

Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins

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Ageing in Muslim Communities, by Hayat Doughan

Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Project Coordinator
Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria
M: 0478 217 956
E: hdoughan@eccv.org.au

"One way of showing highness to Allah is to honour the elderly Muslim"
Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him

The teaching of Islam preaches honour and respect for older people and holds parents and grandparents in the highest esteem. Built on the tenets of care, dignity, compassion and kindness, Muslims are called upon to look after the ageing members of their families and communities.

Islam does not consider the elderly as burdens on society but rather it recognises their past and continuing contributions to society and seeks to repay them by acknowledging the special status they deserve. The process of ageing itself is considered a blessing, a time for inner growth and introspection on the journey back to spiritual purity.

According to the 2021 Census, over 800,000 people in Australia identified as Muslim, an increase to 3.2% of the population from 2.6% in 2016. The Muslim diaspora in Australia is one of the most diverse representing numerous ethnicities, cultures, languages, and Islamic traditions.

On coming to Australia, Muslim migrants bring with them their many cultures and beliefs. Like many other migrant and refugees, in the beginning they experience cultural shock eventually adapting to their new lifestyle and accepting the changes

that come with moving to a new country. In this they can face many challenges whilst still trying to hang on to their cultural and religious beliefs.

Older people from Muslim backgrounds have many things in common with other communities from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Apart from sharing their migrant or refugee experience, many share the traumas caused by war or oppression and discrimination. The hardships brought on by these experiences can significantly impact peoples' health and wellbeing causing older people to become more vulnerable, and more dependent on their family members for support.

There are also other issues that can impact on their vulnerability such as language barriers, lack of information about Australian systems and services and lack of health and digital literacy.

For older Muslims however, these issues can be further compounded by the fact that there are many misconceptions regarding Islam and preconceptions about Muslims which may influence the way others in the community interact with them. It is critical that service providers are mindful of the issues that may be affecting an older Muslim person, be open to understanding their experiences and needs, and ensure they are providing services which are culturally appropriate and inclusive.

The culture of respect and dignity of older people practised among Muslims can be challenging to maintain in the Australian context. Even though 'raising your voice higher than the older person is considered very disrespectful' or 'placing a parent in aged care is seen as unacceptable' these ideas can be hard to hold onto as younger generations adapt to different concepts, values and societal expectations. As such, first generation Muslims may find it hard to understand the change in their children's attitudes, and the second generation may not comprehend the high demand for respect toward their elders.

Unfortunately, sometimes these changing dynamics can cause friction with families and, in the worst-case scenarios, can lead to elder abuse.

Elder abuse takes various forms and although physical abuse does not appear to be common in the Muslim community, other forms of abuse such as neglect, social isolation, gender driven abuse, financial, emotional, and physical abuse are becoming more common.

For newly emerging communities there is another type of abuse known as 'Visa abuse' that is when children who sponsor their parents control them by threatening to cancel their Visa and send them back home. Other types of abuse can be stopping grandparents from seeing their grandchildren or threatening to send parents to an aged care facility.

The road to ensuring that older Muslims remain healthy and safe means respecting their way of life, giving them freedom to practice their religious and cultural beliefs, building their capacity to navigate Australian society and above all, fostering a sense of belonging without being judged or looked down upon.

What's something people can do now? Ask questions to learn about the older person, fostering choice and control, and active listening without judgement are all important ways of showing respect and ensuring that older Muslim people age safely and well.