Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security
Membership Meeting: Summary Brief

Exploring opportunities for social cohesion and community building in Australia
Thursday, August 8th, 2024
4-5 pm AEST

About the event

Last month, the WPS Coalition hosted a member's meeting on the **theme of social cohesion and community building**. The topic was selected for discussion in response to the separate acts of violence in Western Sydney and the Eastern Suburbs in April 2024 that shocked the nation. As the speakers discussed, the attacks have shone a light on the "epidemic of violence against women" and the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, both of which threaten to undermine social cohesion and peace within and across Australian communities.

The objective of the discussion included to: 1) explore practical solutions to promote peace building and social cohesion in Australia; 2) discuss the role of women in community building and social cohesion through an intersectional lens and; 3) consider the impacts that recent events have had on gender-based violence, and in particularly on Muslim women.

The session was moderated by Ludmilla Kwitko (Co-Chair, WPS Coalition) and included esteemed speakers Behishta Anwar (President of the Afghan Women Federation of South Australia and WPS Coalition Steering Committee member), Mitra Khakbaz CEO, Gladstone Women's Health Centre and WPS Coalition Steering Committee member) and Dr Nora Amath (Founder and Chair, Islamophobia Register Australia).[1] The event included 30 attendees, who were both members and non-members of the WPS Coalition, representing a broad range of gender, peace and security interests.

Background and context
The moderator provided introductory marks, setting the context for the discussion by emphasising the WPS Agenda is an agenda for peace, as the WPS Coalition has highlighted across its work over the years. The WPS Agenda is especially relevant to Australia's domestic context, which is increasingly characterised by threats fuelled by far right hate speech and racism, including but not limited to, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and insecurity as reflected in persistent and entrenched instances of gender-based violence. These events also underscore the need to consider the linkages between the local, national and global perspectives of the WPS agenda, and to understand how the domestic application of the WPS agenda can be a means for fostering social cohesion within and across communities.[2]

The impact of recent violence on social cohesion and speaker's work in their communities:

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[1] See speaker bios in Annexe I.
[2] Worryingly, "Social cohesion is under pressure and declining on several fronts, straining the fabric of our communities," as the Australian Cohesion Index reports, with only 48% of Australians reporting a "great sense of belonging in 2023."

To begin, the speakers were invited to share how the violence in April 2024, and its aftermath, have impacted social cohesion in their own localities and communities. Speakers were also asked to consider what this can tell us about how social cohesion is understood and practised in Australia, including the role of gender in this context.

For **Behishta Anwar**, it was the vastly different media coverage and police response to the violent attack at the Westgate Shopping Centre in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney that motivated her to speak out further and increase awareness about the effects of this on distinct communities.[3] Anwar drew the member's attention to the reality that when the Bondi attack occurred, at a time when little information about the assailant was available, there was an immediate presumption that the perpetrator was Muslim and social media was flooded with anti Muslim posts and comments. However, when the assailant was identified, Anwar explained, his actions were quickly associated with his mental health conditions. In contrast, the attack at an Assyrian church in Western Sydney was immediately labelled a terrorist attack, primarily due to the individual's Muslim identity. Anwar noted that this was despite the Bondi incident having a larger impact and more closely resembling what is typically perceived as a terrorist-related attack. The church assailant also had a history of mental health struggles, yet this was overlooked in favour of labelling it as terrorism. The focus on the perpetrator's identity persisted, even after it was revealed that he too had mental health issues.Anwar explained that this double standard deeply affects Muslim communities, particularly women who feared personal reprisals following the attacks. This fear was especially pronounced among visibly Muslim women, such as those who wear scarves. Many were afraid to leave their homes alone and encouraged others to walk in groups or with a male guardian to ensure their safety, as they could be easily identified as Muslim. For Anwar, the most troubling aspect was the sense of insecurity this created within her network. She observed women advising their families and friends to avoid going out alone, instead walk in groups or with male guardians to stay safe due to the fear of being attacked.

The attacks, as she emphasised, have shone a light on issues of identity and belonging in Australia and personal experiences of social cohesion. Unless recognition of diversity and community safety is prioritised, social cohesion will be undermined.

The second speaker, **Mitra Khakbaz**, emphasised Australia's history: noting that as a country largely populated by settlers, this is intrinsically linked to how social cohesion is fostered in Australia. For Khabaz, Indigenous resilience and community building is central to social cohesion, and any understanding of the concept must be grounded in an individual's sense of belonging, ability to contribute as part of the community and the ways in which people interact with one another. Khakbaz emphasised that it is the fragility of social cohesion that most concerns her, highlighting Australia's strong multiculturalism as a source of strength, while also cautioning that this should not be taken for granted. She emphasised the importance of building bridges during times of social tension, noting the unfortunate results of the Voice Referendum as demonstrating the need for greater dialogue and understanding.

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[3] This has also been highlighted in the Women's Agenda by Violet Roumeliotis of Settlement Services International:"*With the Bondi attack, the media took a deep dive into the attacker as an individual, looking at his mental health history, his ex-partners, his parents – even going as far as dissecting his Google reviews. The narrative was clear: this was an individual who had committed an unspeakable act. But with the attack on the Assyrian congregation, the focus has been entirely on the attacker's religion. Granted he is underage so there are restrictions on his identification, but it has become apparent that in the court of public opinion, the individual is not on trial – it's the entire Muslim community.*" As reported in the Guardian: "The Islamic Council of NSW 'found it bewildering' …that [the]...attack at Bondi Junction was deemed to be "exclusively motivated by the mental health issues" but the church stabbing 'was designated as a terrorist act within hours.'" This narrative has had "disproportionate consequences" for Australia's Muslim communities, with spikes in Islamophobic incidents reported, which especially impact women. As Roumeliotis writes: "In the wake of the gender-based violence we saw in Bondi, it feels like a scary time to be a woman. But it's an even scarier time to be a Muslim woman."

For Khakbaz, community well-being is at the heart of social cohesion, and must be prioritised as the country navigates complex political and social dynamics that are characterised by volatile events taking place overseas, climate insecurity, and transitions to renewable energy. An important lesson in social cohesion that Khakbaz shared with attendees, was acquired at a young age during the Iranian Revolution. Like her peers, she was eager to participate. However, her Mother, shone a light on the familial nature of those she'd be confronting: drawing attention to their identities as mothers, daughters, sons and teaching her daughter an important lesson on the human impact of conflict and instability.

As an experienced practitioner in the domestic violence space, Khabaz also drew attention to Australia's high prevalence of gender based violence (GBV). This year - 2024, one woman is violently killed every four days in Australia. [4] There is also a rise in sexual violence. For Khakbaz, it is critical to understand the way in which global events are impacting the local context and the ways in which the political and media landscapes shape this: whether this is through permitting casual racism; inadequate responses to high profile GBV and sexual assault cases; or due to a lack of accountability for public leaders in instigating or fuelling hatred or increased conflict around such matters.

The third speaker, **Dr Nora Amath** drew the audience's attention not only to recent events in Sydney, but also the impact of the wider global context, including the situation and recent events in Gaza and Israel. Dr Amath noted the ongoing humanitarian crisis, conflict and instability in Yemen, Sudan and Bangladesh, amongst others, emphasising that Australia's challenges are part of a wider trend of rising and persistent conflict and humanitarian disasters. Especially concerning, for Dr Amath, is the extreme increase of Islamophobia reported to the Islamophobia Register in Australia following the October 7 attacks in Israel. The Register has recorded a 1300% increase which only reflects recorded incidents and therefore is expected to be much higher. As Dr Amath noted, this reflects the reality that instances of Islamophobia and violence are becoming more frequent and normalised.

Dr. Amath also drew attention to the intersection between race, anti-immigration and the rise of far-right hate speech in undermining social cohesion. For her, trust is the cornerstone of social cohesion. She expressed doubt as to the current level of public trust towards Muslim women in Australia, while also underscoring that their own sense of security and protection is also diminishing. Dr Amath emphasised the ways in which her own identity, when considered from an intersectional lens, has been threatened by the deterioration of trust requiring her and other women at times to consider taking greater safety measures in public in some instances withdrawing from certain social contexts, echoing concerns also raised by Anwar.

Dr Amath also drew attention to the rising conflict in the UK, prompting the question, *whose social cohesion? Who decides? Who is included? Is there a hierarchy of humanity,* noting the grave situation facing Palestinians families in Australia, who fear grieving publicly or identifying outwardly as Palestinian or sharing their views on the conflict, due to risk of reprisal or for acting "political." For Dr Amath, the recent violence in the UK shows the grave consequences of a society "where racism broadly, Islamophobia specifically and anti-immigrant [sentiment] is normalised or goes unchecked…when…racism and anti-immigration hate...[are normalised]". This should serve as a warning for Australia, she asserts. Australia's leadership must respond to the increasing rise of far right hate and ensure politicians, the security sector, etc. do not contribute to this, either explicitly through their words or actions, or through their own negligence or acquiescence.

Practical solutions and opportunities for building social cohesion

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[4] As reported by the Sydney Morning Herald, citing the work of Counting Dead Women Australia, a research initiative registering the women killed in 2024.

Speakers and members were then invited to share practical solutions to strengthen social cohesion at the community and national level, including how the WPS Coalition could support this initiative as a convener. Speakers were also prompted to address how women's leadership roles in community building could also be supported. The following recommendations reflect points shared by participants.

Recommendations*:*
- Improve cultural, racially-sensitive and gender awareness training for decision makers to better understand how public narratives in the aftermath of violent attacks such as the events in Eastern and Western Sydney directly and disproportionately impact particular communities.
- Create opportunities for reflection and ongoing dialogue on challenging global and national issues, for instance, the context in Gaza and Israel or Afghanistan at work and schools to facilitate empathy and understanding amongst community members.
- Acknowledge and address persistent racism in police service responses.
- Enhance recognition of and protection for minority rights in Australia.
- Acknowledge and address Australia's high rate of gender based violence, across all communities.
- Create opportunities for First Nation people to share their community building initiatives.
- Spotlight examples of effective community initiatives: For instance, the Australian Bhutanese Association was noted for its Sydney wide presence and inter-faith community work. The Australian Religious Response to Climate Change was also mentioned, which includes individuals from all the major religions and denominations.

Next steps
The discussion provided an opportunity to convene speakers and member's to discuss an important and especially timely issue that is having a significant impact on the lives of women across the country, and to explore opportunities for strengthening social cohesion and community building in Australia. The WPS Coalition would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the speakers and audience for participating in the meeting.

The WPS Coalition is currently exploring how to continue engaging on these issues. We invite you to provide your feedback and recommendations and encourage you to join with us to strengthen social cohesion and the role of women in community building in Australia. Contact WPS Coordinators to continue the discussion: wpscoalition@gmail.com.

Speaker Bios

Behishta Anwar, Community Development Officer, Australian Refugee Association

Behishta Anwar is the President of the Afghan Women Federation of SA and a dedicated advocate for Afghan women and newcomers to Australia. Her personal experiences under the Taliban in Afghanistan and her adaptation to a new country fuel her passion for promoting girls' education and amplifying voices facing challenges in Australia. As a Community Development Officer at the Australian Refugee Association Inc., Behishta empowers and uplifts communities. She recently graduated from the Governor's Leadership Foundation Program at the Leader's Institute of South Australia and actively volunteers in community projects. Behishta also serves as an executive member of MOSAIC Adelaide.

Mitra Khakbaz, CEO, Gladstone Women's Health Centre

Mitra Khakbaz is a seasoned advocate for positive social change with over two decades of experience in senior non-profit roles. Specialising in humanitarian and development initiatives in the Asia Pacific region, she has led numerous impactful projects. Currently, Mitra serves as the CEO of Gladstone Women's Health Centre and is actively involved with boards such as 100Women, promoting inclusivity and social justice. She has a diverse educational background and is pursuing a Master of Business Administration, demonstrating her commitment to leading sustainable global change.

Dr. Nora Amath, Executive Director, The Islamophobia Register Australia

Dr. Nora Amath is a distinguished community developer and sociologist with a focus on multiculturalism, social inclusion, diversity, leadership, and community development. She is a director at Yarah, a non-executive director at Islamic Relief Australia, an Adjunct Research Fellow at Griffith University, and an Australian Fellow at the Centre for Women, Faith and Leadership in Washington DC. Dr. Amath also contributes to the Australian Multicultural Community Reference Group and chairs various organisations supporting diverse backgrounds, including the Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity. She co-founded a domestic violence refuge for multicultural women in Queensland and served on the Queensland Women's Safety Taskforce. Notably, Dr. Amath was the first female chair of Islamic Relief Australia and has received numerous accolades, including the Australia Day Community Awards and the Queensland Day's Award 2023. In 2024, she was included in the UN's global directory, Building a Better World: The Women Leading Religions for Peace.