

Below is a transcript of an article that appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of InExile – a magazine of the Refugee Council

‘The Journey to Acceptance – Working with and for lesbian and gay refugees from Muslim countries’

By Anisa de Jong & Suhraiya Jivraj of the Safra Project

To be a Muslim gay man or Muslim lesbian is often perceived as a contradiction in terms. This is no surprise as most Muslims (and non-Muslims) believe that Islam forbids homosexuality. This widespread belief, combined with an entrenched homophobia common to almost all cultures, has led to the prosecution and persecution of gay men and lesbians in many Muslim countries.

As a result, many Muslim gay men and lesbians struggling to reconcile their sexual orientation with their religion and culture. They often feel that they are forced to make a difficult or impossible choice: either to abandon Islam or to oppress their sexual orientation. For most people, particularly those living in Muslim countries, there usually is no choice but the latter. Those who are forced to flee often continue to struggle with this question.

The Safra Project is a voluntary resource project for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women who identify as Muslim either religiously and/or culturally (Muslim LBT women). Safra is an Arabic word meaning journey; the word also relates to discovery. When we held a conference to find out about needs of Muslim lesbians, we found that many experience Islamophobia, racism, homophobia or gender discrimination, or a combination of these. The Safra Project aims to raise awareness of the issues that face them in order to ensure that they can access appropriate social and legal services.

Another of our aims is to research and provide information on the treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in countries with a predominantly Muslim population in order to support the asylum claims of people from these groups. Because of the lack of country information on this issue generally, the Safra Project has included Muslim gay, bisexual and transgender men in this part of its work.

The Safra Project's work on refugee issues is not only relevant to those women who have fled from their countries because they suffered persecution on the grounds of their sexual orientation. Some women have entered the United Kingdom for other reasons, for example as a spouse of a refugee or a

UK resident, and find that it can be very difficult for them to return to their country if they later come out as being lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

The Safra Project has heard from women who have upsetting experiences dealing with caseworkers and interpreters who clearly strongly disapprove of homosexuality or who were fascinated by it in an unprofessional manner. Sometimes the fact that a caseworker or interpreter was Muslim or male, was enough reason for them to be fearful to speak about their homosexuality.

The Safra Project also tries to challenge ignorance, fear and lack of understanding by researching by researching and providing information on sexuality and transgender issues in Islam. We are looking at a diversity of perspectives, but our main focus is the modern and feminist scholars that concentrate on the concept of compassion, so central to the Quran. The Safra Project is not a religious organisation and does not seek to promote any one particular interpretation of Islam. Rather, we aim to provide resources and information to assist lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in forming their own opinions.

Anisa de Jong is the Asylum & Immigration Co-ordinator and Suhraiya the Joint Co-ordinator of the Safra Project. The project will be launching a social policy report and a website in January 2003. The report will focus on the need to raise awareness amongst service providers in the areas of mental health, asylum and safety about the issues faced by Muslim gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, including those who are seeking asylum. For further details of the work of the Safra Project, please email info@safraproject.org or call 07 941 659 320.