



19 March 2019

Dismantling Islamophobia

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the most important thing in the world?

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

The *Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand* (CSWEANZ) stands in solidarity with the New Zealand Muslim community and condemns the act of white supremacist violence that led to the murder of 50 innocent people at prayer in Christchurch on Friday the 15th of March 2019.

We pledge our support to the families of those killed and injured, to our Muslim colleagues and students, and to the wider Muslim community. We also commit to using our role as social work educators to help dismantle Islamophobia and drive white supremacist ideology from our country and the world.

New Zealand has a reputation for being a relatively safe and tolerant place for immigrants and refugees of different faiths. However, we are also a settler colonial state and are not immune to racist discourse, anti-indigenous sentiments, anti-immigrant politics, anti-Muslim bigotry or groups who openly display adherence to fascist ideologies. In the age of the internet, this country at the edge of the world, cannot distance itself from a global Islamophobic narrative that has been normalised by opportunist politicians, mainstream media, talk show hosts, academics, comedians and people using social media. A narrative that has demonised and dehumanised Muslim people in New Zealand and abroad.

Since the massacre at the mosques more than 350 leading Islamic figures, from across the world, [signed a letter to the Guardian newspaper](#), linking the actions of the alleged shooter to an atmosphere of “systemic and institutionalised Islamophobia”. The letter states that:

The massacre of Muslims did not just begin with bullets fired from the barrel of [the shooters] gun. Rather it was decades in the making: inspired by Islamophobic media reports, hundreds and thousands of column inches of hatred printed in the press, many Muslim-hating politicians and unchecked social media bigotry. Muslims have been constantly cast as suspect communities, foreigners with barbaric views who are a threat to our society. We are now reaping the awful outcome of systemic and institutionalised Islamophobia woven into many sections of our societies. This racism and xenophobia that has been allowed to fester for far too long – has deadly consequences – presenting one of the most significant challenges to civilised society in contemporary times.

The Council concurs with these views and calls on our colleagues in all international social work bodies – the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) – to commit to raising awareness and challenging Islamophobia.

The massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand cannot be seen in isolation. Its significance is global. Through the medium of online extremist communities the massacre was modelled on previous attacks across the world and, as perturbing as the thought may be, is likely to influence future outrages perpetrated elsewhere. Rather than giving the alt-right pause for thought, there are indications that the alleged shooter has already entered the online, fascist hall of fame.

Social work educators enable prospective social workers to learn about human rights, social justice, equality, diversity and cultural sensitivity. It

would, of course, be wrong to assume that there is a hierarchy of oppression: that one form of violence against a particular ethnic or religious group is more important to the social work community than another.

However, in the wake of the Christchurch attacks social work education needs to make a renewed commitment to graduating social workers with the knowledge, skills and values to fight deeply institutionalised Islamophobia in our communities, in mainstream media, amongst our politicians, on social media and in our own social networks.

In particular, we must take practical steps to review, produce and share educational and campaign materials and actions aimed at dismantling Islamophobia. These practical steps and actions should be guided and approved by Muslim colleagues and organisations.

Today we grieve, tomorrow, we must educate and organise.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Ballantyne', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Neil Ballantyne

President, Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand
(CSWEANZ)