking about the Arabic community, it's a massive bloody community. Lebanese themselves don't agree. Imagine trying to get the Iraqis, Palestinians, the Jordanian, the Saudis, the Iranians... [*Women's focus group*]

(iii) **Apprehension about further stigmatising Arab communities**

Despite the broad support for such a public education campaign by many participants, some community and welfare workers and community leaders who expressed support for SSA people said they were apprehensive (or perceived that others in Arab communities would be apprehensive) about such public initiatives. With increased political and public hostility towards Arab communities, some participants said they were concerned that these communities would be further victimised.

Alongside accusations of Arabs as 'terrorists', 'criminals', 'rapists', 'misogynists' and 'extremists', some participants were concerned with accusations of homophobia being added to the mix. Some participants re-emphasised that a politically sensitive

climate meant that if a public awareness strategy was pursued, then grassroots campaigns which 'highlight[ed] and tackle[d] the human aspects of the issue' were even more important.

Homophobia is not a priority at this point in time. The Arabic community is [going] through a lot and other priorities are there. The Arabic community still struggles with its identity. Other issues are unemployment, financial hardship, media focus and over-coverage and dealing with the image media creates. To be honest, homophobia and homosexuality is the least on the list, and again I say at this point in time. In addition and as I said earlier, homosexuality and thus homophobia is ignored and hidden, so the issue now is to find the correct timing to raise such topics. We should go with the pace of the community. Let us deal with other priorities first. Do not 'shake' this matter now because the community is not prepared. [*Female community leader*]

However, SSA participants and their family members emphasised that living with homophobia compounded their marginalisation as people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. This group affirmed their commitment to the collective, particularly through their persistent concern to avoid bringing shame to their families. Many felt disappointed that families and Arab communities did not include them. For them addressing homophobia in Arab communities was not about stigmatising Arab communities, but enhancing what they saw as the best aspects of Arab culture, such as the culture's hospitality and emphasis on the collective. One participant described ways that cultural values could be reinterpreted in affirmative ways which supported lesbians and gay men:

Participant 5: I felt like that when I first started getting in contact with a lot of people that I know. Because I always felt that, in our [Arabic] communities, everybody is always, sort of, nice to you. Kisses you on both cheeks. You know, gives you coffee. You know, a very hospitable nature. And you feel like even when you absolutely hate the person, they still have some kind of superficial connection with you. But when I actually came into the gay Arabic community here. I felt the same thing. And when I first noticed that – people being very welcoming – I felt; this is real. These people accept me for who I am. Are

being very nice, are being very welcoming and it's all real. And it was a great feeling. [Men's focus group]

(iv) **Strong dissent from some religious and community leaders**

Six of the nine community and religious leaders interviewed strongly reacted against any campaign that would promote acceptance of homosexuality. One community leader said:

I wouldn't initiate any steps towards the acceptance of those people. On the contrary, I would encourage organisations and institutions to address the problem [homosexuality], so that we can work towards a better society that is free of it. [...] Homosexuality is a deviant sort of behaviour that we have to protect our children from. I encourage media institutions to not allow homosexual to spread opinions and lifestyles through them. [Male community leader]

8.1.2 Support services

SSA participants, family members, and community and welfare workers also highlighted the need for support services which addressed the specific needs of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and their families.

In the survey, SSA respondents were asked to rank from a list the most important services for SSA people which should be available within 'the Arabic community'.

The following were provided out of 31 responses and in order (multiple responses allowed):

- family support groups (26 respondents)
- support groups for GLQ people (26 respondents)
- information on the internet (26 respondents)
- counselling (24 respondents)
- resources (e.g. booklets, pamphlets) (22 respondents)
- 'coming out' groups (21 respondents)

Many participants took the opportunity to elaborate on this list or provide further suggestions for specific support services. One suggestion was to establish a telephone counselling service staffed by volunteers from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Another suggestion was for a refuge for homeless or at risk youth. One participant in the women's focus group spoke about a time when she opened her home to a young lesbian who had run away from home:

Participant A: [A] few years before that, I met a young woman, who was 16, who ran away from home after she came out, and decided to use my house as a refuge. But she was savvy enough to know that she wasn't the only lesbian in the world. But she had nowhere to go. [...] Now, multiply that by the hundreds of young women out there, who are still at high school, or just leaving high school, or their parents are suspecting something is wrong and they make sure they go and get married by the time they're 18. There must be heaps of them out there. And they don't have access to the information that tells them that it's okay, that you are normal, that there is nothing wrong with you, and that you can escape from this. [Women's focus group]

Another suggestion was a discussion group for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds including advertising material in Arabic in the gay and lesbian press:

Participant 6: Material written in Arabic, talking about the issue. Just like you have ads for Fun and Esteem⁵⁵ in SX⁵⁶ or the Star Observer⁵⁷ that kind of thing. And then give the number to a support line. [Men's focus group]

However, the same participant highlighted that people who were isolated from GLBTQ communities may struggle access information on groups and services:

Participant 6: If you don't exist in the gay community, if you don't read SX or the Star, if you don't have a relationship with ACON, you wouldn't know they exist. [Men's focus group]

Indeed, the demographics of the survey highlighted that young people in particular did not tend to live in areas where the GLBTQ press was available. Widespread information dissemination was therefore noted by some participants as important.

Some participants spoke about the ways for people to engage within religious contexts, providing educative as well as support options:

Participant 1: Doing things that are affiliated to the church or the mosque. And that way would be more successful than just posters. [*Men's focus group*]

However, there was apprehension about the capacity to affect change in religious organisations. Some participants felt the emphasis should be on promoting a secular provision of services and come from community organisations:

Participant A: Some secular way of dealing with the issue within the community. That way you don't necessarily connect with religious organisations. Because you really can't go there, I think that would be a very difficult task, but maybe we deal with community based organisations, whereby you have an education programme that promotes a certain level of understanding. [*Women's focus group*]

One community and welfare worker reiterated the importance of non-judgemental support services.

8.1.3 Speaking out

Many SSA participants spoke about the need to provide role models for younger people and individuals:

Participant 6: We have a responsibility to younger gay Arab people to show them that there's a public face on people who have done it. [Y]ou've got young people in their teens who are looking for role models. [*Men's focus group*]

Participant C: Gay and lesbian Arabs need to progress within themselves. They need to become a bit stronger and defending themselves. And until each individual starts taking control of their lives and pushing those boundaries further, that's the only way that I think. Other people might see what's going on. [*Women's focus group*]

However some participants spoke about the risks to individuals who take a public role in speaking out, suggesting there may be a need to protect and support them from physical and emotional violence.

Others noted that the place to start speaking out

about the issue may be within the community and welfare sector, and within Arab community organisations. However it was admitted that even these sectors and organisations may be apprehensive to discuss the issues at first.

8.1.4 Culture and arts

A few participants wanted to see cultural programs that built community capacity and fostered creative voices from within the GLBTQ Arab community.

Arts expression opportunities – our culture is infused with Arts. An opportunity to express our cultural art traditions e.g. dance, music, drama. [20 – 24 years, gay man, survey respondent]

8.1.5 Addressing racism and racial exclusion

Apart from services targeting homophobia and supporting SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, participants felt that there was a need to redress a sense of exclusion based on ethnicity and race.

Unless organisations [sic] lose their whiteness, and to do that they have to give up some power, they can't respond to the real issues, because the real issues are the ones no one really wants to address. You can't address homophobia without addressing racism at the same time. [40 – 44 years, queer woman, survey respondent]

One participant highlighted the need for more diverse representations in the GLBTQ media that were not restricted to a 'white anglo [sic] image of gays'. Another participant spoke about feeling 'stuck in different parts of Sydney' as a result of having a cultural and sexual identity that did not find a space to freely mix:

*I actually don't think it's just an issue of sexuality as well. I think it's something in the wider Australian population. Like, it's so hard to be an Arab these days in Sydney. After Cronulla, [...] And I think it's just so... if we were to feel at home in our community, we also have to feel at home in the wider community. [...] Because I just feel like bits of me are just stuck in different parts of Sydney, which don't necessarily share each other. [*Men's focus group*]*

Other participants said cultural diversity awareness needed to be fostered within GLBTQ community organisations.

8.1.6 Wider social and legal discrimination

Participants noted that discrimination was also experienced in a wider sense, beyond Arab communities and families. They suggested that improvements to the lives of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds would also require broader legal and social change within Australian society.

8.2 Summary of findings

Most consultation participants supported a list of initiatives to address certain issues for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in NSW. It was also noted that the importance of strategies including partnerships with individuals and organisations would require a long term commitment.

The importance of a 'grassroots' public education campaign in Arab communities, including dispelling myths and misconceptions about homosexuality, was the most commonly supported initiative. However a few community and welfare workers, and community leaders, were concerned about the potential for a public education campaign to further stigmatise Arab communities.

A range of support options for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and their families were suggested. The most common were support groups for GLQ people and families, and information on the internet. Counselling, resources and a 'coming out' group were also considered important.

Other suggestions included supporting people to speak out as role models within Arab communities, supporting cultural and artistic endeavours by SSA people in Arab communities, and addressing wider social and legal discrimination.

PART THREE: NEXT STEPS

الإنسانية
support
الجالية
safety & security
المحبة
الثبات
community
الدعم
resilience
المجتمع
humanity
الاحترام
الانتماء
friendship
الأمل
courage & strength
الشجاعة
respect
المشاركة
social inclusion
love
السلامة و الأمان
hope
الصدقة
belonging

CHAPTER NINE:

Recommended areas for action

9.1 Background

The recommended areas for action contained in this report have been drafted from a summary document *Collated Record of Individual and Group Input* produced by the NSW Workforce Development Project (WDP) in 2009. They resulted from a joint workshop meeting with this report's Steering Committee (see attached document).

The aims of this Meeting were to:

- use a reflective group process to review the themes and suggestions for action documented in the 'We're Family Too' draft final report;
- explore opportunities to respond to those findings in ways that are feasible and achievable; and
- plan a way forward by generating strategies aimed at reducing the effects of homophobia in Arabic-speaking communities

It was agreed by the Arabic Project Steering Committee that the WDP summary document would be used to finalise considerations/recommendations for 'We're Family Too' and to help set future directions.

9.2 Issues considered in developing the recommended areas for action.

- Cultural and religious appropriateness, relevance and sensitivities are important elements in the development and/or implementation of strategies.
- The report is the result of Arabic-speaking community participation and consultation and it is vital that these principles of community development, engagement and capacity building continue to inform strategies.
- The report is the result of collaborative working partnerships. It is important that a commitment to collaborative partnership practice is maintained across strategies.
- There is currently inadequate service provision for SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.
- There is an invisibility both of SSA/GLBT individuals from Arabic speaking backgrounds and of the community networks supporting

SSA/GLBT people from Arabic speaking backgrounds.

- The potential for people from sexually and gender diverse / GLBT Arabic-speaking backgrounds becoming visible and forging their own identities/initiatives.
- The importance of support from government and non-government organisations, including commitments to support grass roots processes and an understanding of cultural sensitivity.
- The important role of private business (e.g. Arabic media) in supporting the needs of affected communities and community members.
- The value of qualitative data in providing insights through personal accounts such as the complexity of religious values in people's lives.
- The comparative numbers of SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds living in 'GLBT neighbourhoods' may be small.
- The recognition of the need to identify key organisations to progress community engagement and support

9.3 Recommended Areas for Action

9.3.1 Systems

- Consider the possibility of establishing a SSA/GLBT Arabic forum, comprised of government/non-government organisations, community groups, community members and other key stakeholders to identify and implement (via Terms of Reference, Position Statement and Work Plan) evidence based strategies and initiatives.
- Identify approaches, principles and frameworks which inform the implementation of strategies and initiatives such as collaborative partnerships, community development, community cultural development, health promotion, human rights and social justice.

9.3.2 Support / resource development

- Work in partnership to develop culturally and religiously appropriate GLBT support services which focus on holistic health and wellbeing, either as component of existing services or as standalone services.
- Explore opportunities to deliver community cultural development initiatives (community arts) and social events for GLBT Arab people/communities that affirm pride, identity and community (e.g. previous Club Arak or Beit el Hob events).
- Explore the establishment of family support networks sensitive to cultural and religious diversity.
- Explore the potential of the internet to provide information and support for GLBT Arabic people and their families (e.g. via Facebook or existing online forums or networks).
- Investigate the establishment of a GLBT/Arabic referral database (GLBT, Arabic, health, youth, family, support, community, GLBT-friendly services).
- Develop appropriate and relevant resources addressing sexual/gender diversity for Arab community workers in collaboration with Arab community workers.

9.3.3 Capacity building

Build the capacity of networks and organisations (e.g. Beit el Hob / Arab Council / ACON) to work with GLBT Arabic people and communities including:

- advocating for organisational policy or strategic plan development to address the needs and issues faced by GLBT Arabic people
- building leadership of the GLBT Arabic community through training and mentoring
- investigating further research on needs or issues for GLBT Arabic people (health impacts, family relationships, homophobia/violence, or community or cultural needs)

9.3.4 Education and training

Explore opportunities for sexual and gender diversity education and awareness raising (e.g. dialogue with Arab community leaders, engage Arabic/GLBT media, brief media on public education campaigns, utilise the International Day Against Homophobia or Wear it Purple day).

Work with the Multicultural HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C Service (MHAHS) to address misconceptions about HIV/AIDS in the Arabic media and provide appropriate health promotion information.

Provide key Arab groups, services and organisations with regular GLBT health and service information for dissemination among their networks and communities.

In partnership with ACON's Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project and others, develop, adapt and promote culturally appropriate evidence based anti-homophobia initiatives targeting selected Arabic community stakeholders, GLBT Arabic people, GLBT community or others.

Identify both subtle and overt racism and its impact on service provision, community engagement and wellbeing (e.g. exotification, exclusion, belonging, coming out discourses etc), with the aim of increasing and improving social capital, knowledge, awareness, support and services regarding diverse sexualities and genders.

GLBT and Arabic partnerships should be established to:

- develop sexual and gender diversity awareness training for government and non-government organisations working directly with Arabic communities and individuals;
- explore training on cultural sensitivity for key GLBT / Arabic organisations - including working with GLBT Arabic people and communities, delivering better services, challenging racism, and addressing cultural norms, issues and needs;
- develop education and information resources for Arabic people on sexual/gender diversity;
- address racism in the GLBT community, GLBT media and other locations / areas.

FOOTNOTES

1. NSW Attorney General's Department (AGD) (2003) *'You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe': A report on homophobic hostilities and violence against gay men and lesbian in New South Wales*, Sydney: AGD.
2. Although the report originally termed the group 'of Middle-Eastern backgrounds', all the participants were specifically of Arabic-speaking backgrounds: AGD, n1, p.21.
3. AGD, n1, p.22.
4. For example, see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (2004) *Isma'at – Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*, Sydney: HREOC.
5. HREOC, n4, pp.77-84.
6. For example, see Abdessamad Dialmy (2005) 'Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society', *Social Analysis* 49(2): 16-33. See generally Stephen Murray & Will Roscoe (eds) (1997) *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, history and literature*, New York: New York University Press; Joseph Massad (2002) 'Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab world', *Public Culture* 14(2): 361-385; Arno Schmitt & Jehoeda Sofer (eds) (1992) *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies*, New York: Harrington Park Press.
7. For example, see Robert Eichberg (1990) *Coming Out: An act of love*, New York: Plume.
8. Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett (2007) 'Azima ila Hayati – An Invitation in to My Life: Narrative conversations about sexual identity', *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 1: 29-39, pp. 30-32.
9. Randolph Bowers, David Plummer, Pol McCann, Cathryn McConaghy & Lyn Irwin (2006) *How we Manage Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Public Health System: A research report*, School of Health, University of New England and Northern Sydney Central Coast Health, pp. 34-37; Iain Williamson (2000) 'Internalized Homophobia and Health Issues Affecting Lesbians and Gay Men', *Health Education Research: Theory and Practice* 15(1): 97-107, pp. 97-98.
10. Colloquial figure of speech, roughly translating to 'Congratulations to you, may God bless you next'.
11. Due to the complexity of ethnic identities in the Arab world, it is very difficult to ascertain the proportion of the NSW population who identify as 'Arab' (or similar). However, 2006 census data reveals that 2.52 per cent of the NSW population speaks Arabic at home: ABS (2007) *2006 Census of Population and Housing Tables: NSW, language spoken at home by sex (based on usual place of residence)*, cat no. 2068.0, Canberra: ABS; Furthermore, in the 2006 census, 2.23 per cent of the total responses from people indicated Arab, Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Palestinian, Saudi Arabian, Syrian, Tunisian and/or Yemeni ancestry: ABS (2007) *2006 Census of Population and Housing Tables: NSW, ancestry (full classification list) by sex (based on usual place of residence)*, cat no. 2068.0, Canberra: ABS.
12. ABS, 'Sydney, language spoken at home by sex', n11.
13. For example, in the *Private Lives* study (the largest study of GLBTI people in Australia), a survey of 5,462 people included only 21 participants (10 male, 11 female) that indicated Arab ancestry. This was 0.4 per cent of the overall sample: Marian Pitts, Anthony Smith, Anne Mitchell & Sunil Patel (2006) *Private Lives: A report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians*, Melbourne: Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria and Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS). In the largest study on SSA young people in Australia, of the 1,744 responses surveyed, only 0.1 per cent of the participants indicated a North African or Middle Eastern country of birth: Lynne Hillier, Alina Turner & Anne Mitchell (2005) *Writing Themselves In Again: 6 years on – The 2nd national report on the sexuality, health and wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people in Australia*, Melbourne: ARCSHS. Both these sample sizes are well below the estimated proportion of Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds that can be estimated from census statistics.
14. See Garrett Prestage, June Crawford, Jamal Sayed, Daryl Hood & Tania Sorrell (unpublished) *Arabic-Speaking Men Who Have Sex With Men*, Sydney: National Centre in HIV Social Research and National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (draft report); Ghassan Kasssieh (2006) *Bodies in Exile: The stories and experiences of same-sex attracted Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds*, University of Sydney (unpublished honours thesis).
15. See Raina Jardin (2006) 'The Only Queer from a CALD Background': Addressing sexuality, sexual health and homophobia within CALD communities in St George and Sutherland: Sydney, St George Youth Services.
16. AGD, n1, pp.22-23; Kasssieh, n14, pp.28-45, 47-60.
17. AGD, n1, pp.22-23; Kasssieh, n14, pp.69-71.
18. Kasssieh, n14, p.71-72.
19. Kasssieh, n14, pp.50-62.
20. Prestage et al, n14, p.10; AGD, n1, p.23; Kasssieh, n14, pp.74-77.
21. Kasssieh, n14, pp.63-67; 72.
22. Kasssieh, n14, pp.64-67; Jardin, n15, pp.21-22, 24-25, 27-28.
23. Kasssieh, n14, pp.77-78; Jardin, n15, pp.24, 26, 28.
24. See Appendix 1.
25. Including the *Sydney Star Observer*, *SX News* and *LOTL*.
26. Beit el Hob is a Sydney-based social and support group for GLBTQ from Middle Eastern backgrounds.
27. Club Arak is an Arab queer dance party held in Sydney.
28. Fair Day is the largest GLBTQ community fete in Australia, held each year in Sydney's inner west as part of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival.
29. However, one participant who did not state any postcode was included in the sample. This was because the participant indicated being born in Australia. Therefore, the presumption that they were living was felt to be reasonable, particularly as the participant may have preferred to leave the postcode question unanswered for privacy reasons.
30. See Michael Flood & Clive Hamilton (2005) *Mapping Homophobia in Australia*, Australia Institute, <unilife.curtin.edu.au/sexualdiversity/documents/MappingHomophobiaInAustralia.pdf> [Accessed 19 July 2008]. This research shows variations in attitudes to homosexuality are influenced by a range of factors, including gender, age, educational levels, locality and religious affiliation. However, the research did not report on attitudes to homosexuality in relation to cultural or ethnic heritage.
31. AGD, n1, pp.22-23.
32. Not all Arab nations criminalise male and/or female homosexuality, however several do and some prescribe the death penalty as a possible punishment: see Daniel Ottosson (2008) *State-Sponsored Homophobia: A world survey of laws prohibiting same sex activity between consenting adults*, Brussels: International Legal and Gay Association. Available online via <www.ilga.org/statehomophobia/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2008.pdf> [Accessed 1 November 2008].
33. In other words, the 'top' or the person who performs the penetrative role during anal sex.
34. A non-government organisation working for the human rights of GLBT people in Lebanon.
35. HREOC, n4, pp.77-84.
36. Arabic word for the Islamic headress (veil).
37. A Sydney-based social support group for Middle Eastern GLBTQ people, and their friends and family. Beit el Hob used to meet monthly at the Newtown Hotel, Sydney.
38. These findings are supported by previous research which suggests that SSA Australians from Arabic-speaking backgrounds negotiate tensions surrounding their sexual and religious identities by either rejecting their birth faith altogether or reinterpreting key tenants from their faith in more inclusive and affirming ways. Of those who wish to practice their birth faiths as lesbians or gay men from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, very few find a space to do so in conventional religious spaces, such as local churches or mosques within the Arabic community: Kasssieh, n14, pp.72-73.
39. AGD, n1, p. 22.
40. See Table 6.1 in AGD, n1, p.35.
41. Localised colloquial Arabic word for 'grandmother'.
42. Id, for 'grandfather'.
43. AGD, n1, pp.51-52.
44. Kasssieh, n14, pp.69-72.
45. Colloquial Arabic word for 'grandmother'.
46. See Harry Triandis (1990) 'Theoretical Concepts that are Applicable to the Analysis of Ethnocentrism' in R Brislin (ed) *Applied Cross-Cultural Psychology*, New York: Sage, 34-55, p.42; Peter Dodd (1973) 'Family Honor and the Forces of Change in Arab Society', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4: 40-54. See also Unni Wikan (1984) 'Shame and Honour: A contestable pair', *Man* 19(4): 635-652 and Diane Baxter (2007) 'Honor thy Sister: Selfhood, gender, and agency in Palestinian culture', *Anthropological Quarterly* 80(3): 739-776.
47. See Kasssieh, n14.
48. The disclosure-related question asked respondents whom they had disclosed their sexuality to generally, whilst the support-related question asked respondents how supportive people (within the Arabic community) were towards their sexuality. In some cases, the people to whom respondents disclosed may be different to the people the respondent answered the support-related question about. If this occurred, this would result in a data error conflating the reporting of *actual* support after disclosure with the respondents' *perception* of support in lieu of any disclosure.
49. Flood & Hamilton, n30.
50. A water-pipe for smoking flavoured tobacco.
51. 'Sexually-transmitted infection'.
52. 'Exoticification' or the 'fetishisation' of ethnicity, refers to the practice of eroticising, depicting or sexually fantasising about a racial 'other' by attributing stereotypical characteristics (such as demureness, sexual prowess, penis size etc.) on the basis of that person's actual or perceived ethnicity. See also Edward Said (1978) *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage.
53. Gay and lesbian bar in Oxford St, Darlinghurst (Sydney).
54. An ACON program for gay men of Asian background.
55. Support group for SSA young men run by ACON.
56. Gay and lesbian street press.
57. Gay and lesbian community newspaper.

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APPENDIX 1: ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The Effects of Homophobia in Arabic Speaking Communities

Screen 1: Introduction

Survey Background

Thanks for taking the time to fill out this survey. It should take no longer than 15-20 minutes. Your responses are completely confidential and anonymous, including where your response has been sent from.

In 2003 the NSW Attorney General's Department released a report on homophobic violence, *You Shouldn't have to Hide to be Safe*. The report found that violence against gays and lesbians remained at high levels with 56% of respondents reporting an experience of homophobic abuse or violence in the previous 12 months.

A focus group with gays and lesbians of Middle Eastern background found that although participants experienced homophobic abuse from strangers, they focused primarily on homophobia and abuse experienced within their own families and communities.

As a result of this report, the Attorney General's Department of NSW has funded the Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project (ACON) to carry out a project to further understand the experience of homophobia within Arabic speaking communities and seek community views on strategies for change.

The project is being undertaken in partnership with Beit El Hob (House of Love – Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Middle Eastern Group), Bankstown Community Health Service, St George Youth Workers Network (GLYSSN Project), Australian Arabic Communities Council and NSW Multicultural HIV Service.

This survey is part of the community consultation process.

The results of the survey will be used to compile a report consisting of recommendations for addressing homophobia in Arabic speaking communities.

Thanks for your time.

Screen 2: Participants' details

1. Age:

Single response allowed: 15-19; 20-24; 25-29; 30-34; 35-39; 40-44; 45-49; 50-54; 55-60.

2. Gender:

Multiple response allowed: Male; Female; Transgender; Intersex.

3. Sexuality:

Multiple response allowed: Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Heterosexual; Queer; Other (please specify).

4. Language/s spoken at home:

Multiple response allowed: Arabic; English; Other (please specify).

5. Country of birth:

Open response.

6. Cultural identity:

Open response.

7. Religious background:

Open response.

8. Postcode of residence:

Open response.

Screen 3

'Homophobia' describes fear of and/or hostility towards those who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay or queer.

There are many different opinions about homosexuality across different communities in Australia. We wish to ask about attitudes and beliefs concerning homosexuality in Australia.

9. What do you think is the usual attitude towards gays and lesbians in the Arabic community?

Single response allowed: Very hostile; Hostile; Neutral; Supportive; Very supportive.

10. Why is it so?

Open response.

11. How many of the following have you told about your sexuality?

Single response allowed to each table item: Have told; Have told some; Haven't told.

	Have told	Have told some	Haven't told
Mother			
Father			
Siblings			
Extended family			
Doctor			
Counsellor			
Health workers			
Gay, Lesbian, Queer Arabic friends			
School teachers			
Religious leaders			
Work colleagues			
Heterosexual Arabic friends			
Non-Arabic friends			

12. Why is that?

Open response.

13. Have you experienced any of the following because of your sexuality?

Multiple response allowed to each table item: Never; Yes, from people in the Arabic Community; Yes, from people outside the Arabic Community.

	Never	Yes, from people in the Arabic Community	Yes, from people outside the Arabic Community
Rumours spread about you			
Personal insults or verbal abuse			
Been excluded socially or ignored			
Been kicked out of your home			
Been asked to leave a religious site			
Been asked to leave a cultural event			
Threats to 'out' you			
Obscene mail or telephone calls			
Taken to a doctor/religious leader to be 'cured'			
Been pressured to act 'straight'			
Received hate mail			
Been subject to blackmail			
Threat of violence or intimidation			
Physical attack, or other kind of physical violence			
Sexual assault			
Rape			

14. What is your experience being of Arabic background in the gay/lesbian/queer community?

Open response.

Screen 4

15. How often do you experience homophobic discrimination, prejudice, harassment and/or violence within the Arabic community?

Single response allowed: Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; Very often.

16. How supportive of your sexuality are the following members of the Arabic community?

Single response allowed to each table item: Not at all supportive; Rarely supportive; Sometimes supportive; Mostly supportive; Very supportive.

	Not at all supportive	Rarely supportive	Sometimes supportive	Mostly supportive	Very supportive
Mother					
Father					
Siblings					
Extended family					
Doctor					
Counsellor					
Health workers					
Gay, Lesbian, Queer Arabic friends					
School teachers					
Religious leaders					
Work colleagues					
Heterosexual Arabic friends					
Non-Arabic friends					

17. What sort of ideas did you get about gays/lesbians/queers when growing up within the Arabic community?

Single response allowed: Very negative; Negative; Neutral; Positive; Very positive.

18. Where do you think these ideas came from?

Open response.

Screen 5

19. What experience have you had of your sexuality being accepted within the Arabic community?

Open response.

20. What experience of hostility and discrimination from within the Arabic community have you had due to your sexuality?

Open response.

21. Do you feel that gay, lesbian and queer organisations/community (e.g. ACON, New Mardi Gras) respond to issues facing Arabic gays and lesbians?

Single response allowed: Yes; No; Partly.

22. Why?

Open response.

23. Do you feel that general health, welfare and community services respond to issues facing Arabic gays and lesbians?

Single response allowed: Yes; No; Partly.

24. Why?

Open response.

25. What services would you like to see within the Arabic community to help support lesbians/gays/queers?

Multiple response allowed: Coming out groups; Counselling; Support groups for gay, lesbian and queer people; Information on the internet; Family support groups; Resources e.g. booklets, pamphlets; Other (please specify).

Screen 6: Creating positive change

26. How important is it to you to have your sexuality accepted in the Arabic community?

Single response allowed: Very important; Important; Not important.

27. What needs to happen within the Arabic community to improve attitudes towards gays and lesbians?

Open response.

28. In your opinion, who or what can influence the Arabic community to create greater acceptance of lesbians and gays?

Open response.

29. What do you think you can do to help make these changes?

Open response.

APPENDIX 2: COLLATED RECORD OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP INPUT

Arabic Project Meeting

Tuesday 9 December 2008 -- Arab Council Australia, Bankstown

Facilitated by:

Rob Wilkins and Norman Booker

NSW Health Workforce Development Program

Collated Record of Individual and Group Input

*This document is a verbatim record of the feedback generated through activities and discussion among members of the Steering Committee attending the meeting (session outline is attached). It was agreed that this material would now be used to finalise the record of considerations or recommendations included in the **We're Family Too** Report and to set future directions.*

The aims of the Meeting were

- 1. To use a reflective group process to review the themes and suggestions for action documented in the Final draft Report **We're Family Too***
- 2. To explore opportunities to respond to those findings in ways that are feasible and achievable*
- 3. To plan a way forward by generating strategies aimed at reducing the effects of homophobia in Arabic-speaking communities.*

Group members overall comments and observations on the Report

- The Report reaffirms the importance of people from queer Arabic-speaking backgrounds forging our own identities
- It's good to have something written that confirms our own invisibility
- There's inadequate service provision for same sex attracted people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds
- The Report was done within the community, by the community
- There was difficulty in finding same sex attracted networks to participate in the consultations

- Community initiated projects are often quite contained
- The qualitative data in the report is excellent and provides us with useful insight: there's validation of the voice
- The Report highlights the complexity of religious values in people's lives
- The Report highlights that few SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds live in LGBTQ neighbourhoods

Issues to be taken into account if useful activity is to follow on from this Report

- The importance of involvement from the Arabic community
- A need for a genuine understanding of culture and sensitivity
- The need for support from other organisations
- The need to find a home for the project
- The need for grass roots processes supported by organisations
- The use of Arabic media and Arab Council Australia to disseminate the Report

Activities that can usefully be done now in response to this Report

Report Dissemination Activities

- Develop one or two launch ideas
- Launches should be small and targeted, providing information to the media (Arabic) including interviews to get discussions happening in the community
- Take the Report back to SSA Arab community for discussion, creating a forum
- The Report can be a springboard for further / other action such as more research and support groups

Working with the Media

- Use the Arab media to start dialogue around sexuality and diverse sexuality
- Organise briefings for Arab media
- Media campaign in Arabic speaking communities (in Arabic language) regarding sexuality issues including queerness
- Public education in Arabic media and Arabic organisations
- Community and media (e.g. SBS visibility) Consultations, campaigns, resources with community leaders. Grass roots. Creative Arts. Training for and with leaders, health community workers.

Support and Counselling

- Create support services for SSA Arabs and their families
- Focus on health and wellbeing perhaps linked with WHO. Counselling services via the internet, culturally and religious sensitive services, a safe place for people to access through partnerships and collaboration
- Family support groups that offer sensitivity to cultural and religious factors with an acknowledgement of diversity within Arabic religious communities
- Establish a support service specifically for queer Arabs whether auspiced or stand alone. Support services such as counselling and social work, emergency accommodation, safe Spaces

Capacity Building

- Build the capacity of Beit el Hob and other key organisations like (Arab Council / ACON) to continue to increase their reach / role within Arabic communities. Potentially reflected in policy
- Ensure the Beit el Hob are regularly updated with GLBT health and service information for them to disseminate to their networks

Development of Database / Fact Sheets / Resources

- Referral links database with GLBT-friendly Arabic-friendly services to be established in partnerships with GLBT and Arabic organisations –giving SSA Arabs choice of service provision (GLBT community, Arabic community, “mainstream” but friendly services)
- Resources on sexuality for Arab community workers

Cultural Diversity Learning / Training

- Develop key cultural learnings and develop into 1 or ½ day workshop for GLBT social and community organisations on delivering better service to people from Arabic speaking backgrounds
- Adapt existing AVP anti-homophobia programs for cultural appropriateness and deliver to priority Arabic speaking community stakeholders
- Encourage MHAHS to challenge misconceptions about HIV in the Arabic media and provide some health promotion information
- Cultural diversity training as essential part of all GLBT organisations: media, service providers and commercial services. Giving awareness of how subtle and overt racism can pervade service provision e.g. exotification, coming out discourses
- Training on racism for mainstream LGBT community organisations
- Utilise Arabic speaking organisations to speak at ACON peer education workshops and community panels
- “Fun and Esteem” program for queer Arabs
- Offer/develop sexual diversity training for government and non-government organisations working directly with Arabic community and individuals (increase knowledge/awareness / support) Aim to increase social capital re diverse sexualities.

- Training on cultural sensitivity for GLBT organisations including racism, cultural norms, issues, needs
- Training Arabic people about sexual diversity

Cultural forums / events

- Empower SSA Arab community through self created projects (arts, cultural and social based) that reaffirm a sense of self and a sense of community –forging our own GLBTQ Arabic communities (i.e. past events like Club Arak and Beit el Hob events)
- More queer Arab cultural / social events

Process / Ways of working

- Identify key community stakeholders and formulate a ‘united voice’ regarding development [and] implementation of initiatives (i.e. community leaders/ significant voices / key community reps)
- Identify useful approaches which inform developments (e.g. community development, community cultural development, health promotion, human rights, social justice)
- Education that comes through discussion and dialogue with leadership from SSA Arab people and our allies. Including discussion and dialogue with Arab community leaders
- Partnership with Arabic services between GLBT bodies and Arabic organisations
- Commitment to genuine challenge of racism –from individuals to institutions, to acknowledge that homophobia cannot be addressed without addressing racism. Cultural awareness training.
- Challenge racism in the GLBT community and media and community organisations in partnership with local council (especially in the inner west)

Mid term to longer term activities

- Collaborate with other groups seeking “sexual liberation” in Arabic-speaking communities
- Developing wider progressive religious networks for people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds (again to include GLBT organisations, key people)
- Dialogue opportunities with leaders (not sure that this will work at this stage)
- Engage with religious and community leaders re: homophobia and myths about homosexuality
- Potential to piggy-back activities with May 17 International Day of Homophobia

الإنسانية
support
الجالية
safety & security
المحبة
الثبات
community
الدعم
المجتمع
resilience
الانتماء
friendship
الشجاعة
courage & strength
الأمم
respect
المشاركة
social inclusion
السلامة و الأمان
love
الصدافة
hope
belonging

acon

BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY'S
HEALTH & WELLBEING