Public Forum: “Muslim migrants in South Australia: work, immigration and aspirations”

City of Charles Sturt
Cheltenham Community Centre
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As part of the Urbanizing Faith project, the University of South Australia’s International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding hosted a public forum in conjunction with the City of Charles Sturt. The forum was held in the City of Charles Sturt’s Cheltenham Community Centre on Sunday 12 April 2015 from 10:30am – 2:30pm.

Aim
The forum aimed to encourage Muslim immigrants to discuss their settlement matters. The topics of discussions included employment, immigration, housing, education, aged care, volunteering, and legal issues. The fundamental basis for this forum was to build a better understanding between the service providers and the Muslim migrant community, and to contribute towards the development of a resilient and inclusive South Australian society.

Background
South Australia has been an important destination for many immigrants. Adelaide is considered one of Australia’s most environmentally sustainable cities. Its multicultural events, ozAsia festival, art festivals, sports, beaches, national parks give the city a distinct character.

Sometimes immigrants choose to settle in South Australia (SA) because of work opportunities, or because they find it economically feasible to live in a smaller city (compared to the big cities such as Sydney and Melbourne). However, new immigrants often face multiple challenges when settling in a new country. For example, under the immigration visa requirement skilled immigrants are expected to live and work in SA for two years. However, jobs may not be readily available to some new arrivals. Sometimes, depending on their visa status, skilled migrants are unable to move to another state to seek job opportunities. Some immigrants are keen to get information on the availability of council housing but they don’t know where they should turn to.

Some new immigrants may lack proficiency in English. They may not be aware of the services provided by their local councils, such as English language classes or age care facilities, or that legal aid services are available. The services provided by the South Australia Police such as ensuring safety and security to diverse migrant communities are also worth noting. Mosques and Islamic educational institutions and Muslim community leaders also help to facilitate understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. Many services are readily available to the new immigrants through several avenues such as the Department of Social Services and the Migrant Resource Centre, however some migrants are unaware of these services.

Forum participants
About 130 people from many sectors of the community attended this forum. The forum participants included people from the Muslim communities, members from the wider society, service providers, local, state and commonwealth government representatives, non-governmental organisation representatives, researchers and community leaders. The diverse range of Muslims included people from Afghan, Albanian, Algerian, Bangladeshi, Bosnian, Indian, Indonesian, Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Malaysian, Moroccan, Pakistani, Palestinian, South African and Australian heritage. Non-Muslims participants included people from Indian, Malaysian, Lebanese, Liberian, Vietnamese and Australian heritage.
Panel Discussion Session 1

Panel members from left to right: Ms Eugenia Tsoulis AOM, Ms Laila El-Assaad, Ms Kate Muslera, Mr Danny McAteer, Mr Michael Lipzker, Ms Triscia Hogan, Ms Fiona Curnow
Panel Discussion Session 2

Panel members from left to right: Ms Anna Williamson, Ms Shaista Kalaniya, Ms Sobia Hashmi, Imam Ensar Cutahija, Ms Judith Robertson
Panel discussions, Q&A sessions

The panel members described the services of their respective agencies that are available to the migrant community, namely: employment, immigration, housing, education, aged care, volunteering, and legal advice. Panel members representing the Muslim community spoke about their personal experiences, the challenges some Muslims face within the Muslim community and the wider society, and how to move forward while settling in South Australia. They mentioned that Islamophobia in the wider society has increased. For example, visible Muslim women who wear the hijabs (headscarves) can be subjected to vilification by some members of the wider society in public places. The misogynistic acts in the Muslim community were also mentioned. For example, some Muslim women are subjected to intimate partner violence, but their voices remain unheard. Sometimes, these victims also tend to remain silent because they are cautious that they may be marginalised within their community. One of the panel members mentioned that in the employment sector few Australians are successful in their job applications.

Questions from the audience mainly concerned visa issues and employment issues. For example, after fulfilling the skilled bridging visa requirements, when migrants apply for a permanent residency visa, they may face a slow response from the relevant government department. Some migrants with Muslim names have been encountering difficulties in entering the job market. Some audience members also pointed out that it was important that migrants should improve their English language skills. It was also acknowledged that volunteering is an appropriate avenue for acquiring work experience. There were questions on the definition of abuse and violence. For example, if a Muslim woman is attacked on the streets, how would the police consider it: an act of abuse or violence? There were comments/questions that the service providers have been working diligently to provide services to the migrants, particularly to the humanitarian migrants. But when the skilled migrants arrive in Australia there is a vacuum of knowledge regarding the services provided by certain government agencies such as Centre Link, Medicare and so on. So how can this gap be filled? Another question was in regard to possible gateways from high schools. Whether it would be possible to correlate between Islamic organisations and schools to keep pathways open for Muslim youths?

Suggestions by panel members and audiences

- The websites of the service providers have relevant links where migrants can express their concerns. Migrants need to be persistent in their approach.
- New immigrants may need to review their job expectations as they may not necessarily be able to obtain the same standard or level of employment previously held.
- Migrants should upgrade their qualifications through various bridging courses/university degrees to enhance relevant job opportunities.
- If there are limited job opportunities in major cities, it may be beneficial for migrants to relocate to regional areas where increased employment opportunities could be available.
- English language classes are provided by councils and TAFE colleges, and migrants should enrol themselves in these institutions.
- The state schools should provide opportunities of dialogue between the Islamic organisations and Muslim students.
- The Muslim migrant community is relatively young, however aged care services could be extended to the older members of the community if they remain connected with the council services or relevant Muslim organisations.
Muslim women who are assaulted verbally or physically should report to the police station so that the police are aware of the nature of vilification. The police would then patrol around the areas where the incidents have happened.

- The councils should provide Islamically appropriate toilets on its premises with the provision of handheld bidet sprayer.
- Reciprocity between the service providers and consumers is essential for building a cohesive and resilient society.

Priorities

There is a need to look into more provisions for skilled, family and student visa holders. There is a need to looking into equal opportunities for Muslim migrants in the employment sector. There should be awareness among the Muslim community of the benefit of volunteering services. Muslim community should be more proactive in seeking services from relevant agencies. The service providers and the Muslim community should implement and manage these priorities.

Feedback

Positive verbal and written feedback was received from the attendees. One audience member commented, “The seminar was great and I am glad to hear from such a diversified community. Thanks a lot for your continuous effort of image and confidence building session for Muslim community”. Another participant said, “I have taken something with me today. I now know which service provider I should contact when I need any assistance”. Others commented that more regular, similar events will be beneficial to both migrants and service providers. Many audience members expressed their appreciation for the panel members who gave up their Sunday for this forum, and for providing in-depth information both during formal discussions, and informally during the breaks.

Some panel members were also pleased to be a part of the forum which they found it a “very collegiate and collaborative forum”. Some comments included, “It was a terrific day and very valuable for my learning too”; and “Congratulations to you and your team for hosting a well thought out forum”. Our team has “certainly benefited from being involved on Sunday”.

Panel members

The panel members included:

Ms Eugenia Tsoulis, OAM, CEO, Migrant Resource Centre
Ms Laila El-Assaad, Teacher, Islamic College of South Australia
Ms Kate Muslera, Legal Education Officer, Legal Services Commission of South Australia
Mr Danny McAteer, Director, Families, Communities and Settlement, South Australian Office
Mr Michael Lipzker, Director, People Division, Department of Immigration and Border Protection
Ms Triscia Hogan, Australian Government Department of Employment
Ms Fiona Curnow, Regional Manager - Housing SA, Department for Communities and Social Inclusion.
Ms Anna Williamson, Manager Volunteer Services, Volunteering SA&NT Inc
Ms Shaista Kalaniya, Project Manager, Muslim Women’s Association SA
Ms Sobia Hashmi, Pharmacist (appeared on the TV series Dream Australia)
Imam Ensar Cutahija, Adelaide Mosque
Ms Judith Robertson, Diversity Officer, Community Projects Unit, City of Charles Sturt

Chair
Dr Ibrahima Diallo, Lecturer, Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia
Dr David Radford, Senior Research Fellow, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia

Convener/Master of ceremonies
Dr Nahid Afrose Kabir, Senior Research Fellow, International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia

Official Welcome
Professor Riaz Hassan, Director, International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia
Mayor Angela Keneally, Mayor of City of Charles Sturt

Acknowledgements
The International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding in conjunction with the City of Charles Sturt expresses sincere thanks to all attendees at the forum, particularly staff and students on the day who made this forum successful: Mrs Mary Jolly, Ms Andre Khoury-Correa, Mr Mohammed Sulaiman, and Dr Amrita Malhi, and volunteers Mr Mahtab Kabir and Dr Mohammad Kabir. Last but not least, my sincere thanks to Ms Judith Robertson and Mr Laurie McCann of the City of Charles Sturt; without them this forum would not have been possible.
Mayor Angela Keneally, Mayor of Charles Sturt, delivering her Official Welcome Speech
Professor Riaz Hassan, Director, International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, delivering his Official Welcome Speech.
Dr Nahid Afrose Kabir, Master of Ceremonies