

Muslim youth and volunteering

In July 2006 Volunteering Australia and the Australian Multicultural Foundation, together with ORIMA Research, conducted a number of focus groups with Muslim youth and not for profit organisations. The research found significant scope exists to increase the participation of Muslim youth in volunteering activities, as Muslim youth tend towards a positive predisposition towards volunteering. The idea that volunteering forms a significant part of being a good community member emerged as a common cultural norm among Muslim youth.

The research found that a number of critical success factors exist that can be incorporated by organisations who wish to include more young people who are Muslims. Family and community support for specific volunteering activities are especially important. These, and other success factors for organisations in involving Muslim youth, are explored in this research bulletin.

Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature, involving eight focus groups with Muslim youth and not for profit organisations. The focus groups were conducted in Lakemba, Shepparton and Melbourne in July 2006. A total of 73 people participated in the focus groups. The Muslim youth who participated in the research came from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Algerian, Egyptian, Turkish, Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani, Sudanese, Sri Lankan and Indonesian. The young people were between 18 and 25 years of age.

Participation in volunteering by Muslim youth

Almost all the youth participants in the research reported being involved in some kind of volunteering at some stage of their lives. However, the young people do not always identify their community work as volunteering, in part because they tend to feel that volunteering in Australia is a more formal experience than in their cultures of origin.

Most of the young people had volunteered through Muslim organisations or associations, and some had volunteered in non-Muslim organisations spanning a range of not for profit sectors. The female participants were significantly more likely to be involved in volunteering, and tended to be engaged in welfare based community work. Young men were more likely to be involved in sports based activities and physical work.

'The idea that volunteering forms a significant part of being a good community member emerged as a common cultural norm among Muslim youth'

Attitudes to volunteering

The research found that the extent of family support is a critical factor in influencing decisions to volunteer among Muslim youth:

Many Muslim youth research participants stated that they would not undertake or continue volunteering or community work if they did not have the approval and support of their parents and/or spouse.

The participants indicated that families are often supportive of volunteering but this can vary, and that participation in volunteering may be mediated according to the following preferences:

- For women to work during the day for safety reasons and to facilitate family time;
- That young men should steer away from activities that could be interpreted as politically inappropriate or dangerous; and
- That voluntary work should not interfere with study or potential to seek paid work

Islam is also an important influence toward volunteering, emphasising as it does work in the community, especially during significant periods of religious importance. This community work may not be explicitly identified as volunteering, as survey respondents often used terms such as 'community work' or 'charity work'. For organisations seeking to involve Muslim youth in volunteering, it may be worthwhile to use terms such as these in addition to 'volunteering'.

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Pathways to volunteering

The Muslim youth who participated in focus groups drew most of their awareness of volunteering opportunities from Muslim community sources and their community's media. The young people were less aware of volunteering opportunities outside their community. They were especially unlikely to be aware of volunteering activities available at the local level.

The focus group discussions showed that community leaders play a critical role in promoting volunteering among Muslim youth, 'the families of these youth would be highly likely to support their involvement – due to the trust and respect that the leaders had in the community'. Volunteering involvements also followed from self initiated contact stemming from the above channels, through friends and family and in response to direct requests from not for profit organisations.

Motivations and barriers to volunteering for Muslim youth

The young people involved in the research identified a number of motivating factors and barriers to volunteering. The benefits and motivations for volunteering could be grouped into the following themes:

- The personal benefits of volunteering (for example personal development or exploring possible career paths);
- The social benefits of volunteering (meeting new people or enhancing social life); and
- The benefits to Muslim communities (making a contribution to the community, creating a positive awareness of Muslim cultures within Australian society).

Some of the barriers to becoming involved in volunteering experienced or perceived by Muslim youth include:

- Limited time to spare due to other commitments;
- Lack of family support and encouragement;
- Having to face potentially difficult situations in some volunteering activities;
- The potential financial costs of participation;
- Lack of information about volunteering opportunities;
- Fear of isolation/exposure to unfamiliar surroundings, issues and people;
- Adverse perception of the worthiness of some work, such as administrative work, in helping people; and
- Having to deal with bureaucratic or political issues arising within an organisation.

In addition to these barriers, Muslim youth participants identified the fear of being isolated, harassed or discriminated against as a major barrier to participating in volunteering activities arranged by non-Muslim organisations:

Muslim youths indicated that they would be more likely to volunteer with non-Muslim organisations that demonstrated a strong commitment to including volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds than those who did not ... they did not want to be singled out as a special group.

The Muslim youth did however express a desire for organisations to be aware and understanding of various religious practices associated with Islam. The following messages may be useful in encouraging young Muslim people to volunteer and offsetting some of the barriers to volunteering:

- Volunteering can be a flexible commitment.
- Volunteers are supported by their organisation.
- There may be financial assistance to offset costs of participation.
- Volunteering organisations value and recognise the importance of their efforts.
- Volunteering organisations encourage people from a diverse range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds to get involved.
- Volunteering organisations are Muslim friendly – understand the sensitivities and needs of Muslim volunteers.

Not for profit perspectives on involving Muslim youth as volunteers

Of the eight focus groups conducted, two groups sought the views and experiences of not for profit organisations in involving Muslim youth. The focus groups also explored what information the organisations would find helpful in recruiting and retaining young volunteers from Muslim communities. The organisations were from a range of not for profit sectors, and most did not have young Muslim volunteers working for them at the time.

‘(The participants expressed) a desire for organisations to be aware and understanding of various religious practices associated with Islam’

Of the organisations that did involve Muslim youth volunteers, most were located in areas with relatively large Muslim populations. These organisations were very positive about their experiences with these volunteers, and indicated that the volunteers were generally very enthusiastic and made a substantial contribution.

Some of the not for profit organisations who participated felt they could offer benefits to Muslim volunteers including the ability to improve job skills and English language skills (where this is desired or relevant) and the opportunity to interact with non-Muslims. Another key benefit of involving Muslim volunteers identified by organisations is the potential for improving service delivery to clients with similar cultural backgrounds.

Some not for profit organisations identified some potential barriers to involving Muslim youth, including the general lack of understanding in volunteering organisations of the nature of cultural and religious sensitivities and the anticipated level of acceptance of Muslim volunteers by some client groups.

Participants indicated that the following key messages about volunteering opportunities have been effective in their efforts to attract young people generally:

- You can join up and work with a friend;
- We have interesting topics/activities;
- You can make a limited rather than open-ended commitment;
- There are IT related activities;
- We offer flexible hours; and
- We offer work experiences and references.

The organisations represented in the focus group felt the development of information, tips or guidelines for helping not for profit organisations understand and deal with cultural and religious sensitivities would assist them to involve Muslim youth as volunteers effectively. Such assistance might include:

- Help to identify key leaders/liaison points within local Muslim communities.
- Brochures and posters to put in community spaces;
- General information about benefits of volunteering targeted to Muslim audiences; and
- An annual calendar highlighting specific religious and cultural dates of importance for Muslims and other CALD communities (including explanations to help not for profit organisations and their clients to understand the significance and nature of these).

For more information refer to the full report *Research about Muslim youths' experiences of and attitudes towards volunteering*. This report can be downloaded from the Volunteering Australia website www.volunteeringaustralia.org.

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