

Parliamentary Inquiry into
BODY IMAGE

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1.1 Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Parliamentary Inquiry ordered by the Hon. Jacinta Allan, Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs into the development of body image among young people and the associated effects on their health. In contemporary Australian society, there is a need to both explore the causes of negative body image and to discover positive strategies for building self-esteem among young people. Further, the lack of examination and understanding of negative body image among young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds is a situation that requires some remedy. We believe that CMYI's submission represents a beginning.

1.2 The Organisation

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) has a long history of responding to the needs of young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds within Victoria. CMYI has a strong focus on the issues and needs of young people from refugee or newly arrived communities who face particular social and economic disadvantages as a result of their refugee experiences and subsequent resettlement in Australia.

As a statewide organisation, CMYI has a crucial role in providing current and informed advice to the government and the non-government sectors on trends and issues that are impacting on young people from CLD backgrounds. CMYI also has a role in promoting culturally sensitive and effective approaches for service providers working with CLD young people and their families.

Since 1988, CMYI has undertaken a broad range of projects and initiatives addressing the needs of CLD young people in Victoria and Australia. These responses have been initiated as a result of issues identified by both government and services in contact with young people from CLD backgrounds. Significant projects undertaken by CMYI have focused on a range of areas including employment, education and training, sport and recreation, sexual and mental health, drugs and alcohol, young people and the law, racism and homelessness.

Acknowledging the roles outlined above, the key organisational goal of CMYI is to strengthen and provide leadership between young people, support services and the community to enhance life opportunities for young people from CLD backgrounds. CMYI has an important role to play, in partnership with Government, to develop policies and programs that are responsive to the needs of CLD young people, particularly marginalised refugee young people.

1.3 Methodology

In order to strengthen our submission to the Inquiry, CMYI convened a Statewide Network Meeting in September 2004 to explore the issue of body image with key organisations and workers in the youth and multicultural sectors. With speakers and commentators from ethno-specific agencies providing context and background, over 60 participants from a diverse range of agencies provided their perspective on the issues at the event.

1.4 Sector Rationale for Submission

Feedback received by CMYI from sector representatives consulted as part of the Statewide meeting were concerned that issues relating to body image as experienced by migrant and refugee young people could be under represented in the submissions submitted to the Parliamentary Inquiry. As a result, workers and their organisations welcomed CMYI's initiative in consulting the sector and reflecting some of their views in our submission.

1.5 Areas Addressed by CMYI's Submission

The Terms of Reference require that the Family and Community Development Committee of Parliament inquire into, consider and report to Parliament on issues relating to the development of body image among young people and the associated effects on their health and wellbeing. CMYI's submission will address two core areas outlined in the Terms of Reference:

1. Identify factors which contribute to the development of body image among young people;
2. Consider:
 - ❖ The role of the media, family, the peer group and other potential factors in the development of body image;
 - ❖ Other factors that impact on body image;
 - ❖ The associated health and other impacts of eating disorders,
 - ❖ Steroid use, and other manifestations of problematic body image, on young people;
 - ❖ Gender differences in the development of problematic body image.

2. The Literature

Culture and ethnicity as a factor in the development of body image among young people has rarely been examined.

An analysis of the literature that does exist produces a highly variable series of conclusions. Some studies in the United States have stated that “...Caucasian females exhibit more body image disturbance than other ethnic groups” (Story 1995).

Other studies on the other hand have stated that there is little or no difference between cultural groups. In her study of body size preferences among underweight young women from different cultural backgrounds, O’Dea found that:

“The young women from different cultural background in the current study held very similar perceptions of what constituted an ideal body size for themselves, for women in general and for young men.

The finding that there were no cross-cultural differences in body size perception, desired body size or male and female body ideals suggests that young Australian women from various cultural backgrounds may be similarly influenced by the Western socio-cultural factors which promote the slim ideal...” (O’Dea 1998:78-79).

Most studies agree however that “body dissatisfaction” is increasing among both men and women (Barnett 2001).

3. Factors Impacting on Body Image among CLD young people

3.1 Background

Following the consultation undertaken by CMYI, we believe that there are a number of key factors that impact on CLD young people and the development of their body image. These include:

1. Gender
2. Religion
3. Sport
4. Family
5. School Setting and Peer Relations
6. Media
7. Lack of Connection and Isolation

A key overriding and distinguishing factor that impacts on the body image of refugee and migrant young people is the impact of the settlement experience on this group. Young people in this situation may be recovering from the loss of family, loss of identity, torture and trauma while attempting to learn a new language and adjust to foreign culture. This process of acculturation to the norms, expectations and systems of new society places much stress and strain on the young people in question, their families and their communities. This often results in social isolation, dis-connectedness, and loss of confidence. Herein lies the link to negative body image. As Paxton (2000) notes, “Poor body image is associated with low self esteem, especially in women” (Paxton 2000:1).

3.2 Gender

The consultation found a number of differences in issues based on gender.

Young Women

- ❖ Dress code restrictions on Muslim young women impacted on their self-image in the community and lead to increased isolation and depression. This related to issue of community perceptions both within ethnic and broader communities.
- ❖ Negative body image was mentioned as an issue among young mothers from migrant backgrounds, many of who are unaware of postnatal depression and lack the necessary supports.

Young Men

- ❖ Young men struggle with body image issues attempting to manipulate their bodies into media driven representations of strength and masculinity. This can include excessive use of protein supplements and growth enhancing hormones, aggressive behaviour and increased risk taking while driving cars.

- ❖ For young men, body image was a factor relating to fear of violence (from other young people) and of being targeted in public spaces.

3.3 Religion

The issue of religion as a factor in body image, particularly among young women, has been explored in detail in a study conducted by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria. The council has stated that similar to other young women in the community, Islamic young women also experience peer pressure. However, theirs is experienced on two levels, first, from those around them that want them to look more "Western". This is supported by media portrayals of women.

Second, young women have felt pressure from other Islamic young women and their particular communities. For example, young women expressed that they felt that the particular peer pressure from within their community peers impacted on their marriage prospects. They felt that they were not free to wear what they wanted for fear of gossip and the implications for them and their family. This then may lead to negative perceptions of them and men within the community would not marry them.

Finally, young women who wear the Hijab are perceived in a particular way by the rest of the community. The wearing of the Hijab relates to more than the headscarf, but a way of life. For some young women wearing the Hijab has made them feel more vulnerable and visible in the broader community, and post September 11 has meant that they are less likely to use public space.

3.4 Sport

Again, focusing on the work undertaken by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, the dress code associated with Islam had implications for young women and their friends. Some stated that it was difficult to engage in sporting activities as women-only sports and recreation opportunities were limited. Afifa Saad had become an important role model for Muslim young women. They were inspired by the infamous incident that made the news regarding Afifa being sent off the soccer field for refusing to take off her headscarf. However, young women were also aware that men within their own community were unsupportive of Afifa and did not think that young women should be playing sport.

(It is important to note that the Islamic Women's Welfare Council view is one of many different perspectives within the Islamic community. It is important note make assumptions or draw conclusions too broadly.)

Among the group of young women interviewed by the Council, many found it difficult to get involved with sporting activities, some felt depressed and became concerned about inactivity and weight gain. Some of the young women went on to say that the increased use of dietary pills (purchased over the internet) had become a serious issue for their peers.

3.5 Family

Some of the issues relating to body image and CLD young people within the family context are:

- ❖ Fear for the safety of young people out of the protection of the home when in public spaces including waking around in local neighbourhood
- ❖ Lack of trust between parents and service providers, perceived as interventionist
- ❖ A lack of targeted programs addressing body image within CLD communities.
- ❖ Lack of information on healthy eating relevant to CLD families
- ❖ High family expectations to succeed and responsibilities contributing to pressure, conflict and eating disorders
- ❖ Lack of communication between young people and their families
- ❖ Families emersed in resettlement find it difficult to pay for extra activities for young people, including fees and cost of sporting equipment and uniforms. They are often unable to watch young people participate in sport and provide transportation to and from events, due to long working hours and financial commitments.

3.6 School Setting and Peer Relations

Some of the issues relating to body image and CLD young people in the school and peer setting are:

- ❖ Lack of appropriate information in the education system about issues relating to body image
- ❖ Lack of diverse food choices in schools.
- ❖ Feeling unsafe at school due to racism and bullying
- ❖ Low self esteem of newly arrived and in particular refugee young people attempting to negotiate their identity and position within school, family and culture and the broader community while dealing with adolescence.

3.7 Media

The media has a significant impact on young people. The media often constructs an identity for young people that misrepresents their perspective. In particular, images of CLD young people (often linked to crime and group violence) do not support a positive image of them in the broader community.

In the work conducted by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council, some of the young women talked about issues that had an impact on their whole family. Many said that their parents feared for the safety of their young women because of the increased violence against the Islamic community post September 11th. This placed further restrictions on young women's access and opportunity to participate in activities and social events of interest.

The media has a high impact on young women's image of themselves and perceptions of "ideal". Young women attempting to be a certain body type leading to eating disorders and serious health problems, such as, Polynesian young women and excessive dieting attempting to alter a genetic physical attribution.

3.8 Lack of Social Connection and Isolation

Young people do not feel connected to the structures and systems within the broader community. Young people often feel powerless and isolated in relation to processes of power.

4. CMYI Recommends

In reviewing the options outlined above, CMYI recommends a number of changes.

4.1 School context

CMYI Recommends:

- ❖ More programs promoting positive health and well-being messages in primary and secondary schools are needed
- ❖ Strategies that only target obesity are insufficient in addressing preventative behaviours and exploring the actual causes such as depression, surviving and recovering from torture or trauma issues, isolation and identity negotiation
- ❖ Body image is far too complex and cannot be addressed by a minimalist approach focussing on one symptom such as obesity
- ❖ Increasing the availability of healthy culturally appropriate foods in schools and decreasing nutritionally poor food
- ❖ Providing a constant framework for schools to accommodate and appreciate difference, by promoting diversity in curriculum, cultural identity, and catering. Also the framework must have a consistent mechanism for dealing with racism within schools and bullying, based on the premise that all young people have the right to feel safe and free from all forms of discrimination at school.

4.2 Family Context

CMYI Recommends:

- ❖ Targeted strategies need to be adopted to provide CLD families with important information regarding a whole range of issues including health and wellbeing
- ❖ Information that will increase their connections and understanding of the structures and systems they are unfamiliar with in Australia
- ❖ Importantly, information needs to be provided in developing and increasing the capacity of CLD families to communicate and connect with their young people.

4.3 Community Context

CMYI Recommends:

- ❖ Significant investment needs to be made in the area of researching the relationship between the impact of settlement on migrant and refugee young people and body image

- ❖ Media guidelines need to reflect the concerns of the community regarding the images of young people and in particular CLD young people. Restrictions need to be placed on images that promote negative body images of men and women.

4.4 Sports Context

CMYI Recommends:

- ❖ Peak sporting bodies must adopt a targeted strategy to increase the participation of CLD young people in sporting activities.
- ❖ Sporting clubs need to implement more culturally inclusive policies.
- ❖ Sports clubs and recreation centres must provide culturally sensitive programs including more women only programs.

4.5 Gender Context

CMYI Recommends:

- ❖ The diversity and potential of all young women must be promoted and encouraged in the media and by government initiatives.
- ❖ CLD young women need to be supported to become accredited fitness providers.
- ❖ The entrepreneurial achievements of Islamic women's fashion designers need to be promoted alongside mainstream designers.
- ❖ Targeted strategies need to be employed by sports and recreation organisations to engage with CLD young men, in particular newly arrived refugee young men.
- ❖ Positive images of CLD young men need to be adopted in the media to promote and nurture a better self image for young men, encourages positive behaviours and health and wellbeing. This was seen as a preventative strategy against aggressive and self-harming behaviours.

5. References

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