

Galila Abdel Salam

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Galila and husband Emad

Galila, her husband Emad and their only child left Egypt in 1983 to start a new life in Sydney, Australia. Her husband had been offered a job and they decided to migrate even though it was a short-term contract. Galila's qualifications as an agricultural engineer were not recognised, so she decided to change her profession and trained at TAFE as a draughtsperson. She had basic English which she had learned at High School, but passed

her course with flying colours. However Galila found that she could never get beyond the initial phone interview. When she did turn up in person for a formal interview, she was always unsuccessful. "It probably had much to do with my Muslim garb and their negative perceptions of that Muslim image. Anti-discrimination laws did not permit them to voice their opinions, but you could always see it in their eyes."

Thus for the first few years she stayed at home and had two more children. Then in 1989, the family came up to Brisbane for a holiday and immediately loved the quieter, smaller city. Unlike Sydney, they found people to be more tourist-oriented and friendlier. Thus a decision was made to re-locate to sunny Brisbane. In her very first week, Galila made a beeline for the Logan Neighbourhood Centre. She was feeling very lonely and was looking forward to making new friends. It did not matter the least if these women were not Muslim. Coming from Egypt, there was always a great degree of tolerance and co-operation between the Muslims and the Coptic Christians; besides, at home, two of her best friends had been Christian.

Before long, Galila was a member of the Management Committee of the Centre and a few years later, its Vice-president. It was a formative time for her as not only was she actively involved with a multicultural group, she was now learning to set up networks and to fully understand Australian systems. Three years passed before a nucleus of Islamic women was formed, even though there was nothing concrete to actually offer to them.

Fifteen Muslim women turned up at a first meeting in 1991; it was more of a consultative process, trying to discern what the women really wanted. Galila found that the women just wanted to get together since Brisbane's Muslim community was only twelve thousand strong at that stage and there was nothing going for the Muslim woman then. The group decided that initially they would operate on the 'Tupperware principle' –membership would form only through friendship networks!

The Islamic Women's Association of Queensland (IWAQ) became a reality later that year, and began operations at the Regional Resource Centre in Woodridge. They were

given a room free of charge and were allowed to hold meetings in the Conference room. By 1992, IWAQ was producing a newsletter that was mailed to approximately 270 members. In 1996, IWAQ moved to the Migrant Resource Centre, receiving a federal Government grant to assist in the resettlement of Muslim families. These families came from a whole range of nations stretching over several continents. There were Muslims from Albania and Bosnia, where the women were often uneducated and illiterate. The ones who came from war-torn Lebanon also lacked a learning culture and the latest wave of Muslim arrivals included refugees from the Horn of Africa and Afghanistan.

Even while Galila was establishing her women's association, she began working in late 1991 with the Migrant Women's Emergency Support Services. This lasted two years before she moved on to the Women's Health Centre. This was again an illuminating time for her, as it helped her identify relevant health issues that needed to be introduced and emphasised among Muslim women. Many were unaware of the basic concerns relating to pap smears and mammograms; most were not aware that Australian law did not tolerate any form of domestic violence.

IWAQ received funding in 1997 to run an Aged Care Programme to look after the Muslim elderly living at home and in December 2001, it moved to its own building in Sunnybank Hills. At present, there are no Nursing Homes for Muslim Aged who have special dietary requirements that are religion-based, and for whom communication is a major problem due to language restrictions. Thus Galila helps to co-ordinate this programme, but still spends a lot of time looking after her women's interests and helping with newly – arrived migrants.

Indeed, from 1996 – 2001, there has been a non-stop flow of Muslim refugee families into Brisbane, coming from the Balkans, the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa. These people are referred to IWAQ by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). Galila has recruited a band of bilingual volunteers who will meet them at the airport, transport them to motels, link them with service providers like Medicare and Centrelink, and assist them with bank accounts and tax file numbers. For every family IWAQ helps, it is at least three months before a family really settles down. And seeing that the refugees from various ethnic backgrounds speak a host of languages, Galila has a huge task on her hands. (In IWAQ meetings, where over twenty nationalities gather, they all have to speak English!)

Galila's mission to educate, inform and establish support systems for Islamic women has necessitated working relationships with non-Islamic bodies with similar interests. The feminist ideas of the Women's Health Centre have impacted Muslim women who traditionally have very little rights in their home countries. Given the fact that IWAQ is technically a multicultural association that invariably has to use translators and bilingual speakers, strong links with the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) have been forged as well as the Non - English Speaking Background Association (NESBA).

IWAQ joins these groups for their cross-cultural workshops and functions, and shares in the research and programmes that emanate from all their efforts. She knows that her association cannot be seen to favour any one culture and therefore attempts to increase their cross-cultural skills. Furthermore, many do not realize that even among

the Muslims, there is a variety of 'schools' that include the Sunnis, the Shiites, the Sufis and other sects.

There is hardly any time for cultural activities as sometimes they are snowed under with having to deal with fifteen to twenty clients a week. Galila declares, "This is far too much for us to handle. We not only try to educate our women and inform them of facilities and services available to them, as well as their rights, but we also need to produce referrals, act as interpreters and double up as unofficial social workers and counsellors." All this is in addition to her 'normal' work as Aged Care Service co-ordinator! But an exception was made after the September 11 tragedy last year. As anti-Muslim sentiments reared its ugly head among minor sections of Australian society, many government and religious groups banded together in a show of support and solidarity. As part of this move to counter the post-September negativity, IWAQ participated in an Exhibition mounted at the RNA showgrounds, three weeks later, to "Celebrate The Difference". They displayed traditional clothing of Muslims who have literally come from all corners of the world, to make Australia their new haven.

Galila is grateful that she has a very supportive husband; otherwise she would never be able to do all that she currently does. Volunteering in the larger society is quite an alien concept among Muslims where nearly all activities occur within the context of their religion. There would be some fund-raising efforts for the mosque, or some informal work to help with the resettlement of refugees. You are expected to help your own family, but apart from that, nothing much else happens. Thus Galila is pleased that the Imams from the mosque seem to approve of what the IWAQ is doing, and are willing to get involved in some of their projects and functions.



Galila at work

At all times, IWAQ treads a delicate path. It needs to show that it is not anti-family; neither is it a rabid feminist movement. The Association informs women of the legal measures available to them; it does look after women who have been abandoned or who are victims of domestic violence, but Galila and her team are at pains to prove that they do not encourage women to leave their homes. Galila feels that in a way, IWAQ is hindered in its work by the fact that it does not have a Refuge for Muslim women, unlike Sydney with its Women's Refuge.

There have been occasions when Galila has felt some disappointment and hurt, and that is when the people she helps expects her to do so, since they consider her as merely doing 'her duty'. But the overwhelming success that IWAQ has had in raising the status of the Muslim woman in Brisbane over the last ten years makes Galila feel very contented. What she finds most gratifying is the fact that her group has won the trust of the community as well as government, and the respect of the mosque officials. Evidence of this was seen in 2001, when Galila's team was awarded the 'Excellence in Care' Team Award by Aged Care Queensland.

Thus, Galila considers the setting up of IWAQ as the best thing that she has done in terms of volunteering in Australia. “It is nice to see that the seed you have planted is now a tree with fruit on it. Sure there are people who try to jump on the bandwagon now that they see that the work we do is much needed and greatly appreciated, but well, when there is honey, you will always find flies as well as the bees”. Thus Galila is philosophical about her achievements, but there is one fact that no one can take away from her: she and her team have been acknowledged as doing very good work and no matter what any one says or feels about them, their good work will continue to flourish!