

Launch of the *We're Family Too* report, 10 April 2012, 1pm, NSW Parliament House

Address by Ghassan Kassisieh, author of *We're Family Too*

It is with a sense of pride and immense privilege that I speak as the author of the *We're Family Too* report. I want to first acknowledge the consultation team who are not named for privacy reasons, but who conducted, transcribed and translated the survey, interviews and focus groups. This qualitative consultation drew stories from approximately 40 same-sex attracted people, 6 family members, 9 community and religious leaders and 11 community and welfare workers.

Some of the opinions were very hard to hear, but they also needed to be shared in the report. For example, one community leader said:

"I wouldn't initiate any steps towards the acceptance of those people. On the contrary, I would encourage organisations and institutions to address the problem, so we can work towards a better society that is free of it".

Here the "problem" was defined squarely as being *homosexuality* itself. Indeed, 30 out of 34 same-sex attracted survey respondents perceived that attitudes to lesbians and gay men in the Arab community were either 'hostile' or 'very hostile'. Almost everyone else agreed with them, although some considered that such attitudes were a positive virtue.

The idea that homosexuality was a choice, an illness, a Western import, less prevalent in Arab cultures, contagious, curable, unnatural, immoral, sinful, detrimental to family life, a risk to children or a precursor to AIDS were some of the attitudes our participants said were held by others in the Arab community, or even held by themselves.

Most ideas we have heard said before by people in other communities. But what was most notable is that there was little being said to counter them. It is not surprising then that a grassroots, public-education campaign led by respected Arab voices and supported by allies was a common suggestion for action mentioned by most participants themselves, as were support groups for same-sex attracted people and families, and the availability of information on the internet.

"I think the biggest thing that the community, most of the Arabic community needs to know, more than anything, is that we exist." said one woman in the women's focus group.

A sister spoke about her mum: **"Mum feels like she is alone with this.** [Oumees bit hiss ino heyeh minhalah]. **She cries.** [Tibqee]. **She feels like she doesn't have anyone to go to.** [Bit hiss ino fish haddan trou'hlo] So support for mums and for the families."

For the same-sex attracted people and their supportive family members, the "problem" was not homosexuality but negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians in the Arab community.

Getting married and having children as the only acceptable life course; “unmarried” women being seen as creatures of pity; gayness being seen as an affront to masculinity and any talk of sexuality as a taboo. These were some of the reasons why there was no space available for same-sex attracted people within their own families and communities.

In this collectivist culture, disclosing your sexuality or speaking out against homophobia were seen as disrespecting your elders, denying your roots, being selfish and bringing shame onto yourself and your family.

“its all about god and what people are gonna say” was how one lesbian in her late 20s put it.

“Every conversation with Taita and Juido [grandma and grandpa] is homophobic, derogatory and the rest of the family, whom I am out to, do nothing to stop it,” said one gay man in his teens.

And a female community leader said: *“my brother he had a gay friend. I did ask [my brother] to stay away from him, [so as] not to be labelled by our family members, neighbours or our community as being in the company of a gay person.”*

None of the religious and community leaders advocated violence, although ‘curing’ homosexuality was not seen by some as constituting a type of violence.

“I wouldn’t teach my people to accept a homosexual. I would tell them to pray for him or her to be cured because it’s a kind of disease. If someone gay was being attacked in front of me, I would defend him. Not because of love or compassion but because he’s sick and his life needs to be changed”, said one religious leader.

Here Muslim and Christian leaders spoke with one voice. However, at other times, religious values were also a source of support or used to challenge homophobia. One woman spoke about challenging her own family members:

*“But now I just tell them, “Jesus said, who are you to judge others?” ... **And they really change.** [Tygharou] They stop completely saying anything bad about gay or lesbian people”.*

Of the survey participants, same-sex attracted people reported high levels of homophobic violence and hostilities directed at them, both from people within and outside the Arab community. The second most common experience overall was experiencing personal insults or verbal abuse. This was just as likely to come from people outside the Arab community, as within it.

But within the Arab community, being pressured to ‘act straight’ and rumours being spread about you were the most common homophobic experience. Within the sample, 1 in 3 were threatened with violence and 1 in 4 had experienced physical attack. 1 in 5 had been taken to a religious leader or doctor to be cured. 1 in 10 had been kicked out of their home.

The bruises were sometimes physical, and sometimes emotional:

A gay man in his early 20s said “[I’m] *Suicidal at the moment there is no way of telling anyone. I wish I had never been born*”.

A lesbian in her early 30s said: “*I have been bashed by a family member for shaming the family*”.

Of those who had disclosed their sexuality to their family, the relatively high levels of support among some members of the family (siblings and mothers) can give us some optimism. But many did not disclose their sexuality for fear of a negative reaction.

One mum said:

“I was so cruel to my son when I found out ... I hated it. ... Then I thought he’s a good person, he hasn’t done anything wrong. I love him dearly, and he looks after me and his siblings. ... I just want my son to be happy. [Bas biddee ibni i’kun mabsoot]”

However, for some, familial acceptance never came.

“My sister says that it makes her physically sick when she thinks about it.” said one man.

And another said: *“I didn’t have that experience of liberation after coming out. My mother has a huge problem with even articulating the word, let alone accepting it... It was my burden again. It was my shame. I was in that space where I was so angry at her for not accepting me. And yet at the same time, so hurt because I felt rejected. But at the same time not sure what to do because I loved her as well. So I was kind of split in the middle.”*

Not being able to live life simultaneously as Arab and as same-sex attracted caused a disconnect or the sense of a “*double life*” for some participants. GLBTQ communities, and the scene, were not absolved of responsibility either. Experiences in the gay scene varied but racism and stereotyping were noted.

“There is a lot of racism and ignorance about us in the wider queer community. A lot of the time I feel ignored, invisible or sometimes we’re just there for the exotic pleasure of white queers” said one lesbian.

Out of 31 responses, 30 same-sex attracted people said that gay and lesbian organisations and service providers did not adequately address issues concerning Arab gays and lesbians, or only did so “partly”. Community and welfare workers in the Arab community also highlighted a gap in services for gays and lesbians in the Arab community.

In that gap, SSA people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds have made spaces and networks for themselves.

One man said *“The first time I went to Club Arak. I don’t think I’d ever been happier in my life”*.

Finally, I wanted to thank all the participants. I hope I do not over-generalise the diverse stories and experiences of same-sex attracted people and their families when I say, they treasured and wanted to maintain a positive connection with their family and culture. One woman said:

*“...And I think if there’s any reason why you’d wanna come out, it’s to tell your parents; I’m fine, I’m happy, I’m content. **My heart is full.** [Albi malaan] But we don’t speak the same language as our parents and our parents don’t speak the same language as us. And issues of love are always tough things to talk about.”*

We’re Family Too is about the first step in finding that common language and opening the hearts and minds of every Arab in Australia to live out the hospitality and family values which connect us as one *‘eleh*, or family.