

Confederation of Indian Organisations 29th March 2006
Presentation on
'Diversity as strength'



I begin in a supplication to my creator to ask for guidance in all that I do.

I would like to thank the Confederation of Indian Organisations for inviting me to this conference.

My name is Tamsila Tauqir and I am the project coordinator of the Safra Project.

The Safra Project was set up in October 2001 by a number of Muslim lesbian, bisexual and trans women - including myself. The Safra Project is a resource project working on issues relating to lesbian, bisexual and trans women who identify themselves as Muslim religiously and/or culturally, which I will shorten to Muslim LBT women.

Although we work on faith issues we are not a faith organisation. This is reflected in the fact that we include women who identify as Muslim culturally and **not** religiously. It should be noted that - in any case - the distinction between culture and religion is not clear cut.

Our work is relevant to other women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people (LGBT) from religious and ethnic minorities.

The word Safra is related to the words for journey and discovery in Arabic, Urdu and Farsi. This name reflects the purpose of the project which is to be a resource for women on their journeys discovering their multiple identities. This is reflected in the compass on our homepage, directing people on the website.

For your information I have listed here the aims of the Safra Project:

1. To empower Muslim LGBTQ women to deal with the issues they face resulting from their sexual orientation and/or gender (identity) within the context of their ethnic, cultural and/or religious background.
2. To raise awareness on the needs and issues relating to Muslim LGBTQ women in order to make service provision accessible and appropriate.
3. To eliminate (interrelated) prejudice and (multiple) discrimination experienced by Muslim LGBTQ women and promote diversity.

I was asked to present on the difficulties that South Asian lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) Muslim individuals face with their sexuality and how this might push their issues into obscurity and cause effects relating to mental health. Using direct proportionality from the last census, the estimate of South Asian Muslim LGBT people in Britain is approximately 140,000¹.

I decided to title this presentation, 'diversity as strength'. Current British society is in contrast to this statement; it attempts to diffuse out multiplicity and attempts to label us into a singularly identified person, the 'melting pot' expression rather than the 'salad bowl' comes to mind. In reality no such singular identified person exists. Let me give you an example. In my case I am a co-parent of a teenager, a Muslim, as well as a lesbian and not forgetting South Asian, plus much more. It is through experiencing racism, sexism and homophobia that my faith has given me not only strength but the tools to challenge prejudice in all its forms and build alliances with other groups like the disabled, refugees and other faith groups. The multiplicity of identities within me does not cause me personal fractions but adds to the sum of me in being who I am and the capacity of what I do.

One of the key reasons to set up the Safra Project was the lack of accessible and appropriate social and legal services for Muslim LBT women.

To address this we undertook a research project that resulted in an Initial findings report. The findings of the report are based on the input of about 80 Muslim LGBTQ women and 15 service providers. The report covers a wide range of issues - these are:

- Identity and mental health
- Coming Out
- Isolation
- Marriage and children
- Domestic violence and refuges
- Housing
- Employment
- Asylum

¹ Using a proportional estimate using 1.4 million South Asian Muslims at the last census (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=6892&More=Y>) and using Kinsey's estimates of gay people this will give us a proportional estimate of 140,000.

It is important to note that this is a report of *initial* findings. We are hoping to undertake more in-depth research on at least two of these areas once funding is secured.

It is also important to remember that the findings of the report do not represent the experiences of *all* Muslim LGBTQ women.

I will now go through some of the key findings of the report regarding identity & mental health.

In our Initial Findings Report's section on identity and mental health a glaring finding on our research shouted out how,

'Prejudicial and misinformed attitudes reinforce the misconception that Muslim LGBTQ women need to choose between an LGB identity and a cultural or religious identity.'

If Muslim LGBTQ women are forced, often through mental and emotional abuse and sometimes physical, the loss of religious and/or cultural identity causes many to feel 'bad ', guilty and depressed.

A major difficulty for the situation of most Muslims who are attracted to their own sex or are bisexual, or transgender lies in the immense pressure within our communities to follow tradition and patriarchal values blindly. Not to ask questions, not to understand oneself or one's faith on a deeper, broader perspective. Most women find it difficult to locate or access useful materials on this subject. The little material available is often concentrated on male homosexuality and/or is based on conservative and patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

In the area of mental health our key findings showed;

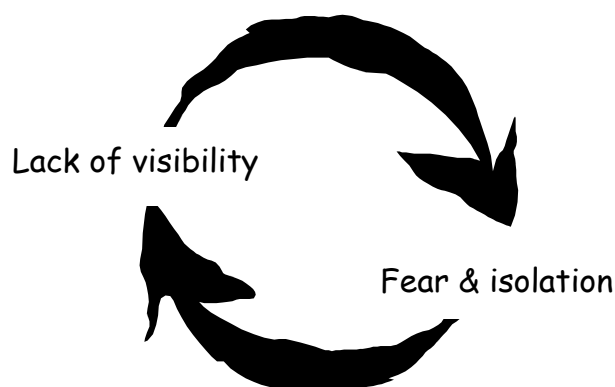
- The struggle to reconcile sexual orientation and/or gender identity with cultural and religious identities results in feeling in-themselves to be sinful or are called sinful by their friends and relatives. Many also do not know what the words lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender mean, or they associate these words with derogatory meanings.
- Muslim LGBTQ people often feel that they have to choose between being Muslim and being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

"When I realised that I was in love with a woman, I thought I would have to go to the other extreme of leaving Islam and leaving my family". (Safra Project, 2003)

- This struggle often leads to mental health problems, such as depression and self harm including suicide or attempted suicide.

We, that is the South Asian communities, as many communities, have not fully realised the negative effects of viewing individual differences as divisive. Instead we could view the differences as positive variations of human nature, 'the spice of life', and build on areas of common grounds. The situation of many Muslim LGBTQ women I have worked with has proved that when they are viewed in the one-dimension of either, Muslim only/Indian only/woman only/lesbian only/etc, it can often lead to emotional and mental struggles mentioned. Hence, the importance to recognise the holistic being, incorporating all of these as well as other identities.

The social struggles our communities are facing such as forced marriages, domestic violence and unequal employment opportunities can be even greater struggles for Muslim LGBTQ women. Living in a society that has been proven to be inherently racist², and I would like to add, sexist and homophobic, it is no wonder that there is an issue of mental health needs among some Muslim LGBTQ women. One of the first steps towards addressing the needs of Muslim LGBTQ women is recognising we exist from within our own communities as well as from wider society. Many may still not 'Come Out', due to fear of how their ethnic or religious community may react not only to themselves but the consequences on their families. Without 'Coming Out' the lack of visibility and role models perpetuates this 'Catch 22' situation;



² Mc Pherson Report (1999)

My focus on 'diversity as strength' comes from the Safra Project's view that we need to understand and accept, not just tolerate, the multiple identities of people and the diversity in religion. Tolerance doesn't require a deeper understanding or engagement with the issues, but is a superficial 'nod' of liberalism, whereas acceptance requires an active engagement for knowledge and actual work. That is the challenge for all of us.

Useful resources:

Bibliography of Islam, gender and sexuality:

http://www.safraproject.org/bibliography_sgib.htm

Queering India; Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society by Ruth Vanita. (Routledge), (2002).

Sex Longing and Not Belonging: A Gay Muslim's Quest for Love and Meaning by Badruddin Khan, Floating Lotus, (1997).

A Minority within A Minority: British Non-heterosexual Muslims (Report of Research Activities and Results) by Dr. Andrew Yip (2003)