

Women Helping Women

Organisations Involved & Contact Details

Organisation: Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association and The Smith Family/VIEW Clubs of Australia

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Aims & Target Group

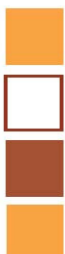
Aim: The aim of the Women Helping Women initiative was to create an intimate relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim women in the Arncliffe/St George area, based on English language learning classes. Other objectives of the project were to help Muslim migrant women achieve proficiency in their written and spoken English language so that they could better communicate with different structures of society; improve their chances of employability; and better communicate with non-Muslim-Australian women enabling them to better inform non-Muslim women about their culture and religion, dispel myths about Islam, and build relationships between the two groups.

Target group: Australian-Muslim women and primarily Anglo-Australian retired or semi retired women teachers who were volunteers of the Smith Family's VIEW (Voice Interest and Education of Women) Program.

Project Description & Components

Once a week on Thursday, the women meet for an English language class, with material developed by the teachers to reflect the topics most important to the students. During the class, the students learnt basic English skills so that they can communicate in English rather than just in their mother tongue. However an important feature is the emphasis on friendships, building bridges across difference, and social interaction. Most of the teacher volunteers are from the Maroubra, St George and Sutherland Shire region and participated as a response to the Cronulla riots.

The other component of the project was to conduct cross cultural training for VIEW Club members in the city office of the Smith Family on multiculturalism, Islam, being a Muslim in Australia and working with Muslim clients.





Process

The process began with an initial meeting between VIEW Clubs of Australia and AZMWA representatives to discuss the issues and concerns of the local Muslim women and how VIEW can help. A steering committee was set up with representatives from the Smith Family, VIEW Clubs of Australia and Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association to plan, coordinate, implement and evaluate the project.

Outcomes

The success of the project is manifested in the fact that both Muslim-Australian women as students and Anglo-Celtic Australian women as teachers were able not only to achieve the set objectives of the project but to transcend these by developing a good relationship with one another. This project created a venue, as well as, the opportunity to learn about each other at a more personal level and about cultural values and norms. Mostly the social interaction occurred around discussions of an everyday nature.

The initiative created empathy among the Anglo-Celtic women volunteers with regard to the Muslim-Australian women's experiences of migration, settlement and racism.

The relaxed environment of the classroom provided a lightly structured means through which relationships could be built. Overall the atmosphere was reported as light hearted and positive and all participants seemed to gain a great deal of pleasure from the encounters.

But I guess the relationships that developed, you know like some of the women were just such a hoot you know, they were such fun and you know really good entertainment ... fairly confident saying that their social skills and their level of comfort in coming to a place and working with other women and different women, was probably a positive one.

The Anglo-Australian volunteer women felt good about their contribution in that they felt they had skills to offer the Muslim-Australian women.

The volunteers spoke of their involvement as 'life changing' and felt that the experience had enlightened them in many ways about what it means to live as a Muslim-Australian today. There was a definite 'de-centering' of previously ethnocentric views, even where the women reported their views as being fairly open to begin with.

The Muslim-Australian women felt a sense of satisfaction in helping to change attitudes towards Muslims through contact with the teachers, and indirectly, having an impact upon the attitudes of the teachers friends.

Everyone's open together, and we talk about what's happened, why they say bad things about Muslims. She says, 'I know.' She knows some people who ask her, 'Why are you talking to Muslims? Why do you have a relationship with them? It's not good. They're no good.' She





says, *'No, I know them very well. They are very friendly and very good. It's not like what you think about them.'*

The Muslim Australian women spoke of the environment as being like a 'second home'. This is an important achievement as this was one of the few places outside their own homes that these women felt comfortable to come to.

Challenges & Obstacles

A key challenge in terms of really changing hearts and minds where it counts is for the Smith Family's VIEW Club to be able to recruit a wider cross-section of Anglo-Celtic Australian women, particularly those from lower middle and working class backgrounds. The participants, as former teachers, were overwhelmingly middle class and had fairly open views about Islam and multiculturalism to begin with. Although there was some shift in views, the attitudinal change was less marked than if the volunteer group had a broader representative base. Should the organisation seek out a broader volunteer base, this will need to be carefully managed and mediated. The only negative report on this study related to one such teacher who had her own prejudices about Islam and was not particularly open to having these challenged. The Muslim-Australian women in the end asked that they be allocated a different teacher.

Significant challenges to the continuation of this program include funding issues as it relies solely on funding from the Smith Family.

Funding

Smith Family through its VIEW (Voice Interest and Education of Women Program)



