

The QPS 'Connected Women' Program: Police Mentor Assessments of the Program

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The QPS 'Connected Women' Program

Police Mentor Assessments of the Program

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The Police Mentor Interviews.....	4
1. Perceived Aims of the Program.....	5
2. Outcomes of the Program.....	5
Positive Changes in Attitudes.....	6
Partnerships with Key Organisations	7
Developing Networks between Participants and Mentors.....	8
Continuity of Connections Made in the Program	9
Identification and Discussion of Key Issues.....	10
Empowering Participants.....	11
3. Most Valued Aspects of the Program.....	12
4. Recommendations for Future Programs.....	14
Providing a Platform for Open and Personal Discussions	14
Including More Sessions and Additional Stakeholders.....	14
The Mentor Role	15
Adapting the Program to Meet Differing Needs.....	15
Dreamworld	16
The Role of the Police Uniform.....	16
Conclusion.....	17
References	18

Introduction

In 2017 the Queensland Police Service (QPS) trialled the new '*Connected Women Program*'. The trial involved running an eight-week program designed to build strong relationships between police mentors and young Muslim women in the South Brisbane District of Queensland. Many of the Muslim women selected to participate in the program were new immigrants to Australia. The project partner was the Islamic Women's Association of Queensland (IWAQ) and the project was funded by a Suncorp grant. IWAQ worked closely with the QPS to ensure that cultural needs and appropriateness of content were maintained throughout the program. The program commenced on the 15th of July, 2017 with an initial intake of 22 Muslim women. As the program continued over the 8-week period an additional 5 Muslim women joined the program. The Muslim women ranged in age between 14 and 72 (average age = 24.1). All participants graduated from the program on the 2nd September, 2017.

The *Connected Women Program's* eight phase concept was designed to increase awareness of personal safety, home security strategies, identity theft, fraud and scams, the role of police and police liaison officers (PLOs), knowledge of Australian laws, violence prevention (including domestic and family violence), and how to report information to police and anonymously through Crimestoppers. The Program's underlying objective was to link female police mentors with young Muslim women in order to develop a network of participants who felt supported, educated and empowered in the community. Hence, the program aimed to build young Muslim women's knowledge of police, trust and confidence in police, and their willingness to engage with police in the future. Much of the previous and ongoing engagement with the Muslim community in South Brisbane District has predominantly been conducted with Muslim men. The *Connected Women Program*, with its focus on Muslim women, is the first program of its kind in the District.

Professor Kristina Murphy and members of her research team from the Griffith Criminology Institute at Griffith University were retained to conduct an independent evaluation

of the Program's success. The evaluation involved surveying program participants both before and after the program (for findings from the participant survey see Murphy, 2017). The evaluation also involved interviewing the eight (N=8) female police mentors involved in the program. Police mentors' perceptions of the program's aims, the outcomes the program achieved, what mentors felt worked well, and what they felt could be improved if the program continues to be rolled out in the future were canvassed. The current report presents findings from these police mentor interviews.

The Police Mentor Interviews

As part of the evaluation of the *Connected Women Program* (herein the program), in-person interviews were conducted with eight (N=8) police mentors who were involved in the program's development and implementation. The program aimed to engage female Muslim participants living in South-east Queensland to foster relationships between the women and the police. Interviews ranged in length from 17 minutes to 1 hour. A series of four main interview questions were posed to the police mentors. The questions were designed to gauge a) police mentors' understandings of the program's aims, b) their observations of the program's outcomes, c) thoughts on what worked well, and d) thoughts on how the program could be improved. Of particular interest was to ascertain mentors' perceptions of the extent to which the program facilitated trust and rapport between members of the QPS and the Muslim women who were involved. Interviews between police mentors and members of the Griffith University research team were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. *NVivo* software was utilised to code and analyse the interview transcripts. The transcripts were coded in such a way to ensure that the topic of each interview question was covered. This report is structured by headings that detail each of the four main questions canvassed in the interviews and the identification of key themes emerging from the interviews.

1. Perceived Aims of the Program

Police mentors were first asked what they believed the aims of the program to be. Interviewees described the two primary aims as: 1) needing to “build up rapport”, and 2) to “create networks and break barriers.” The *barriers* were described by police mentors as originating from perceptions of police in the participants’ countries of origin that transmitted to a fear of police within Australia. Thus, interviewees believed it was important to *address those barriers*, and *develop networks* and a sense of *trust* with the QPS. The types of networks they felt were important for the women included developing networks with the QPS, as well as “form[ing] their own network.” Some of the mentors spoke of *empowering* the participants to provide “some really good foundations for decision making.”

2. Outcomes of the Program

After establishing what the aims of the program were, police mentors were asked to comment on the types of positive or negative outcomes that emerged from the Muslim women’s participation in the program. Six major outcomes were discussed in the interviews. First, Mentors described positive changes in attitudes to be an important outcome of the program. Interestingly, they discussed both changes in mentors’ attitudes, as well as changes in attitudes that occurred among the Muslim participants. The other five outcomes identified by the mentors included: 1) the development of partnerships with key organisations; 2) the establishment of networks between program participants and program mentors; 3) the continuity of connections made with participants and the wider Muslim community; 4) identification and discussion of key issues of concern to Muslim women; and 5) empowerment of participants. Each of the six outcomes identified will be discussed in turn below.

Positive Changes in Attitudes

The most prominent outcome identified by police mentors was a change in attitudes. Mentors described how the program enabled both the police mentors and the program participants to change their attitudes on a range of issues.

Mentor changes. Some mentors spoke of how the program enabled them to address “unconscious biases” and “ideas...[and] knowledge of the culture prior to [the program].” Other mentors spoke of being better able to understand the Muslim culture and faith, and advocate for Muslim communities. Specifically, the mentors spoke of the benefits the program had for their work, in terms of their ability to now “correct misinformation or perceptions of other police but also other community members.” Others discussed having a greater sense of “diversity and inclusion” that they could draw on in work-related activities.

Interviewees discussed feeling as though they could openly ask questions in the program environment that were specific to the Muslim culture and faith that “a lot of police might wonder but never have the opportunity to ask and find out from someone who’s from that culture.” One mentor spoke of feeling better equipped to “put in place things to assist [and to] reach out to communities and support them more.” A key takeaway for several of the mentors was having “a deeper understanding” not only of the Muslim culture and faith, but also “of the issues faced by those women.”

Muslim participant changes. *The police mentors who were interviewed* also spoke of the changes in attitudes they perceived the program participants to have. *The police mentors* stated that program participants *appeared to have* a better understanding of how to report issues and crime problems to police. This perception held by the mentors can be confirmed by the results of the participant surveys; findings from the post-program survey revealed that the Muslim women reported greater knowledge of who to go to if they required assistance. At commencement of the program there was significantly less knowledge or awareness among the program participants of

who they should contact if they witnessed or became a victim of crime (see Murphy, 2017). Other interviewees spoke of how the program seemed to ‘humanise’ Queensland police officers among the participants. They further discussed how the program had shifted participants’ perceptions of police from being fearful to being more trusting of police and that they now have a “greater willingness to engage and talk openly.” Again, each of these perceptions were confirmed by the post-program survey conducted with participants (see Murphy, 2017).

Several of the mentors believed that the main factor spurring distrust in the QPS was participants’ existing distrust towards police in their home countries. Interviewees spoke of participants being “in fear of police” because they were “very aggressive, very violent, and just the total opposite of what [police] are here.” Another interviewee suggested a barrier to reporting crime and victimisation may stem from participants’ fear of being stigmatised: “the perception was that, yes, you don't go outside the family, you don't go and report it. There's a lot of shame that they would bring to family by doing that. Fear of reprisals or ostracism from other members of the family.”

Other interviewees described “a lack of knowledge” that may inhibit Muslim women from reporting crime and victimisation. However, because of the program, one of the police mentors highlighted how participants now “realise the breadth of things that we could offer them, or suggestions, strategies to keep their house safe - they realise that they can go to the police and find that information out. Or if we don't know, we don't offer that service, who else might.” The consensus in the interviews was that the program had shifted perceptions of police among participants from an authority to fear to one that can assist.

Partnerships with Key Organisations

The program was not only born out of a partnership between the QPS and IWAQ, but it fostered further partnerships throughout the duration of the program. Representatives from IWAQ were described by the police mentors as content experts, whereby the police mentors could

seek guidance from them on the types of issues to discuss and how to appropriately discuss them. One mentor also mentioned that IWAQ marketed the program and encouraged Muslim women from different areas in South-East Queensland to attend. Several mentors highlighted the benefit of IWAQ's support for the program throughout its implementation. For example, interviewees discussed how IWAQ had provided an avenue to further support and develop activities for the participants after the conclusion of the program.

The program was also seen to catalyse the development of police relationships with several religious and community organisations. The mentors expressed how this would benefit them in the local areas they police. For example, one interviewee spoke of how the program had enabled them to foster relationships with a person who could connect them with an Imam from a local mosque. Resultantly, the interviewee stated that knowledge gained from the program, in conjunction with increased connections, would "help her police that area better."

The program was also seen to foster stronger relationships between the QPS and other government entities. For example, one interviewee recalled how some of the program participants discussed issues related to personal safety on trains. Thus, the police mentor spoke of subsequently organising meetings with Queensland Rail to ascertain whether changes can be made to enhance personal safety on trains: "I've suggested that maybe they want to consider having a women-only carriage - not for Muslim women but for all women to have a safe carriage."

Developing Networks between Participants and Mentors

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the networks that were forged between the police mentors and the program participants. This theme was viewed to be one of the most important outcomes of the program. Interviewees discussed how throughout the duration of the program, program participants became more open with the police mentors, and trust was fostered between both groups. This trust empowered program participants to discuss personal and sensitive stories. Another police mentor spoke about how the positive and secure environment the program

promoted enabled participants to divulge private stories. This gave the police mentors insight into the lives of these Muslim women. Several interviewees spoke passionately about what they had learned from the Muslim women in the program. For example, one interviewee explained how “enriching in the two-way exchange of having to walk in their footsteps for just a short period of time, how powerful it can be.” Another interviewee said, “I gained a much better understanding of the issues faced by those women and I'm able to be an advocate for them into the future.”

The police mentors also highlighted how the Muslim women in the program had developed strong relationships with each other. One interviewee elaborated on this point: “There's positives in it for them like building their own networks and building their confidence and then they get to take it back into their communities and stuff like that.”

Continuity of Connections Made in the Program

It was noted by the police mentors that the program had enabled continuing connections with the program participants as well as with other members of the Muslim community made through the program participants. Interviewees described how at the conclusion of the program this did not signal that relationships between police and the participants had to end. One of the program's aims is to develop networks between Muslim women and police, and from the interviews it was clear that these networks would be continuing. Two interviewees in particular described how they were also developing networks with Mosques and Muslim community centres because of the program. Other interviewees discussed how participants had asked them to provide additional information after the program had concluded about topics or issues such as appropriate childcare, immigration issues, and obtaining a driver's license.

Interviewees spoke of how the program had improved connections for the program participants following the program. One interviewee spoke of how the program had empowered the participants to reach out to and engage with other police officers and other members of their

own communities. One interviewee noted that members of participants' extended families had been in contact, as well as representatives from IWAQ.

Identification and Discussion of Key Issues

In addition to discussing topics scheduled formally into the program, a range of other topics were also discussed during the program. An outcome of program participants' increased willingness to discuss sensitive issues was that the mentors could provide the participants with some tools to be resilient when encountering such situations. For example, the topic of terrorism arose during the program, and one of the police mentors spoke of how some program participants could be directly affected by the fallout of the incident. As she noted: "if there is some sort of terrorist attack and there's some sort of Muslim link to it they can walk down the street and just be abused." The police mentor said she could discuss ways in which the participants could respond to such abuse: "We were able to give them that bit of confidence about what they should be doing in those situations and who they can report it to and that we as the police don't accept that and that's not right."

One of the most frequently discussed topics participants highlighted was around domestic violence. One police mentor discussed how she had attended cultural and reference group meetings with Muslim community members prior to the program. She noted that when discussing domestic violence with Muslim audiences, female audience members were a minority who often did not interact or engage during the meetings. The police mentor further identified that there was "a lot of quiet informal reporting of domestic and family violence and things like that that wasn't to police... and the police were never involved to be able to intervene or assist or provide advice." However, the mentor saw the program as one which could foster strong networks and engagement with the participants in "a soft, non-confrontational way" to provide Muslim women with the opportunity to discuss these issues in their community with police. Hence, a positive outcome of

the program was that it opened lines of communication between Muslim women and police regarding sensitive topics.

Empowering Participants

The program was underpinned by a drive to enhance empowerment among the participants. Empowerment was seen to occur through a combination of the content presented within each session and the subsequent discussions had among the participants and police mentors. For example, one of the police mentors interviewed described the domestic violence session the women in the program were exposed to. She noted that the guest presenter from IWAQ drew on excerpts from the Quran to exemplify what are deemed appropriate ways for women to be treated both by men and within the household according to Islam. The interviewee continued: “you could see the little changes in their faces going, oh well that's good. You know it was just that empowerment.”

Interviewees also discussed how other information delivered to program participants equipped them with the skills and knowledge to effectively deal with some of the issues they may face. One interviewee elaborated on this point: “if they know how to report, if they know legislation about DV [domestic violence], if they know how to look after themselves in the car, if they know how to keep safe at home, if they know how to keep safe when they're out and about, that gives them a lot of power to make their own decisions...so they don't have to rely on other people.”

The use of police mentors to facilitate the program also empowered the participants to trust police and to see the mentors as women as well as police officers. Muslim police officers were also engaged to give some presentations to the participants. One interviewee recalled how a particular Muslim police officer discussed some of the barriers she faced during her journey to becoming a police officer: “as she's talking you can see the little lights go on in these girls faces. It

was like oh, so every barrier that they thought of, this one had already done. I think that was a really good session.”

The program itself empowered participants to feel comfortable to actively engage with the content, other participants, and the mentors themselves. Several interviewees described the participants as being “reserved”, “shy”, and “quiet” at the commencement of the program. However, these portrayals completely changed by the end of the program. Interviewees described participants as “outgoing”, “more willing to be interactive”, and “keen to share their stories”. Some interviewees said they noticed participants becoming more confident from week 3 onwards. Interviewees further described the participants as being more engaged and comfortable to let their guard down as the program progressed. Hence, from these quotes it appears that the program had success in empowering the program participants.

3. Most Valued Aspects of the Program

One of the interview questions posed to the police mentors asked them to consider what they believed to be some of the most valued aspects of the program. As a 10-week program, many different topics were covered and numerous activities were organised for participants to be involved in. The police mentors were asked to choose what they saw as some of the most beneficial sessions or activities for the program participants. Enhancing knowledge and awareness of what police do, the relationships fostered between mentors and participants, and the empowerment of the Muslim women were identified as particularly helpful and were valued highly by the police mentors.

The use of police officers as mentors for the program, as well as some of the sessions that involved showing participants elements of the policing role, enhanced participants’ understanding of policing and the QPS. In addition, interviewees spoke of how several participants expressed an eagerness to become a police officer because of the program. The mentors also noted that the education delivered to participants through the sessions was beneficial to participants.

Interviewees highlighted some of the sessions, including those about domestic violence, cyber security, road safety, and respectful relationships.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews as a significant consequence of the program was summarised by an interviewee as “the storytelling, the rapport building, the relationship gathering.” The stories told by participants and mentors was described as enabling participants to gain perspective, specifically, “that they’re not alone in their journeys.”

Another key benefit of the program that was identified by the police mentors was a greater understanding of the Muslim faith *for the mentors*. Interviewees spoke of gaining a deeper insight into the Muslim culture and faith generally, and the diverse backgrounds of the program participants more specifically. One interviewee spoke of how the program gave them insight into “their cultures, their beliefs, their social [traditions].”

Finally, interviewees spoke highly of the all-women mentoring team in a women-focussed program. For example, one interviewee outlined the benefits of involving female mentors:

“I think there is real strength when women speak together about those things because what often happens is they're thinking and feeling foolish about something. When they then speak about it they find out that the person beside them, or the person across the table, is thinking and feeling exactly the same thing, and how thankful they are that they've said something. Then they all start talking about it. If it's not them, it's their sister. If it's not their sister, it's their mother, or they know of somebody else. It's that connection. It's very powerful.”

Some of the mentors spoke of how having female participants *and* mentors enabled both parties to relate to each other better. One interviewee said the ability to share experiences was “enriching” and “powerful.” Another outlined how the appeal to become involved in the program stemmed largely from “the fact it was women focussed... and the fact that it was a vulnerable target group of Muslim women.”

4. Recommendations for Future Programs

After asking the police mentors about what they liked most about the program, interviewees were asked about how the program could be improved into the future. While the consensus from interviewees was that the program was beneficial for both mentors and participants, some interviewees did make some useful recommendations for the implementation of future programs.

Providing a Platform for Open and Personal Discussions

One recommendation made by a mentor was to provide more time for open and personal discussions. Several interviewees discussed the benefits associated with providing a platform for participants *and* mentors to discuss their own personal stories. One interviewee spoke of how stories divulged by both mentors and participants during the program were “powerful” and provided “insight into their diverse lives and backgrounds”. Hence, dedicating more time to facilitating open discussions was seen as an opportunity for enhancing the empowerment of both participants and mentors in future programs. One other interviewee proposed setting aside time at the end of the program to “give everyone the opportunity to stand up and talk about themselves again, just to see the difference that that would be.”

Including More Sessions and Additional Stakeholders

Another recommendation for improving the program into the future included adding different sessions such as self-defence, custody issues, financial issues, and more around domestic violence. Interestingly, one of the Muslim women who completed a survey before and after the program suggested self-defence training would be very useful to her (see Murphy et al 2017).

There was also an expressed desire to involve other stakeholders such as the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Border Force, and Queensland Rail, to name a few. Interviewees highlighted how these departments could provide greater insight and information into some of the issues raised by program participants. For example, some participants outlined feeling unsafe

on public transport. Thus, one interviewee suggested that sessions by the relevant stakeholders would provide the participants with information about how to respond and be resilient towards the issues they faced. In addition to engaging other stakeholders, one interviewee spoke of including other police divisions within the QPS to provide “a broader scope of what police are about.”

The Mentor Role

The role of mentors was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Firstly, some interviewees discussed how both the expertise and the attitudes of police officers were crucial to determining whether they would be appropriate for the mentor role. Police attitudes were identified by interviewees as including their overall attitude towards the program, and specifically, their commitment to the program and achieving its goals. For example, one interviewee stressed that mentors “[have] got to be participant focussed.” Another interviewee highlighted the importance of engaging female mentors to empower female participants in an all-female program. At the same time, they noted there was also value in engaging more male presenters “with great knowledge and expertise, [who] could facilitate in a very tactful, and respectful way” information about particular topics that the female mentors had little expertise in.

Another interviewee also suggested that asking the mentors to assist other mentors in future programs may provide greater insights into what does and does not work. Other interviewees highlighted how engaging the Muslim participants as mentors in the future could greatly improve their own confidence as well as the new program participants, but would also provide educational benefits to police mentors.

Adapting the Program to Meet Differing Needs

One suggestion made by interviewees was to adapt the program so it could be rolled out to different communities. Interviewees spoke of a desire “to see the program grow and move and have transferability to other cultures”, and “to be flexible to meet differing needs.” Others

suggested these types of programs are crucial in developing partnerships with other communities. To summarise, one participant saw the program “as hugely beneficial, very powerful, [with] huge potential to be replicated across the state” with Muslims as well as other communities.

In addition to the benefits associated with the program itself, there was also an identified need to ensure other logistical aspects of the program met participants’ needs. A repeated issue among the interviewees was “punctuality” and “transport issues”. Interviewees discussed needing to acknowledge that often participants would not arrive on time and that future programs should include flexibility in the daily schedule so all proposed sessions could still be covered. Another identified barrier was related to language. While participants in the program were all required to have a basic understanding of the English language it became apparent throughout the program that English was a barrier for some participants. This issue became particularly evident when participants completed surveys and where participants would translate for others. One interviewee suggested that future programs ensure that “English is a good foundation for all participants.”

Dreamworld

One of the program activities included a visit to Dreamworld. The intention of the Dreamworld trip was to facilitate an open environment where the participants could relax and have fun. While police mentors highlighted that the idea was good, in hindsight they suggested that a different venue may be more comfortable for female participants. Another interviewee recalled that during the Dreamworld trip participants were offered free time and suggested a similar activity in the future would be more valuable if the participants and mentors stayed together.

The Role of the Police Uniform

A final, and seemingly contentious issue raised in the interviews was the necessity for the police uniform. While some interviewees suggested there may be benefits to wearing plain clothes to some of the sessions, others highlighted the need for mentors to be in uniform “to build and strengthen relationships.” Underpinning this issue was the notion of barriers, with one interviewee

stating: “whenever you walk into a room of community members or police, if there's uniforms in the room, uniforms will always usually gravitate to the uniforms.” This interviewee further stated that the separation between the police mentors and the participants became obvious in certain situations, such as during lunch breaks. Perhaps commencing the program in uniform followed by subsequent sessions in plain clothes may serve to break down barriers between the mentors and participants.

Conclusion

The key themes emerging from the interviews highlight the benefits and positive outcomes associated with the *Connected Women Program*, not only for program participants, but also for the police mentors involved in the program. Excerpts from the interviews with eight police mentors demonstrate that the overarching aims of the program to forge relationships, build networks, educate and empower participants appear to have been met. Other outcomes outlined in this document further affirms the effect this program has had on police-community relationships, and provides evidence in support of conducting similar programs in the future. The QPS has the capability to see the program continue into the future and to scope the value of expanding the program to other community groups across Queensland.

References

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