

# **Volunteering within ethno-religious community contexts: Empirical insights with a focus on Muslim intra-community engagement in Australia**

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*Towards a*  
**National Strategy  
for Volunteering**



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# Volunteering within ethno-religious community contexts: Empirical insights with a focus on Muslim intra-community engagement in Australia

Mario Peucker<sup>1</sup>

## Key Insights

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- Ethno-religious community organisations are both important sites of volunteering for people from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds, as well as bridges to cross-community engagement and volunteering in the wider community.
- Volunteering within one's cultural or religious community context is not an expression of, nor does it lead to, self-segregation. To the contrary, it is mostly driven by a firm commitment to advancing the common good, and serves to enhance social networks.
- Cultural barriers and lack of inclusion in voluntary sector organisations are often part of the reason why people from diverse backgrounds choose to volunteer time in an organisation within their own community.
- The main volunteering motives for Australian Muslims are shaped by altruism, but this altruism is almost always intertwined with a sense of religious duty to do good deeds. Another Muslim-specific driver for volunteering is to counteract and respond to Islamophobia.
- Muslims' intra-community volunteering strengthens their social networks, deepens both their civic and religious identity, and fosters their active citizenship.

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## Introduction

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More than half of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas.<sup>2</sup> As the latest census data show, the country's cultural diversity not only continues to grow, but Australia's multiculturalism also keeps changing as non-European immigration from non-English speaking countries continues to increase. These demographic developments affect many aspects of social and community life, including the voluntary sector. Given these ongoing demographic changes, it is becoming more evident than ever that volunteerism among people from multicultural and multifaith communities is not a minority issue at the margins of civil society; instead, it takes place in a social environment where ethno-religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity is a common feature. What we once typically referred to as 'mainstream', associated with predominantly white, Anglo-Christian institutions, norms, and cultures, has become a much more diverse, multicultural reality. This has significant implications for the volunteering ecosystem.

Official statistics have pointed to lower levels of formal volunteering among multicultural and multifaith populations in Australia. The reasons for this underrepresentation are complex and include socio-economic, cultural, and often language and settlement related factors (see Jedwab 2022, *Volunteering inclusion for people from CALD backgrounds*). Practitioners and academics acknowledge that it is vital for the Australian volunteering ecosystem to address these factors and make volunteering spaces more inclusive to increase volunteering among people from diverse backgrounds. Governments have also highlighted the importance of volunteering of immigrants and culturally diverse communities, often framing it as a vehicle for integration by strengthening social and cultural capital.<sup>3</sup>

These are important perspectives on inclusive volunteering in a multicultural society. The focus of these discussions, however, tends to be on volunteering in the 'broader' community, while community volunteering at the local temple or mosque or in other ethnic or religious community organisations receives less attention or is even viewed less favourably.<sup>4</sup> This is also reflected in the scarcity of research on intra-community volunteering within culturally or religiously diverse contexts. In the National Survey of Australian Volunteers from Diverse Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds (AMF and VA 2006), for example, 96 per cent of all organisational respondents described their not-for-profit organisations as 'mainstream' organisations; the remaining 4 per cent identified

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2 ABS, 2022

3 Handy and Greenspan, 2009; Wang and Handy, 2014; Ishizawa, 2015

4 Sunnier, 2020; Peucker, 2020a

as either multicultural or ethnically specific, i.e. working with multicultural groups or with specific ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

This paper presents a synthesis of key research that sheds light on this under-researched dimension of ethno-religious intra-community volunteering in a pluralistic civil society – with a particular focus on the situation of Australian Muslims, which has received some academic attention in recent years. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the multiple personal and social benefits of volunteering within ethno-religious community contexts, which constitutes an important but often under-appreciated and under-valued form of volunteer community work in Australia’s multicultural society.

## Quantitative scope of ethno-religious community participation and volunteering

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) General Social Survey, Australians born overseas are less likely to have engaged in formal volunteering (i.e. voluntary work through an organisation) in the last 12 months, but equally likely to have ‘undertaken informal volunteering in the last 4 weeks’ (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> National and international studies have found that immigrants and ethnic/religious minorities tend to engage more in informal volunteering, often in the form of unpaid community work, which is often not considered as volunteering although it may take place within an organisational context (Wilson 2012; Mayblin and Soteri-Proctor 2011; Sundeen et al. 2007; Walsh and Black 2015; Madkhul 2007; AMF and VA 2006).

**Table 1: Formal and informal volunteering rates in Australia (2020), in per cent**

	Born in Australia	Born overseas			Total persons
		Recent migrants and temporary residents	Other migrants	Total Migrants	
Has undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months	27.2	15.0	22.3	19.7	24.8
Has undertaken informal volunteering in last 4 weeks	31.9	37.3	31.0	32.4	32.1

Source: ABS 2020

5 [https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/1377045874VAResearchBulletinFindingsfromNationalSurveyofAustralianVolunteersfromCALDBBackgrounds2006.pdf](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files_mf/1377045874VAResearchBulletinFindingsfromNationalSurveyofAustralianVolunteersfromCALDBBackgrounds2006.pdf)

6 ABS, 2020

This (formal or informal) volunteer work frequently takes place within ethnic, cultural, or religious communities.<sup>7</sup> Research confirms the prevalence of intra-community volunteering also for Australian Muslims. A Sydney study by Kevin Dunn and colleagues found that 36 per cent of the 500 interviewed Muslims ‘volunteered for a faith-based organisation’ (compared with just under 14 per cent volunteering for a sporting association).<sup>8</sup> A few years earlier, a survey among 500 Muslims in Melbourne similarly found that religious organisations as well as Muslim sports, leisure and cultural groups were particularly prominent sites of ‘active participation’.<sup>9</sup>

## Sites of volunteering: Choosing an ethnic-religious community organisation

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There is evidence indicating that those who volunteer within their own ethnic, cultural or religious (minority) community context often also volunteer for other, non-minority specific organisations. In the AMF and VA survey among Australian volunteers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, for example, 56 per cent of all respondents stated they were involved in both their ‘ethnic community and the broader community’.<sup>10</sup> Empirical studies on Muslims’ civic engagement in Germany and Australia and Australian Muslims’ intra-community volunteering confirms this. Although the sampling in the latter study focussed specifically on Muslims volunteering *within* a Muslim community context, the study found that a majority of respondents simultaneously volunteered in both a Muslim and a wider community environment (Peucker 2020a: 2375-76).<sup>11</sup>

Rather than being mutually exclusive, intra-community and wider-community volunteering often occurs in tandem among people from multicultural and multifaith backgrounds. International research confirms that. Read’s US study, for example, found that Arab Muslim men who were ‘very involved in mosque activities’ – assumedly through intra-community volunteering – were statistically significantly more likely to be also involved in ‘secular community activities’ such as school or youth programmes, cultural organisations, neighbourhood groups, trade unions, or organisations that help the poor and homeless.<sup>12</sup> A Dutch study on civic-political participation of Turkish and Moroccan minorities found that ‘of all Turks and Moroccans who are engaged in

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7 Bhasin, 1997; Wilson 2012

8 Dunn et al., 2015

9 Monash University, 2009

10 [https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/1377045874VAResearchBulletinFindingsfromNationalSurveyofAustralianVolunteersfromCALDBackgrounds2006.pdf](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files_mf/1377045874VAResearchBulletinFindingsfromNationalSurveyofAustralianVolunteersfromCALDBackgrounds2006.pdf)

11 Peucker, 2020a, p. 2375-76

12 Read, 2015

co-ethnic organisations, more than half are also engaged in cross-ethnic forms'.<sup>13</sup> In this context it is worth noting that, according to the findings of a qualitative German-Australian study by Peucker, for many Muslim participants intra-community volunteering has had a gateway function, paving the way towards civic-political engagement in the wider community.<sup>14</sup>

There is limited evidence on how those from an ethnically, culturally, or religiously diverse background choose to volunteer for an organisation within their respective community. Based on 16 in-depth interviews and an explorative survey among 138 Australian Muslims who volunteered for a Muslim religious or faith-based organisation, Peucker found that 'the vast majority of study participants make a very conscious decision about where they invest their volunteering time and effort'.<sup>15</sup> This decision is mainly guided by the question as to where individuals see their contribution to be particularly meaningful and effective; only for about one quarter of survey respondents was the religious nature of the organisation the key factor in their decision to volunteer there.

The same study found that the community volunteering journey of many Muslim participants started as a result of their previous connections with the respective community organisation; being asked by someone from the organisation to volunteer was often an important trigger for their volunteering pathway.<sup>16</sup> This confirms international research on the mobilising effects of religious community organisations,<sup>17</sup> and of 'organisational religiosity', i.e. participation in religious services.<sup>18</sup> Only a minority of surveyed Muslims in Peucker's study began volunteering 'without external encouragement or invitation'.<sup>19</sup> For the majority, social networks and especially 'weak ties' with community representatives were crucial in initiating their volunteering.<sup>20</sup> A recent case study on culturally diverse volunteering in Melbourne's west similarly concluded 'volunteering is first and foremost relationship-based, particularly in local community volunteering... People join their local community groups as volunteers through connections'.<sup>21</sup>

The decision of people from culturally or religiously diverse background to volunteer within their specific ethno-religious community context instead of a wider-community

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- 13 Van Londen, et al. 2007, 1212; see also Fleischmann et al., 2016
  - 14 Peucker, 2016
  - 15 Peucker, 2020b
  - 16 Peucker, 2020a
  - 17 Wuthnow, 1994; Wang and Handy, 2014; Von Essen et al., 2015
  - 18 Read, 2015; Fleischmann et al., 2016; Vergani et al., 2017
  - 19 Peucker, 2020a, p. 2379
  - 20 Granovetter, 1983
  - 21 Gapasin et al., 2021, p. 15

organisation is influenced by a range of personal, socioeconomic, and cultural factors.<sup>22</sup> These include, among others, a lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities in the wider community as well as language and, more specifically, cultural barriers and a sense of ‘not feeling welcome as volunteers within volunteer-involving organisations’.<sup>23</sup> Explorative studies in Australia generally confirm such an assessment, pointing to cultural barriers and a lack of inclusion. Peucker’s study among Australian Muslims, for example, found that six out of ten survey respondents explained their decision to volunteer for a Muslim community organisation was, among other factors, due to not having to ‘explain their religious duties and practices’.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, one third expressed concerns they might not experience the same level of respect in non-Muslim organisations.<sup>25</sup> Gaspin et al.’s (2021: 15) case study on culturally diverse volunteering in Melbourne’s west also identified cultural barriers, with some participants noting a lack of flexibility within organisations in accommodating cultural needs of volunteers from diverse backgrounds.<sup>26</sup> The study further states that ‘there are also members who are less welcoming of volunteers who come from multicultural communities and who speak languages other than English.’

## Motives for intra-community volunteering

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There is limited empirical evidence on volunteering motives of those from ethnically, culturally or religiously diverse backgrounds and on how these motives may differ from other volunteers. A US-study by Latting from the late 1980s found that altruistic reasons and a sense of social responsibility were more common among black volunteers than among their white counterparts within the same volunteering context.<sup>27</sup> But it is unclear to what extent these US findings from over 30 years ago apply to the Australian situation today.

The Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) and Volunteering Australia (VA) study concluded that the reasons for volunteering of those from culturally diverse backgrounds were overall similar to those from the broader community, identifying three particular prominent motivations among their surveyed people from diverse background: ‘to

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22 Wilson, 2012

23 Southby et al., 2019, p. 914

24 Peucker, 2020b

25 Cultural barriers and, more explicitly, concerns around racism were also identified in Peucker’s qualitative analysis (2021: 34). One survey participant stated, for example: ‘[Volunteering for a Muslim organisation] reduces the fear of being discriminated against ... or abused; limited exposure to the [wider] community reduces such experiences; therefore, it is safer on the whole to volunteer within Muslim organisations, which in effect helps the wider community.’

26 Gaspin et al., 2021, p. 15

27 Latting, 1990



do something worthwhile, help own community [and] personal satisfaction'.<sup>28</sup> The study, however, also identified 'spiritual beliefs [as] an important motivator for many respondents'.<sup>29</sup>

Australian research confirms the centrality of religious motives behind Muslims' volunteering, although the term itself is rarely used in these studies. Harris and Roose (2014: 798) found that the majority of their study participants (80 Australian Muslim from Melbourne and Brisbane) expressed that it is a 'special obligation as Muslims to help others or make the community a better place' and that 'being a Muslim made a difference to the extent or kind of social or civic action they were involved in (p. 808) (though, as discussed above, Muslims choose the organisation they want to volunteer for not primarily based its religious/Islamic nature). Peucker, Johns et al. and Vergani et al. have come to similar conclusions: for many civically active Muslims in Australia their Islamic faith was an important motivating driver for their involvement in 'active forms of community engagement and service'.<sup>30</sup>

Confirming the AMF and VA findings,<sup>31</sup> Peucker also identifies patterns of convergence between motives for Muslim intra-community volunteering and volunteering motivations more broadly, using as a point of comparison the representative findings on volunteering motivations in Stukas et al.'s Victorian study.<sup>32</sup> What the Volunteer Functions Inventory captures under the 'values' category – volunteering to 'express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns'<sup>33</sup> – resonates with the dominant motives for Muslims' intra-community volunteering. Almost all participants in Peucker's study volunteered because they seek 'to contribute to society at large', 'to support the Muslim community and/or fellow Muslims' and 'to help people who are disadvantaged and/or need help' (Figure 1).<sup>34</sup> The fact that these three volunteering motives almost always coincide, without any conflict between common good oriented reasons and Muslim community-oriented motives, underscores how ethno-religious communities see themselves as an integral part of a diverse (civil) society instead of sitting on the fringes of the 'wider community'.

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28 AMF and VA, 2006

29 AMF and VA, 2006, p. 6

30 Peucker, 2016; Peucker, 2018, Johns et al., 2015; Vergani et al., 2017; for a theological discussion on volunteering in Islam, see Keskin and Yucel, 2020

31 AMF and VA, 2006

32 Peucker, 2020b; Stukas et al., 2016

33 Clary et al., 1998, p. 1517

34 Peucker, 2020b, p. 78

Similar to Stukas et al.'s findings,<sup>35</sup> reasons related to 'career-related benefits' were much less important among surveyed Muslims in Peucker's survey.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, they were by far the least common motive (and even less common than in Stukas et al.'s study), with some study participants even stating that their volunteering within a Muslim context can have *negative* implications for their job prospects due to discriminatory biases in the hiring process.<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding these general convergences, Muslims' motives for intra-community volunteering appear to also have several community-specific features. The first one is the 'highly religious nature of most Muslims' motives behind their community volunteering', with almost all survey respondents stating that they volunteer 'because it is an Islamic obligation to do good deeds'.<sup>38</sup> Qualitative research has repeatedly highlighted this motivational facet of Muslims' civic engagement both within Muslim contexts and beyond, whereby volunteer community work is not only a religious duty but 'serving humanity' is also seen as an integral 'principle of lived religiosity'.<sup>39</sup>

Confirming international research,<sup>40</sup> the second prominent motivational factor specific to Muslim volunteers revolves around the desire to address anti-Muslims sentiments, Islamophobia, and institutional misrecognition. Nine out of ten survey respondents agreed that it is an important reason for their intra-community volunteering 'to do something about the negative perception of Muslims in Australia'.<sup>41</sup> This motive can translate into different forms of volunteering, for example, in interfaith dialogue initiatives as an "ambassador" of Islam' or in intra-community engagement aimed at empowering the community to respond to Islamophobia.<sup>42</sup>

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35 Stukas et al., 2016

36 Clary et al, 1998, p. 1518; Peucker, 2020b

37 Peucker, 2021

38 Peucker, 2020b, p. 80

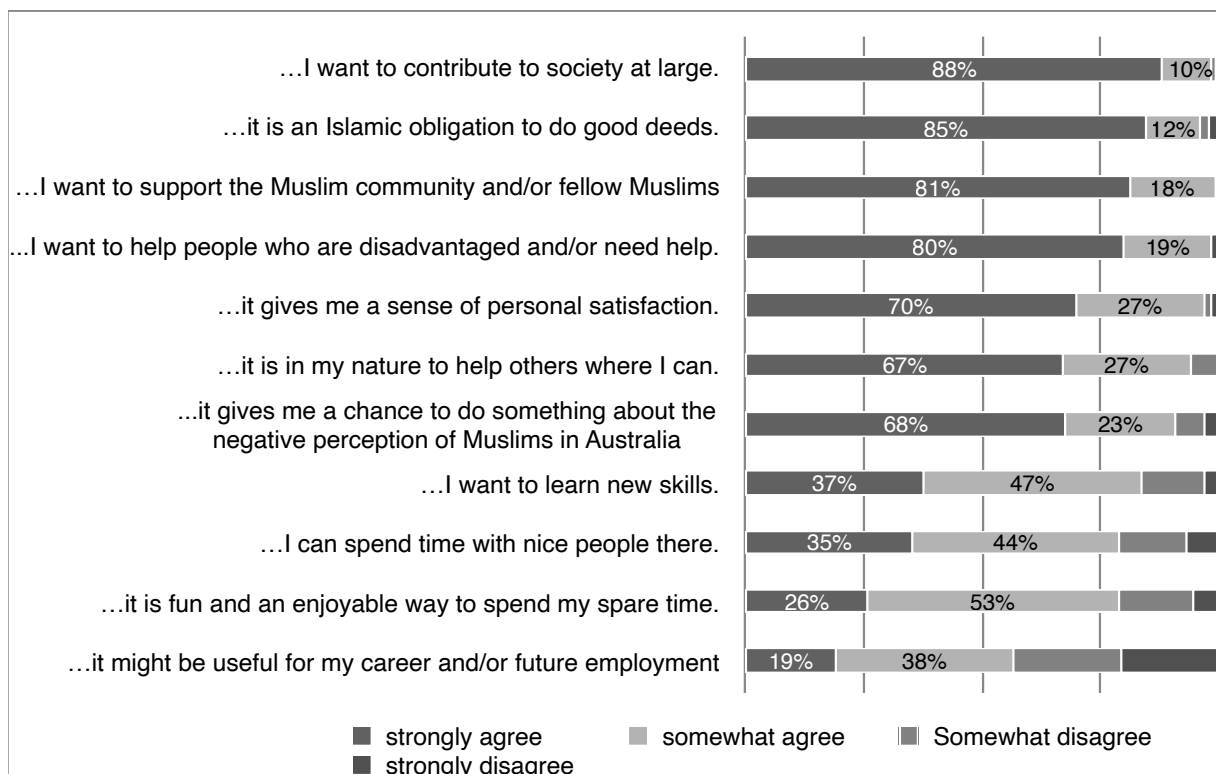
39 Peucker, 2018, p. 567

40 Finlay and Hopkins, 2020; Pilkington and Acik, 2020

41 Peucker, 2020a, p. 2378

42 van Es, 2019, p. 375

**Figure 1: Motives for volunteering**



Source: Peucker 2020a (N=131-136, varied for each item)

## Implications of intra-community volunteering

Intra-community volunteering of people from ethnically, culturally, or religiously diverse background can have a range of personal implications. One of these relates to the mobilising effects of community volunteering on their political engagement. Studies from the US and several European countries have found a positive correlation between Muslims’ active involvement in their mosque and intra-community volunteering and their (non-electoral) political participation.<sup>43</sup>

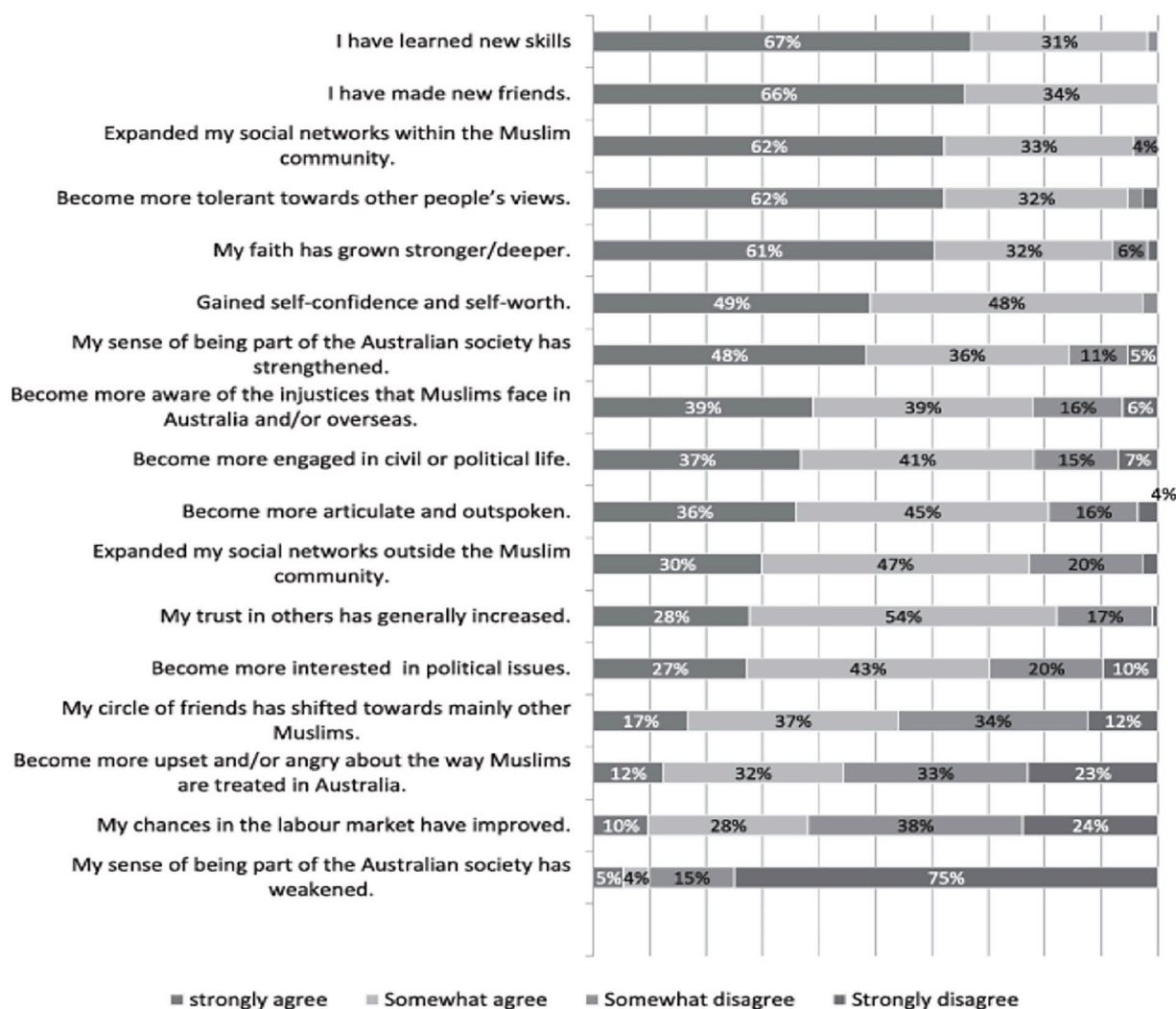
Other effects of intra-community volunteering of ethno-religious minorities have received less empirical attention. In the Australian context, Peucker’s study among Muslim intra-community volunteers concluded, in line with findings on social benefits of volunteering more broadly,<sup>44</sup> that most survey participants learned new skills (although only a minority believe this has increased their employability) and expanded their social networks both *within* the Muslim community (95 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, outside the Muslim

43 Jamal, 2005; Ayers and Hofstetter, 2008; Dana et al., 2017; Giugni et al., 2014; McAndrew and Sobolewska, 2015

44 Walsh and Black, 2015, p. 21

community context (77 per cent).<sup>45</sup> Volunteering within a Muslim community also had a number of other pro-social effects, such as increased general trust (82 per cent) and tolerance towards other people’s views (94 per cent). Moreover, participants noted their growing self-confidence and self-worth, both a sense of belonging to Australian society and strengthening of their Islamic faith, and increased political awareness and civic-political engagement (Figure 2). These findings suggest that Muslims’ intra-community participation has helped build cross-community bridges (‘bridging’ social capital) and served as a catalyst for further civic-political engagement also beyond the Muslim community context.<sup>46</sup>

**Figure 2: Personal implications of volunteering for Muslim community organisation**



Source: Peucker 2020a

45 Peucker, 2020a

46 See also Peucker, 2016

## Gaps and future research directions

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Volunteering motives, pathways, and experiences of people from culturally or religiously diverse backgrounds remain under-researched. This holds true in particular to those who volunteer, formally or informally, within their ethno-religious community context. Future research should address this gap, exploring intra-community volunteering as an ordinary form of civic engagement in a diversifying civil society, whilst being attentive to potential specifics of the volunteering experience in multicultural and multifaith communities.

Moreover, while there is some empirical research emerging on voluntary community work among Australian Muslims (although more research with larger samples is needed), other ethnic, cultural, or religious minority community groups have not received any significant research attention. This research should apply methods of co-design to help enhance community agency and empowerment and avoid essentialising these communities.

## Policy and practice implications

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This paper seeks to make a contribution to the discussion around inclusion and volunteering in Australia's multicultural society – a discussion that has typically focussed primarily on how to make volunteer organisations more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive for people from multicultural and multifaith communities. Volunteering *within* one's ethnic, cultural, or religious minority community context, however, has often been overlooked in this debate. Such a narrow perspective appears increasingly misguided in a society where not only the pool of volunteers but also the organisational structures of the volunteering ecosystem themselves have become much more diverse. It also ignores that intra-community volunteering has, like volunteering more broadly, a range of positive effects on people's social networks, sense of belonging, identity, and self-confidence as well as their civic-political awareness and engagement. Intra-community engagement is both a manifestation of, and catalyst for, active citizenship of people from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, rather than having self-isolating effects, intra-community volunteering often builds bridges to other civil society organisations, creating new opportunities for cross-community interaction and engagement. Policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders in the volunteering ecosystem need to acknowledge, value, and actively promote intra-community volunteering – not at the expense of volunteering in other organisational contexts, but as an 'ordinary' part of volunteering in an increasingly diverse society.

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