

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections

Melbourne—Thursday, 28 May 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

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WITNESSES

Ms Diana Sayed, Chief Executive Officer, and

M.Y., Young Women's Program Coordinator, Australian Muslim Women's Centre
for Human Rights (*both via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing into anti-vilification protections. To the broadcast team, Hansard team, the committee members and secretariat, we are now ready to broadcast. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to the elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who are here today.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Assembly's standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comments repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Also, any deliberate false evidence or misleading evidence to the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded today, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. Can I welcome from the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights Diana Sayed, Chief Executive Officer, and Munira Yusuf, Young Women's Program Coordinator as well. Welcome. You have up to 10 minutes to provide a brief to the committee. It will then be followed by questions by committee members. Thank you.

Ms SAYED: Thank you, Natalie, and thanks to the members of the Legislative Assembly and the Legal and Social Issues Committee for bringing this very pertinent issue to the attention of the reform mechanisms. We would also like to acknowledge that the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights is an organisation of Muslim women leading change in our communities to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia. I would like to acknowledge my colleague who is appearing alongside me here today, Munira Yusuf. Thank you.

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre also acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation, and we acknowledge them as the traditional custodians of the lands on which our centre is located and where we conduct our work. We pay our respect to ancestors and elders past and present, and we are committed to honouring the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas, and their rich contribution to society.

It is important for us to keep that at the forefront of our minds when we are testifying here this morning, because the work that we do recognises that gender, race and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence, particularly against Muslim women, and in the context of an environment of growing Islamophobia. It also recognises that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and before we can even begin to successfully tackle issues within our own communities we must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism and discrimination in all its forms in this country.

So we really welcome this process, and thank you again for inviting us to testify here at the inquiry this morning. I will be as brief as I can. All of the details are in our submission, but I will just give an overview of the enabling environments and a bit of the context in which our submission has been made. I will be the main point of contact for any questions on legalities, and then my colleague Munira Yusuf, who has extensive experience working in community, will talk to you about some of the stories and anecdotal evidence and research that we know firsthand that women experience in the community.

Our submission that is before you now is based on nearly 30 years of experience providing one-to-one support to Muslim women and children and developing and delivering community education, capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift attitudes within Muslim communities. We also work as advocates. We do research and we publish our training and consultation to increase the capacity of the sector to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women particularly. As a leading voice for Muslim women's rights in Australia

we work to challenge the most immediate and pertinent challenges that Muslim women face every day. We promote the rights of Muslim women to enable self-determination, and we recognise the inherent agency that already exists, bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light. AMWCHR, which is our acronym, works with individuals, the community and government to advocate equality within the Australian context, and our submission was designed specifically to contribute greater awareness and understanding of the very unique challenges and barriers facing Muslim women engaging in Australian society and their increased vulnerabilities with the rise of hate and Islamophobia.

So obviously we welcome this inquiry, and we have outlined our recommendations for reform to not only strengthen the legislative framework in Victoria to enable communities to access these mechanisms for redress but we also want to advocate for increased investment in prevention and education programs around community awareness raising as one of the main ways to tackle this issue. It is all good and well to have a legislative framework, but if our communities are not able to access it and those structural barriers continue to exist, it is another form of perpetuating those same levels of discrimination.

So an overview of the problem: as many of you are probably already aware, the dangers of Islamophobia and other forms of racial and religious discrimination and intolerance to Australians are a threat and a danger to Australia's social cohesion and to the ability of all of our citizens to fully belong and enjoy their human rights. It is a very real and very deep concern. Advocacy organisations like ours, the Islamophobia Register and Muslim community members and leaders have long expressed their concerns about the rising trend of Islamophobia in Australia. We as a centre have firsthand accounts of acts of discrimination, vilification and hate as recorded through our community work, with expertise and numerous pieces of research. This includes our own extensive research from 2008 documenting the surge of racism against Muslim communities after the terrorist attacks of September 11 and last year's second Islamophobia report from the Islamophobia Register following on from the Christchurch attacks.

What we do know is gender disparity is in force in both online and offline cases, and this is reflected in both Islamophobia reports. Muslim women continue to be the main targets of offline Islamophobia—that is at 78 per cent—bearing the brunt of public antipathy, including insulting and misogynistic attacks. Muslim women are particularly vulnerable as soft targets, especially in the immediate aftermath of an incident, whether this be global or at home. Women are also targeted more in public spaces, with perpetrators becoming more and increasingly brazen in the current political environment. Racism and Islamophobia are now daily realities of the Australian Muslim woman's experience. It is becoming more pervasive and can be deeply traumatic for individuals who already experience it.

Anti-racism, anti-hate, anti-Islamophobia and human rights initiatives, policies and programs must put at their centre and be informed by the experiences and perspectives of communities who are often targeted by or on the receiving end of human rights breaches. Hateful conduct is on the rise, but it is also going largely unchecked in Australia. And this is not just happening here; it is obviously part of a larger, broader international trend. The atrocity in Christchurch also reignited debates about the extent of right-wing extremism, Islamophobia and race hate as social problems in Australia and the urgent need to re-centre and address these if we are to build strong, socially cohesive communities. Earlier this year we marked the one-year commemoration of the Christchurch massacre, and I am sad to report that we have not made nearly enough progress in alleviating the growing sentiment of hate towards our communities.

The incremental impact of racism on Muslim women's sense of safety, particularly in public spaces, continues to erode their social participation and sense of belonging to Australia. There is widespread concern amongst Australian Muslims that the far right is becoming more vocal in Australia and is getting large platforms; about the specific vulnerability of Muslim women and children, especially women who wear religious dress in public spaces like shopping centres and on public transport; that acts of Islamophobia are on the rise; about the dangers of Australian Muslims engaging with the online world and the Islamophobia they experience; and about the way the public narrative about Australian Muslims in the media and by public figures contributes to Islamophobia and appears to create a licence in the broader community to engage in acts of hate against Muslims. While it is the actions of a small proportion of the Australian community that are harassing and discriminating against Australian Muslims and other minority groups, there are broader divisive narratives and systemic injustices that are involved in magnifying these actions and allowing them traction.

So the analysis that we provided in our submission talks about the context of the low reporting for vilification. I am sure you guys have been briefed. We have worked alongside the Human Rights Law Centre and legal barristers around what exactly we want to see in the reform process. We know that under the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* there have been few complaints of racial vilification, only two successful cases before VCAT and only one prosecution of serious vilification by Victoria Police. This is in no circumstances indicative of the prevalence of the rate of racism and Islamophobia that women experience in Victoria. There is a lack of awareness of the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*—the RRTA, as I will refer to it going forward—and its operation among certain sections of the Australian community, particularly CALD communities, culturally and linguistically diverse, as there are other structural barriers around language, literacy and ability to access these complaints mechanisms.

We know that hateful conduct is harmful and contrary to our democratic principles. It reduces a person's or a group of persons' ability to contribute to or fully participate in society as equals and diminishes their dignity and sense of self-worth and belonging to the broader community. Hateful conduct can, however, be addressed through education, prevention strategies and best practice laws that are accessible to affected people and communities to hold those individual perpetrators to account. This inquiry essentially creates a unique opportunity for the Victorian government to enact best practice anti-hate laws that promote a diverse, safe and harmonious community that will stop hate in its tracks and will create a socially inclusive and cohesive society—not just for a select few. So this submission, as it is before you, argues that Victoria's current laws are deficient and addresses what best practice laws should ideally look like. It is only through a coordinated community response that we can effectively embed the respectful behaviours that underpin community cohesion. We cannot say that we have a free and equal Australian society while people in our community do not feel safe in expressing their full identities. The law has a critical role to play in preventing and addressing hateful conduct and is an important tool that should complement education and early intervention strategies to stop hateful conduct occurring in the first instance. As set out in our submission, the current legal framework is not working.

I am not sure how much more time I have, but as you can see, our recommendations are all outlined in there. I will just in brief talk about the recommendations, and we can talk about them more in depth. Our recommendations are essentially: expanded best practice anti-hate laws that extend beyond vilification and include expanded lists of protected attributes to include race, religious belief or activity, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, HIV/AIDS status and disability; enacting a better civil test for vilification; enacting a new harm-based test; enacting a better criminal test for serious vilification; and expanding the definition of conduct.

Obviously intersectionality is a really, really large part of what we would like to be advocating in terms of all the overlapping various attributes that present, and people who experience vilification based on more than one attribute are uniquely disadvantaged and should be able to complain about that conduct on the basis of their intersectional experience. So, for example, a Muslim woman who is subjected to vilifying conduct targeted at her because she is a Muslim and identifies as a woman of colour or she has other different attributes — disabilities or LGBTIQI—should not have to be limited to bringing one complaint.

So essentially we can go more into the details around the best practice laws to prevent hate, and our submission proposes all of this—enacting a better civil test for civil vilification, enacting new protections against hateful conduct based on a harm-based civil test, enacting a better criminal test for serious vilification. We would like to propose a new criminal offence of prohibiting conduct that is intended or is reasonably likely to cause a person to have reasonable fear for their safety or security of property, and expanding the definition of 'conduct' as previously mentioned.

We would also like to advocate to change the name of the Act. If there is to be a standalone Act, the current name of the Act, the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, needs to be changed to remove 'tolerance' from its title. In order to address the increasing levels of hateful conduct we need to move past the rhetoric where we simply tolerate the existence of others and instead promote respect for, understanding, acceptance and ultimately the celebration of diversity.

There is a whole list of recommendations there around codesigning, working very closely with the Muslim community, especially women, to support, strengthen and develop anti-racism education programs. We want to consult, engage and collaborate with those women directly affected and not overly rely on religious leaders, for

example, to help frame the issue. We need to create much more concrete tools that empower Muslim women to report incidents when they occur. This has been the biggest issue, in that reporting is really low, and also those mechanisms to report are really inaccessible. People do not even know about it as a first port of call, and then how do they actually do it? There are just different levels of barriers that women experience in being able to report. So we do not have a really helpful picture of how extensive this issue ever really is.

Obviously additional resources into community-led services to deal with racism experienced, support programs, community awareness strategies. Training for police obviously is important. Capacity building, counselling and support services for those women—and there is a whole list that has already been included in our submission.

So I open up the floor to members if they would like to ask any questions about our submission. Please keep in mind that I am the person to call on for any of the questions on the legal tests. My colleague Munira will also take some time to highlight some of the more personal, anecdotal stories of the experiences of Muslim women in our community.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Diana, for that extensive presentation, and thank you for the work that your organisation does.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you both for coming and appearing today. That was terrific. There are two issues that I would like to mention. Firstly, online vilification, if I can take you to that point of your submission: how big an issue do you see is online vilification? You referred to liability being extended to corporations. How do you see that? That is the first point.

Ms SAYED: Would you like me to answer them—

Mr NEWBURY: If you would not mind, yes, because the second one goes to the prevention area. So I will let you go to that, if you do not mind.

Ms SAYED: No worries. Thank you, James. This is a really good question. We were looking at the federal level to see what means of redress were being enacted by the federal government given, obviously, corporates operate throughout Australia. The stats are pretty alarming on the online vilification forms for women and women of colour. Amnesty International conducted an extensive research report over two years looking at a platform like Twitter, for example—one example, and obviously a large multinational corporate—and looked at the experiences of women on that social media platform of hate speech, vilification and the different attributes that were being targeted specifically. It showed how pervasive that hate speech and abuse was directed towards people with certain attributes, and the highest rate of hate speech on the platform was directed at black women, for example. They were the most targeted. They were receiving death threats. They were having experiences of doxxing, where their personal information and privacy were being breached.

Overall what ended up happening was that over a large amount of time and the prevalence of this, because it was supposed to be a free and equal space—and this was before Jack Dorsey, the CEO, created a mute, a block and a reporting button and there was no transparency into how those people who were reporting were being addressed, so he created all these other mechanisms and removed a lot of the emails. For example, if you were a user and you did not have a link to an email account that could be verified, you were immediately removed. These were before these mechanisms were put in place.

What the research showed was overall it had a silencing effect on women. They removed themselves from the platform, they removed their accounts and then they just stopped engaging in public narrative, and so those voices were lost essentially. So corporates absolutely in the age of social media, as we have seen right now the tech companies have gained a huge amount of influence in our day-to-day lives, but they have a massive responsibility to ensure that their spaces that they provide—the platforms—create a safe and equal space for all to engage in, whether that is creating mechanisms for reporting to be not just an algorithm but there are actually people there who are looking at those individual reports and taking down hateful conduct and speech, and that they are not pandering to right-wing extremism because of unconscious biases that exist within the internet. We know that the internet is skewed against people of colour. So these are all the sorts of mechanisms that the corporates have to be held accountable for, and whether it is the approach we take in New Zealand or whether we create our own framework, it has to actually start to recognise that corporates have a massive role to play in

the information that people are fed and the misinformation that they are given as well that spurs on and can amount to incitement of minority communities, absolutely.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you for that. I do want you to know that I think this is a really important issue and the idea that you can be compelled to provide your identity in the street if you behave in this way but not online I think is a real concern. My personal view is that that is something that needs to be looked at very, very strongly. The second issue—just a small little one on the prevention: you mentioned the idea of creating a Muslim survival kit, which sounded really novel, and I just would not mind hearing a bit more about what you think that kit would entail.

Ms SAYED: Yes, sure. Thanks, James. This is sort of going beyond some of the rhetoric that we hear from different government agencies and other online programs around communities building resilience, for example. Like, we need to actually go beyond that. It is not really up to us to build resilience around the discrimination and hate that we experience. That is not our burden to bear. We should not have to have an enabling environment that normalises that sort of behaviour. However, there is a current enabling environment that does embolden hate speech, Islamophobia and racism, so what we want are very specific ways to identify, for women to understand and have the language and the vocabulary to understand what is happening to them and to understand what their recourse for redress is. So very clearly outlining, ‘If you have experienced X, you can go and do X’, outlining counselling services—and that is trauma-informed for our communities because we also represent migrant and refugee communities who are already experiencing trauma.

Some of them have come from conflict countries and have been displaced, so this also triggers another level of trauma for them. And so, you know, that also plays—it is a very complex way that people have experienced trauma in Australia. But it would be a very sort of concrete way that we would teach women, work with them and sort of create narrative and language around their experiences. Otherwise they do feel that it is, you know, normal. They reduce it, they minimise it. They are just supposed to be grateful to be in Australia, rather than actually questioning their experiences. So this is really about, like, actually building a bit of capacity and building confidence, really, to tackle the issue at a systemic level.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Ms SAYED: Is it possible to also just go to my colleague Munira as well? She has some great insights and has worked extensively in the community, doing some really, you know, frontline work with young Muslim women. I think that we talk about it in a frame of like, you know, mothers and others on public transport even when they are with their children, but what effect does Islamophobia have on those children coming up, who were born in Australia, who are part of our mainstream society, and the way that they internalise Islamophobia and racism and that sense of belonging? I think it is an angle and a dimension that often gets overlooked and I think it is important that Munira actually gets an opportunity to highlight that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Diana. Munira, we are more than happy to hear that perspective.

M.Y.: Thank you. I think a lot of what the community experiences has been covered by Diana in terms of the more structural impacts. I think the issue for a lot of young Muslims is in terms of engaging with the broader community, the broader Australian community, and the fear that is created by, you know, the hatred that they experience in school, in workplaces, out in public et cetera.

I have just got a couple of incidents that I think would illustrate some of what Diana was saying around intersectionality in particular with African Muslims, given all of the conversation that was happening around Africans and whether Africans belong in Australia, and in particular in Victoria and Melbourne. We conducted several different conversations around Islamophobia with young people and in a lot of those conversations young African Muslims were saying that the level of Islamophobia that they faced was difficult to identify because it was mixed with racism due to their skin colour, so due to them being African. And a lot of the young women in particular who wore hijab or who were covered were experiencing difficulties in understanding whether the racism was due to their skin colour or due to their religion. I think that that creates a really massive barrier for young people in reporting incidents of discrimination and racism. It also creates a barrier in them being able to identify whether an issue is because of vilification or is it because of an isolated incident of discrimination.

So we have had young girls tell us that, you know, they were stopped numerous times on a road trip to the country by police and had their cars searched twice on one trip, so one 2-hour drive, and were asked to leave the vehicle and police searched their cars. And the young women did not even realise that this was an incident of discrimination or that they, you know, had powers as well to ask the police about what it was that they had done wrong or what it was that the police were looking for. There are a lot of power imbalances happening within the community, where the young people are told by their families and by the broader Muslim community to not question, to not say anything. You know, what Diana was saying around being grateful to be in Australia—you know, 'You're in a safe place, just lay low, do what you need to do and don't question anything'.

There is another incident in a regional town where young Muslim women in different schools were told that they were not able to get a job in certain places. The managers of those restaurants and fast-food places and retail places were telling them that they just could not risk having someone in a hijab working in a front-facing customer service position. These girls could see that this sort of fear was being filtered through the whole community—so having mums run off the road with cars, having their mums accused of shoplifting when the Muslim women's centre had given them gift cards to use at Coles, and also being threatened to be drowned during swimming lessons at school by their peers. And when they report these incidents teachers just see it as bullying rather than discrimination or racism.

So there is a broader conversation happening within young people around: how much do they internalise versus how much do they see it as a problem within Australian society? I think for a lot of young people there is that internalisation, but for a growing number of young people they are starting to see the links between their identity, the way politicians and public figures speak about their identity and then the way that the community reacts to them. I think I will leave it there and I would be happy to share any more incidents if you would like.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Munira.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both for your submission and your time today; we really appreciate it. Just on the school side of things that we have just heard, for young women and children—and you have given a couple of examples of what the community have experienced—is this widespread or does it tend to be more in, you mentioned, the rural community? And what is the answer to dealing with that, in your opinion?

M.Y.: I might take the 'widespread' conversation and then maybe Diana can talk about the way to deal with it. Yes, it is absolutely widespread. I only gave the incident of the regional town because there were several different incidents in that regional town. Often with regional town centres when a large group of new migrants are settled there you see a spike in discrimination or racism, but that is not to say that it does not exist in urban cities. Often a lot of our work happens in the city of Melbourne or other city councils in Melbourne and the rates there are just as high. For example, schools in Kensington: there is a school in Kensington that we were working with that had several incidents of racism—and very, very subtle racism—towards African Muslim girls. Even though they were quite high achieving, they were told that there was no point in them trying to get into university because their families just would not allow that.

There is no evidence for these sort of claims but for young people, and for teenagers in particular, hearing those things from teachers or hearing those things from school counsellors can be incredibly damaging for a long time. We have had teachers in schools in Melbourne who have told students that they should not be offended by some of the slurs that students call them because they just need to distance themselves from that rather than actually dealing with the issue of discrimination happening within the school. The rates of discrimination from teachers themselves or administration at schools is quite high as well, and I think that there is a growing number of young people who are starting to recognise—and especially from the work that our agency does as well as other not-for-profits who are going to schools and educating young people about what these types of discrimination are and all of that—and realise that this is not something that they need to stay quiet about and so are reporting that to us and to other agencies.

The problem is that they are unable to report that to the school themselves, which is where I think there just needs to be a lot better management around some of these conversations within schools when young people go to teachers to report. We have had a school actually where a group of 20 young people wanted to report different incidents of discrimination, and the school basically put them through so many administrative barriers that the students pulled out and said, 'We're almost in year 12; we just want to leave. We just want to get

through our schooling and leave, and we don't actually care that much'. And that is something that I think is becoming more and more of an issue, that young people are recognising it and wanting to report it but then the reporting mechanisms are not there to support them.

Ms COUZENS: So do you think there is a need for an independent complaints system, then, if it is not working in the schools?

M.Y.: Yes, absolutely, and I think more of a youth-centred approach—so not necessarily an approach for everyone. I think the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission have really great reporting mechanisms, but the problem is that for young people those sorts of mechanisms do not necessarily work for them. So I think having a lot of youth workers—a lot of youth justice workers especially—who are supporting that reporting, learning from them and seeing how it is that that is sustained, how it is that young people are taken through that whole process. What works for young people will be very different to what works for broader community.

Ms COUZENS: And do you have a view around complaints and the police response and how that impacts?

M.Y.: Yes, we have had a lot of young people who have talked to us about police and the discrimination that happens towards their communities from police. I think initially the police sound like a really great place to report especially incidents of violent discrimination, but when a community has faced several different incidents of discrimination from police themselves, going to police is not a viable option. So I think for a lot of communities there is quite a lot of mistrust in police. We have had an incident where police have told young women that they just needed to ignore what was happening to them on trains. This was after the Sydney incident at Lindt Cafe, when young girls were having their hijabs pulled off on trains, and police told them to just ignore it. So there is that sort of level of complacency from police around these issues, and young people are just not seeing the police as a viable option.

And then lots of young men's experience with police is also incredibly, I guess, disjointed, not necessarily having a really great view of police or what police can do for them. I know there are lots of different places that work with young people around their relationship with police, but often what we hear from community is that they are facing discrimination from police, so how do they then go to police to report it? So yes, I think that that may not be the best option for our community.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. Diana, did you want to say anything about that as well?

Ms SAYED: Munira is highly well versed in this area, so she has covered it quite extensively. I just wanted to add that schools are not necessarily a safe space from what happens in Australian society; you do not all of a sudden go into a school environment and you are safe. This is about a broader education strategy for teachers, principals, social workers in schools, guidance counsellors—people who inherently carry these unconscious biases because of what is happening in larger society and the context. They are not immune to the media. They are not immune to other prejudices that play out from the political leadership or lack thereof. These are the sorts of enabling environments that filter down through parents, that filter down through teachers, and inherently the children and our future generations are internalising these beliefs, and it feeds into their lack of self-worth and confidence.

They disengage from the system, they do not really even finish high school or others and it is very limiting to their ability to aspire to more in life. Our community already experiences an incredible trust deficit with the police around surveillance, what we are seeing around the terrorism narrative; we have had forced child removals from homes—all of this sort of extensive surveillance on our communities. So there is already a trust deficit with those enforcement agencies.

How do we rebuild those relationships? I really do feel that there is a massive opportunity, that whatever reforms are enacted through this inquiry process, there is a larger piece at play around education and awareness raising, and it starts with children in schools. Our centre does a lot of that capacity building. We work with young children who are experiencing Islamophobia. We work with the parents to help them have the vocabulary and the tools to have conversations with their children about their experiences of Islamophobia and racism, because, yes, it feeds into a lot of complexities around being grateful to be in Australia and so they minimise their children's experiences of bullying in the playground, but these actually have real, long-term impacts on them throughout their journey into adulthood. So these are the sorts of things that we have to

address early. There are early prevention programs. We have been in this space for nearly 30 years, and we have such amazing staff on hand from the community, leading change in our own community. We just need that sort of resourcing to drive that change, because we have the solutions from the extensive years that we have been working with community. So we just need to be resourced to do that work.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you very much, Diana and Munira—it was a great presentation. I wanted to ask a couple of things: firstly, just on the numbers—you mentioned the Islamophobia report in 2017—whether there has been any further work since 2017, whether the numbers are on the increase or we are seeing kind of a levelling. I think on page 4 of the report it mentions specific numbers of attacks and assaults and what have you on the community. Are they state-based numbers or are they federal numbers—national numbers—and how does Victoria line up compared to the other states? Sorry, there is a bit in there.

Ms SAYED: Thank you, David. Just so I know, you want to know about if we have anything more recent than the Islamophobia report from 2017, and then you want to know if it has levelled out in the last year and if the data is disaggregated for Victoria specifically.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes, and how does Victoria line up compared to the other states?

Ms SAYED: Yes; sure. To your first question, the Islamophobia register is nationwide. It is a call-in service. People can do it anonymously, people can send in their experiences online as well and it is all captured there. Some of it is anonymous, so we do not necessarily have disaggregated data. I also do not oversee the Islamophobia register—that is a separate entity. I know Mariam Veiszadeh, who started it.

To be honest, I do not think it has levelled out at all. I think that following the Christchurch attack we actually as a centre experienced a spike in the threats that we were receiving and we had to remove our online presence—we had to remove our social media, we took our address offline. We were receiving phone calls of death threats to our phone line. So I absolutely do not think it has levelled out at all. I think that we have as a community been warning elected leaders and others in the community that an attack like Christchurch was inevitable given all the heightened race baiting, dog whistling and rhetoric that we were seeing in Parliament that was creating an enabling environment and emboldening people to come out much more on the streets and on public transport with their hate speech and offensive conduct.

So I absolutely do not think it has been levelled out at all. Victoria specifically—I do not think that Victoria is immune at all. I think that the rhetoric from the federal government has real impacts here in Victoria, and the current government's stance and tough position on policing does not help that narrative, particularly when it comes to, you know, so-called—quote, unquote—'African gangs'. I think communities really do not feel safer with policing and that sort of rhetoric, particularly when communities are occupying public spaces. People are often retreating, particularly Muslim women; they have to make calculated risks about what spaces they go into and they often will just retreat from public life altogether because they are just safer in their homes. And this was in a pre-COVID context that women were actually saying that to us—that it was just not really safe for them to go into different spaces. So they were always measuring what risks they would face, even when they were going to shopping centres et cetera. So I do not think that Victoria is immune at all. What we do need is much more research done into this space to understand the extent of how pervasive this issue is within our communities.

Mr SOUTHWICK: That is terrific. This is probably also for Munira, in terms of her experience. Particularly around some of the policing that you mentioned before—and picking up the last point, Diana, that you raised—I know that there is a multicultural advisory unit that the police have that is meant to work with Muslim and African communities and other communities as well, and I know that years ago there was really a lot of targeted work around this. I am just trying to understand whether that is working, whether that is enough. If you were the police commissioner for a day, what would you do to that space? Obviously we are seeing more Muslim men and women being recruited into the police force, but is there something that we could do within the police force itself to build that bridge of trust that currently is not there, as you said?

M.Y.: I am probably not the best person around solutions. I think it is just not necessarily where my mind is at times. There is a lot of response to community, as you can imagine, and I have not really thought a lot about what police could do better. I think the multicultural liaison officers and those sections of the police are doing the best that they can. The problem is that those who are in those positions are not policing the

community, and so they are not the police that are out in the community. I live in Heidelberg West, which is a largely African-Somali community, and the amount of times that I have been stopped in my little Suzuki—the amount of times that mums who are driving their mum van have been stopped by police; there is just something that police officers see as inherently criminal about Africans and about black people, and then that becomes even more exacerbated when you are wearing a hijab or when they can see that your name is Muslim. So I think that there is a disconnect between the multicultural liaison officers and those who are policing different communities. Having Muslim police officers join the force—I am not really sure whether we have seen that work in other countries or in other places. You are entering an industry that you are a minority in, so will the pressures to fit in override those [inaudible] about a community? I think that that is a conversation that probably is not for me to have, and Flemington & Kensington Community Legal Centre will probably be able to answer some of those questions a lot better around police. But we just have not seen that work in other countries—in the UK and in Canada, for example. Having more police of colour just does not necessarily seem to equate to more just policing.

The other thing, I think, with communities of colour and police is that there has been a really long history of this in Australia with Aboriginal communities and police, and so it is not that we are coming into this and we are the first communities that police have been hostile towards. So, yes, I think that this conversation or this problem is such a long one in Australia's history that needs to really have some real conversations around it. And, yes, I have not really thought about what the solutions would look like.

Mr SOUTHWICK: No, you have done very well. Thanks, Munira. That is great. Diana, did you have anything to add on that?

Ms SAYED: No, I think that that is incredibly important knowledge to always keep front of mind. As my acknowledgement highlighted, our communities and the experiences that we have, whether it is with policing or different government agencies and the inherent trust deficit that we have experienced, this is because of a long historical arc of this country on stolen land. So unless we really address that very real systemic issue with First Nations people we cannot begin to tackle the experiences that our community faces, which pale in comparison. So I think that is a really important point for the committee to keep front and centre of mind.

The CHAIR: Can I thank you both for being here. As you can see, there have been some extensive questions, and we could go on with this. But thank you for all the work that you do, Diana and Munira. It has been an absolute pleasure to have you here to present to us. Just a comment that I would like to make: this is very challenging; there is no doubt about it. It is not just Victoria or national; this is global when it comes to Islamophobia, and we definitely have seen an absolute increase in the attacks towards the Muslim community after the Christchurch attack. But our next steps will be that we will continue on with our public hearings and receiving submissions. The committee will then deliberate on those submissions. On behalf of the committee, we will be presenting a very strong report and recommendations to the government on this absolutely important issue. So thank you again.

Ms SAYED: Thank you so much for all of your focus on this issue. We really appreciate it. Thank you.

M.Y.: Yes, thank you so much.

Witnesses withdrew.