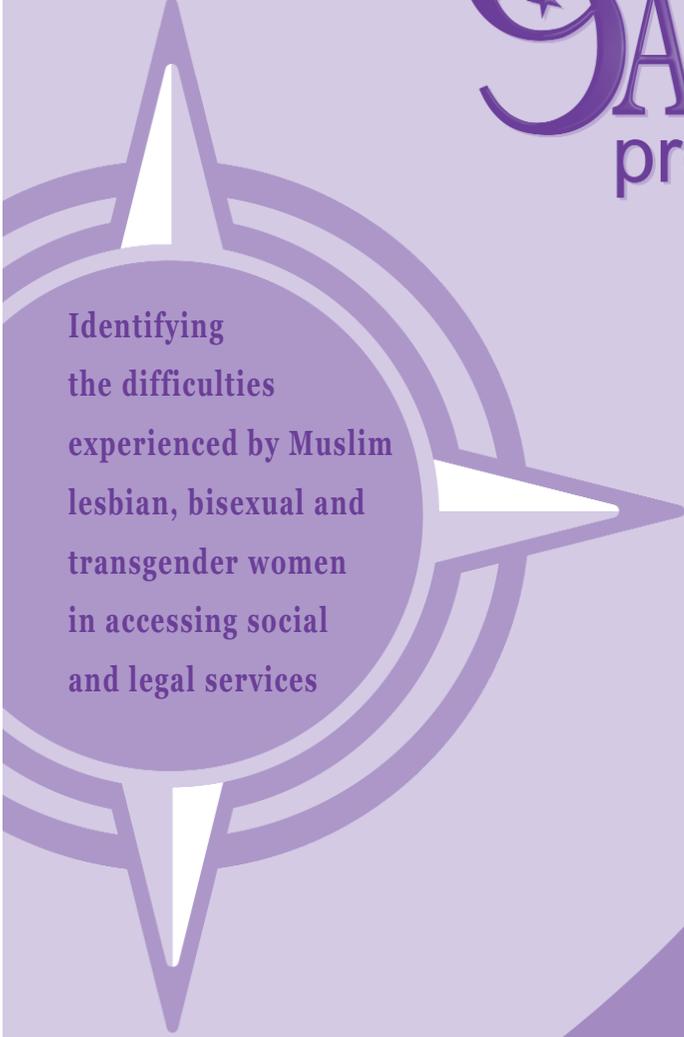


The logo for the SAFRA project features the word "SAFRA" in a large, stylized serif font. The letter "S" is particularly large and contains a small star. Below "SAFRA" is the word "project" in a smaller, lowercase serif font.

SAFRA project

A stylized compass rose graphic with four points, rendered in shades of purple. The central area of the compass is a darker purple circle containing text.

Identifying
the difficulties
experienced by Muslim
lesbian, bisexual and
transgender women
in accessing social
and legal services

*Initial
Findings*

January 2003

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by the Safra project co-ordinators

- Suhraiya Jivraj (Joint co-ordinator)
- Tamsila Tauqir (Joint co-ordinator)
- Anisa de Jong (Asylum co-ordinator)

We would like to thank the following women:

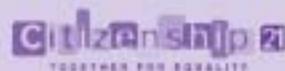
- Dr Anita Naoko Pilgrim for her invaluable contribution as our consultant on Social Policy and Research
- Moneeza Iqbal for her contribution and support
- Kathleen McNeil for her final editing of the report

The Safra Project would also like to thank the following persons and organisations for their input:

PACE
London Friend
YWCA Bristol – Counselling
Havva Mustafa – Independent Counsellor
Stonewall Housing
Albert Kennedy Trust
UNISON
Metropolitan Police
Refugee Women’s Resource Project
Wesley Gryk Solicitors
Stonewall Immigration Group
Immigration Advisory Service
Women Living Under Muslim Laws

Most of all, a big ‘thank you’ to all the women who attended the Safra Project Conference in June 2002. The Safra Project greatly appreciates their willingness to share their personal experiences and wealth of information with each other and with us, enabling us to compile this report.

Funding for the preparation and publication of this report was provided by:



The Safra Project

Founded in October 2001, the Safra Project is a voluntary resource project based in the UK. The Safra Project’s aims are to conduct research and provide information on issues relating to lesbian, bisexual and transgender women who identify themselves as Muslim, culturally and/or religiously (Muslim LBT women). Safra is an Arabic word meaning journey and discovery. The combination of prejudices based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, religion, race, culture and immigration status experienced by Muslim LBT women is unique. This is why we recognised the need for a resource project inclusive of all these factors, separately and in combination. The Safra Project was set up primarily in response to the difficulties experienced by Muslim LBT women in accessing appropriate social and legal services. These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge and awareness amongst service providers of the particular issues facing Muslim LBT women.



The Safra Project’s aims are:

1. To research and provide information on the experiences and needs of Muslim LBT women in order to increase access to appropriate social and legal services.
2. To research and provide information on sexuality, gender and Islam, with a focus on feminist interpretations.
3. To research and provide information on the treatment of LBT women in countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

The Safra Project is not a faith group and does not seek to promote any one belief. Our ethos is one of inclusiveness and diversity. We welcome input from all individuals and groups seeking to combat all forms of prejudice.

For more information about the Safra Project, please see our website:
www.safraproject.org

or contact us:

Safra Project
P.O. Box 35929
London
N17 0WB
Email: info@safraproject.org



Contents

Introduction	5
Methodology	6
Findings & Needs	8
1. Identity & Mental Health	8
2. Coming Out	12
3. Isolation	14
4. Marriage & Children	16
5. Domestic Violence & Refuges	19
6. Housing	22
7. Employment	24
8. Asylum	26
Summary of Recommendations	30

Introduction

Most Muslim LBT women struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation or gender identity with their cultural or religious identities. This struggle can lead to mental health problems such as depression and self harm. In addition, the consequences of coming out (or being found out) can be extremely harsh for Muslim LBT women, particularly for those who are entirely dependent on their families. These consequences can include total or partial rejection by family and friends leading to isolation; intense pressure to get married, sometimes leading to forced marriage; domestic violence; homelessness; losing custody of children; and/or abduction of children. Muslim LBT women seeking asylum in the UK often experience additional mental health, social welfare and legal difficulties.

Many Muslim LBT women find it difficult to access appropriate social and legal services to assist them to address these issues. Muslim LBT women often encounter Islamophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic behaviour as well as a more general culturally insensitive, gender biased and heterosexist attitude. These are often experienced in combination. Many service providers are not aware of the issues Muslim LBT women face and because these specific women's needs are often invisible, service providers find it harder to reach them. Other obstacles facing Muslim LBT women include a lack of information on where to find suitable services. This is due to a lack of advertising in places visited by Muslim LBT women. In addition, social exclusion, limitations on freedom of movement and the location of services in places where Muslim LBT women fear to be seen, prevent Muslim LBT women from accessing these services.

Whilst it is important that service providers are culturally sensitive, some so-called

multicultural practices or policies can contribute to the problem by ignoring diversity within Muslim communities. This is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the differences between religious, cultural and patriarchal norms. Cultural sensitivity can for example, result in service providers not raising LGBT issues or women's rights in relation to Muslims because of the negative reaction that they would most likely receive. In addition, service providers too often assume that Muslims are not LGBT and that LGBT people cannot be Muslim. This is a perception often reinforced by leaders and members of Muslim communities and the media.

Although many service providers have started providing women-specific, LGBT-specific, race-specific or religion-specific services, this compartmentalised approach often overlooks the needs of Muslim LBT women. The discrimination and exclusion Muslim LBT women experience is the result of multiple interrelated factors and therefore needs a comprehensively inclusive approach.

This report aims to increase awareness of these issues and highlight the needs of Muslim LBT women for better access to appropriate social and legal services. In short, the main aims of this report are:

1. To identify and raise awareness of the issues Muslim LBT women face resulting from their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within the context of their ethnic, cultural and/or religious background.
2. To identify some of the difficulties Muslim LBT women experience in accessing appropriate social and legal services.
3. To highlight needs and make recommendations for more accessible and appropriate social and legal services. A summary of recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

Methodology

The Safra Project came about against the backdrop of 1970s feminism, the 1980s and the 1990s Muslim, Black and Asian feminist movements and the rise of queer politics of the 1990s.

When we set up this resource project in October 2001, there were already a number of Muslim feminist and LGBT organisations dealing with sexuality issues e.g. Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Al-Fatiha USA, Al-Fatiha UK and the Yousef Foundation in the Netherlands. Some material relevant to LGBT Muslims has been available on the Internet, although most of this is aimed at gay men rather than at women. There was also an Economic and Social Research Council funded study of LGBT Muslims being conducted at Nottingham Trent University.

We began by drawing up a list of topics that our personal experience suggested were significant to Muslim LBT women. We took this provisional list to a one-day focus meeting held with social and legal service providers held on 27 April 2002. The focus meeting consisted of two workshops: one on social services and one on asylum.

We invited a number of social & legal service providers to this meeting, including:

- * PACE
- * London Friend
- Nafsiyaat
- MIND

- Asian Family Counselling Service
- * Refugee Women's Resource Project (RWRP) / Asylum Aid
- * Refugee Women's Legal Group (RWLG)
- * Amnesty International
- * Wesley Gryk Solicitors
- Wilson and Co Solicitors
- Winstanley Burgess Solicitors
- * Stonewall Immigration Group
- * Refugee Council
- * Women Living Under Muslim Laws
- * Immigration Advisory Service (IAS)
- Refugee Legal Centre (RLC)
- Medical Foundation for the Care of the Victims of Torture
- Refugee Women's Association (RWA)
- Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)
- Terence Higgins Trust
- Manningham Housing Association
- * Stonewall Housing
- * Albert Kennedy Trust
- Camden Equalities Unit
- GALOP
- * Metropolitan Police
- West Midlands Police
- Community and Liason Unit, Foreign & Commonwealth Office
- * LAGER
- * UNISON
- Newham Asian Women's Project
- Southall Black Sisters
- Naz Project
- Kairos
- Consortium
- Yoesuf Foundation

* The organisations that came to this focus meeting and / or otherwise contributed to this report are marked *.

The workshops of this focus meeting resulted in two papers:

1. **Outcomes from the Safra Project Focus Meeting on 27 April 2002**
2. **Report of the Asylum Workshop – Safra Project Focus Meeting on 27 April 2002**

Subsequently, we held a conference in Manchester on 29-30 June 2002. This conference was an opportunity for Muslim LBT women and service providers to meet and talk together about the issues. Over 80 women had contacted us and expressed their interest; 30 women attended the conference.

In the morning of the first day of the conference Dr. Anwar, an Islamic Studies scholar and lecturer, spoke about the possibilities of developing an Islamic framework that could be inclusive of Muslim LBT women. This session and the response to it highlighted the need for more information and knowledge on sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity issues within Islam.

In the afternoon of the first day, the participants divided themselves into three workshops to discuss topics of their choice, mostly drawn from the paper, 'Outcomes from the Safra Project Focus Meeting on 27 April 2002.'

The central themes of the workshops were:

1. **Children & Childcare**
2. **Mental Health & Coming Out**
3. **Housing & Refugees**

On the second day of the conference some of the participants gathered again to further explore some of the topics covered and to evaluate their experiences of the conference.

We now had input from about 15 organisations and about 30 Muslim LBT women, as well as input from several more Muslim LBT women who contacted us by phone or email, to add to our personal experiences. From this body of information we have drawn this list of initial findings and needs. The recommendations are summarised at the end of this report.

It is important to bear in mind that this report consists of initial findings only and it must not be regarded as an exhaustive list or as representative of all Muslim LBT women.

Finally, please note that the sections in the report are all interrelated. In particular, issues such as coming out and isolation are also relevant to the sections on domestic violence and marriage and children.

Findings & Needs

1. Identity & Mental Health

Findings

1.1 Most Muslim LBT women struggle with or question their identities at some stage in their lives. Some Muslim LBT women cannot identify with the words lesbian or bisexual at all and/or have no knowledge of transgender* issues. Many Muslim LBT women also have negative preconceptions about what it means to be lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Not understanding their feelings concerning their sexual orientation or gender identity causes Muslim LBT women to encounter mental health problems such as anxiety, fearfulness and depression.

“I didn’t understand who or what I was. There was no support out there for me and it was frightening to think that there was nowhere to go.”

1.2 The popular Muslim belief is that homosexuality is unnatural, a sin and should be punished. This leads Muslim LBT women to feel guilty, scared and anxious when discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many Muslim LBT women feel that they do not know exactly what Islam and the Quran say about LGBT people and indicate that it is very important to them to learn more about this. However, 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 traditional and patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

1.3 Muslim LBT women often feel the need to choose between being LBT and being Muslim. This is because many women find it difficult to reconcile an LBT identity with their cultural and/or religious identity. This loss of religious and/or cultural identity causes many Muslim LBT women to feel ‘bad’, guilty and depressed.

“I felt as if I was living against Islam and therefore I did not deserve to wear a headscarf, so I stopped wearing it.”

1.4 Often family, friends or other members of Muslim communities will confirm that being LBT is against Muslim cultural and religious values. Many women feel concerned that they would (or have) let their families down and that they would cause (or have caused) shame on the family if they came out (or when they did come out). This concern results in feelings of unworthiness and uselessness. Some mothers even feel that they do not deserve to be in contact with their children. (See also under Marriage & Children, Coming Out and Isolation.)

“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. But now my faith is stronger, I am still myself and I have more confidence with my children, whereas before I believed I was not good enough to be their mother.”

1.5 Because of the issues mentioned above, most Muslim LBT women go through a (prolonged) process of denying and suppressing their sexual orientation or gender identity, both to themselves and to their family and friends. As a result they often experience depression and some women contemplate or attempt suicide or other forms of self-harm.

“Because of the culture of oppression and suppression around me, I had resigned myself to the fact that there were things I could not ever think or do. There would have to be no-go areas in my mind although it was not easy to keep what I was struggling with inside. As a result of meeting other lesbian and bisexual Muslim women I am inspired to share those feelings.”

1.6 Many Muslim LBT women feel that mental health support, both in the form of counselling and in the form of support groups, is extremely important. However, many find it difficult to access suitable mental health services. Often they have not known where to find appropriate services or they have been restricted in their freedom of movement by their families.

1.7 Some Muslim LBT women have been put off from using mental health services after experiencing Islamophobic, racist or culturally insensitive comments by their non-Muslim counsellors. Many counsellors perpetuate popular derogatory perceptions of Islam and/or Muslim women when dealing with their clients. This was particularly felt at the time of the Gulf War and has intensified again as a result of the events on September 11th 2001. In addition, a lack of understanding of Islam and/or a lack of understanding of a client’s cultural context has led some counsellors to fail to differentiate between patriarchal forces within Muslim communities and cultural or religious values.

1.8 This situation is particularly damaging for Muslim LBT women who struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation or gender identity with their religious and/or cultural identities. Prejudicial and misinformed attitudes reinforce the

*We use here the International Foundation for Gender Education definition: “A transgender person is someone whose gender display at least sometimes runs contrary to what other people in the same culture would normally expect.” www.ifge.org

misconception that Muslim LBT women need to choose between an LGB identity and a cultural or religious identity.

- 1.9 Some Muslim LBT women also experience homophobia or transphobia when using counselling or other mental health services. However, not many Muslim LBT women seek mental health support from LGBT service providers. Many do not know about these service providers and if they do, they often expect or perceive these services to be culturally inappropriate. Some women also do not identify with LGBT service providers because they have not yet identified themselves as lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Some women also considered LGBT identified centres for counselling or support to be too inaccessible because they fear being seen by family or friends, which could result in them being 'found out' and perceived or labelled as 'homosexual'.
- 1.10 Partially for that reason, most women said they prefer to seek appropriate counselling within a gender and/or race-specific centre, rather than in an LGBT-identified centre. One person mentioned the Manchester black women's therapy centre that is currently being developed as a good example. One woman receiving therapy from a Muslim woman counsellor found that once she had

come out, getting affirmation from a Muslim counsellor was crucial to her ability to accept herself. However, other Muslim LBT women who visited Muslim women counsellors did not feel at ease to talk to them about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- 1.11 Muslim LBT women feel strongly that their mental health would benefit from both counselling and a Muslim or race-specific women's social support group, run by counsellors that they could identify with. However, Muslim women's social support groups do not always provide safe and appropriate settings to bring up sexual orientation or gender identity issues. Some groups perpetuate patriarchal or homophobic attitudes that exist within their members' communities.

“The knowledge I have gained from the Safra Project has been empowering and has helped me to develop my own identity.”

Needs

- 1.12 Muslim LBT women need access to more information on lesbian, bisexual or transgender identities that they can relate to and that are positive.
- 1.13 More (gender-specific) research needs to be done on sexual orientation and gender identity within Islam. More diverse and gender-sensitive information on this topic should be made available to Muslim LBT women and their families and friends, Muslim communities and service providers.
- 1.14 Mental health service providers need to be all-inclusive and non-discriminatory. This can be encouraged through training and increased awareness of the multiple factors relevant to Muslim LBT women's mental health. Awareness and training is particularly needed on:
- The issue of reconciling sexual orientation and gender identity with religion
 - Understanding Muslim LBT women's experiences in the context of Muslim patriarchal communities
 - Homophobia and heterosexism in wider society
 - Socio-political developments causing Islamophobia
- 1.15 Mental health service providers need to take responsibility for understanding all the social, political and religious realities that impact their clients' mental health. Service providers could develop guidelines for an assessment of clients within their cultural and religious contexts that would address gender, sexual orientation and gender identity issues.
- 1.16 Access to appropriate mental health services for Muslim LBT women should be improved. These services should be located in safe and confidential environments in order to be accessible to Muslim LBT women whose freedom of movement is limited or who fear being seen by family or friends. Schools, colleges, libraries and doctors surgeries are good locations for advertising such services.
- 1.17 There is a need for counsellors and social support groups that Muslim LBT women can identify with in terms of race, culture and religion, as well as in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- 1.18 There is a need for legal protection against multiple discrimination in service provision. The EU Employment Directive, outlawing discrimination on the basis of religion or belief and on the basis of sexual orientation, should be extended to the delivery of goods and services, which includes mental health services. (See also under Employment.)

2. Coming Out

Findings

- 2.1 Coming out is difficult for almost all LGBT people. For many Muslim LBT women, coming out to themselves and coming out to their family and friends can be further complicated due to issues relating to culture or religion. (See also under Identity & Mental Health) For many Muslim LBT women the consequences of coming out to family and friends are devastating.
- 2.2 Often coming out, or 'being outed' by someone else, results in negative reactions from family and friends. These reactions can include (complete) rejection, sometimes leading to isolation; intensified pressure to get married, sometimes leading to forced marriage; physical or emotional domestic violence; and/or the loss of custody or contact with children. Coming out can also result in the sudden loss of all support systems and therefore affects matters such as housing, education and employment. (See also under the relevant headings.)
- 2.3 The reaction of (ex-)husbands (or other family members) to a Muslim LBT woman coming out is diverse. For example, some husbands have been understanding to some extent, but still insisted their wife 'keep up appearances' whilst others became violent. Many women thought that male peer pressure in Muslim communities encouraged domestic violence. (See also under Domestic Violence.)
- 2.4 Class is a distinctly important factor in determining the effects of coming out. According to the experience of the Muslim LBT women informing the Safra Project, families from a middle or upper class background are more likely to have a more liberal attitude towards personal freedom and are therefore more likely to be tolerant. Women from these backgrounds are also more likely to have an education, be employed, they are therefore less dependent on their families.
- 2.5 Even coming out to peers can result in isolation. Some Muslim LBT women indicated that they have not been taken seriously or simply not believed when they have come out to friends. One young woman was forced to leave her college when, after confiding in a friend, rumours spread and people began talking about her negatively. Existing support groups for Asian women in schools and colleges are often hostile towards LGBT issues.
- 2.6 Some social workers don't feel able to talk to Muslim parents about the sexual orientation issues of their children because they are afraid that they would be acting in a culturally insensitive or racist manner. This leaves young LGBT Muslims who have run away from home, or who have problems at home (including domestic violence), to deal with the 'coming out' process on their own.

Needs

- 2.7 Married or divorced Muslim LBT mothers fear losing custody, or even abduction, of their children if they come out or are found out. Some mothers found it extremely difficult to come out to their children because they feared being rejection by them. (See also under Marriage and Children.)
- “My children equate homosexuality with promiscuity because of the way they are being taught and because of the homophobia in their schools. This makes it so hard for me to come out to them.”***
- 2.8 In mainstream LGBT circles there can be a lot of pressure to come out. However, explicitly coming out to family and friends is not, at all times or in all situations, viable or safe for Muslim LBT women. Some may have found a certain balance in their life where they maintain contact with their family whilst leading their own life on a mutual 'don't ask don't tell' basis. The gains of coming out in such a situation do not always outweigh the losses or (physical) risks.
- 2.9 Culturally relevant information, signposting to relevant services and support for young people who are coming out needs to be available in schools and colleges. Schools and colleges need to provide more education on LGBT issues and raise awareness of the issues amongst staff and pupils. (See also under Isolation.)
- 2.10 There is a need for inclusive workshops and support groups throughout the UK where Muslim LBT women would be able to share experiences and find the support that they need to come out to themselves and their friends and families. Particular attention should be paid to issues such as (forced) marriage, dealing with (ex-)husbands, divorce and children.
- 2.11 Support for (young) LGBT people coming out should not be compromised in the name of cultural sensitivity.
- 2.12 Existing mainstream LGBT support groups need to be more aware of issues such as the possible consequences of coming out for Muslim LBT women.

3. Isolation

Findings

3.1 Many Muslim LBT women feel extremely isolated and believe that they are the only Muslim woman who is lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Many participants felt that the Safra conference was the first opportunity that they had had for support and networking.

“The Safra Project has provided a lifeline. It has given me the confidence and the feeling that I am not alone.”

3.2 There are some relevant resources on the Internet (chat rooms and information on homosexuality in Islam), but many of these are aimed at men rather than women. In addition, not all Muslim LBT women have access to or are familiar with the use of the Internet. Many would also like or prefer access to spaces where they can meet and interact with people who share similar experiences in person.

***A 17-year-old:
“Coming to the Safra Project conference was better than going to a normal youth or support group. I didn’t have to feel guilty about being bisexual. It felt good to make friends and be connected with other people.”***

3.3 Many Muslim LBT women feel that they do not belong to either LGBT or Muslim communities. The common belief is that ‘Muslims are not gay’ and ‘gay people can not be Muslim’. This misconception is often reinforced by Muslim community leaders as well as by other Muslims. The perception is also perpetuated in the (LGBT) media where Islam is often portrayed as an extremist, archaic and homophobic religion. This ignores diversity in the Muslim communities and alienates LGBT Muslims.

3.4 Many Muslim LBT women do not identify with the (visible) gay scene, which is predominantly white and often revolves around alcohol-related social activities. Moreover, racism, Islamophobia and cultural insensitivity within the gay scene are alienating factors that are often ignored.

3.5 Many Muslim LBT women would not feel comfortable going to a LBT social support group whilst still struggling with their own LBT identity. They also feel that (some of) the issues they face are very culturally specific and not suitable to discuss in such a group. At the same time, they would also not feel at ease to come out in an Asian women’s social support group because of the negative reaction they anticipate.

3.6 Some women who went to existing race or faith-specific social groups found that these groups either failed to include the issue of religion or remained male-dominated and patriarchal. Some were very nervous or scared when they first went to such groups and were not welcomed as newcomers.

3.7 Homophobic bullying in schools often compounds the isolation of young LGBT people. Schools are known to be some of the most homophobic institutions in the UK. Bullying, whether homophobic or racist, is often ignored by school/college staff. Homophobic bullying can be even more problematic than racist abuse, because it is considered part of ‘playground culture’. Moreover, homophobic remarks by staff themselves are also often ignored or accepted. Tackling the situation is complicated by Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which stipulates that local authorities should not “intentionally promote homosexuality” and that schools should not teach about the “acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”.

Needs

3.8 There is a need for more inclusive social spaces that are responsive to Muslim LBT women’s needs across the UK. This could include the provision of new social groups, events and on-line discussion groups as well as a greater inclusiveness of existing religion, race or faith-specific social groups for LGBT people, such as Al-Fatiha and Kiss. All social and support groups should be actively all-inclusive, gender-sensitive and deal with people who are coming out in a sensitive, welcoming and supportive way.

3.9 Media coverage needs to be more responsible in demonstrating the diversity of both the Muslim and the gay communities. Whilst visibility of LGBT Muslims is important, media coverage should not be sensationalist or Islamophobic. Service providers should not perpetuate inaccurate representations of Muslims, LGBT or Muslim LGBT people in the media.

3.10 Schools and colleges should reduce the isolation of young LGBT people by tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying and racist bullying. The government should facilitate this by repealing S.28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and sending out a strong message that homophobia is unacceptable. LGBT issues should be included in educational programmes.

4. Marriage & Children

Findings

- 4.1 There is a strong pressure on Muslims, particularly on Muslim women, to get married at a young age. Many Muslim LBT women are subjected to enormous pressure to get married; this pressure often intensifies after they come out. Consequently, many Muslim LBT women are (or have been) married and have children.
- 4.2 Some Muslim LBT women, particularly those who clearly self-identify as lesbian, were or are unwilling to enter into a marriage. Others see marriage as a welcome means to escape the family home and the restrictions placed on them. They may later come to see their marriage as a problematic restriction in terms of sexuality itself. Some Muslim LBT women have entered into marriages of convenience, sometimes with gay Muslim men.
- 4.3 Some Muslim LBT women are forcibly married or have had arranged marriages. Forced marriage is where one or both parties are not consenting to the marriage, whereas in an arranged marriage both parties agree to get married. Although it is very important to bear this distinction in mind, it can also be deceptive. Intensified pressure to conform, pressure to ‘please’ the family, socio-economic and emotional dependency, as well as feelings of guilt or shame, can be factors that impede a person from giving their ‘full and free consent’, despite formally agreeing to get married.
- 4.4 Some mothers who are struggling to come to terms with their LBT identity feel that they do not have rights to their children and give up custody to the husband. Some, who had later come to terms with their sexuality or gender identity, found it extremely difficult to regain custody or visiting rights, or to reconnect with their children.
- 4.5 Married or divorced Muslim LBT mothers often fear losing custody of their children, or even having their children abducted if they come out or are found out. One mother who tried to talk to her doctor about her fears concerning abduction of her children, found that he did not take her concerns seriously and instead communicated with her husband only. Her child was later abducted and taken abroad and now she has no means of contacting her child. Her case also highlights the enormous lack of legal and social support services that are available to assist child abduction cases. For example, she was not able to get financial support for legal action, because it was considered unlikely that her case would succeed.
- 4.6 Most Muslim LBT women agreed that there is a lack of support for women within Muslim communities, mosques and from religious organisations in situations of domestic violence, child custody disputes and abduction. There is generally a lack of information about their rights and where to get advice.
- 4.7 There is a lack of knowledge and understanding with service providers and other officials of the real risks Muslim LBT women and their children face. Police, lawyers, social workers and other officials are often unaware that gender identity or sexual orientation are factors that can directly contribute to situations of forced marriage, domestic violence, denial of access to children and abduction. (See also under the relevant headings.)
- 4.8 Moreover, some service providers or officials even become complicit in violating Muslim LBT women’s rights as a result of their personal belief that it is ‘wrong’ to be lesbian, bisexual or transgender. For example, some Muslim LBT women felt that service providers or officials were of the opinion that a LBT woman does not deserve custody of her children. The homophobic or heterosexist attitudes of service providers and officials creates an even greater mistrust amongst Muslim LBT women and increases their feeling that they have “nowhere to turn”.
- A social worker:**
“I know of at least two cases in which a young person felt that the social worker agreed with his or her family’s homophobic views and colluded with them. This resulted directly in a worsening of the situation for that young person. There is definitely a need for training around LGBT issues for social workers, particularly on the interaction between LGBT issues and cultural contexts because this significantly increases a person’s vulnerability.”
- 4.9 Social and legal infrastructures support the widespread belief that it is best for children to grow up in a heterosexual family, which complicates family life for LGBT families in general. In addition, the LGBT community is not geared towards LGBT parents, let alone for LBT mothers from a Muslim background.
- 4.10 The options for ‘out’ LBT women to have children are not always considered suitable by Muslim LBT women. Some are ambivalent and sometimes even hostile, about artificial insemination. Many voiced concerns regarding whether or not such an option would be in accordance with Islamic principles. Many women also believed that adoption is not allowed in Islamic principles of law. Many Muslim LBT women felt that there is inadequate information on gay parenting generally and no information that takes account of particular cultural or religious issues.

Needs

- 4.11 There is a need for service providers and officials to take a more gender and LBT sensitive approach when dealing with situations of domestic violence, forced marriage, child custody and child abduction. It is crucial that when sexual orientation or gender identity play a role in causing these problems, that this role be recognised and understood as such. Service providers and officials need to gain the trust of Muslim LBT women by not perpetuating homophobic or heterosexist views and by understanding Muslim LBT women's cultural backgrounds.
- 4.12 The rights of women who challenge what is perceived to be the norms of their communities, should not be compromised in the name of cultural sensitivity or as a result of multicultural policies. Service providers need to be all-inclusive and acknowledge diversity throughout society, including in Muslim communities.
- 4.13 There is a need for better access to (early) legal and social support for married or divorced Muslim LBT women and for women with children who are struggling with issues relating to marriage, divorce, domestic violence, custody and child abduction.
- 4.14 Muslim LBT women need more access to information on custody rights in schools of Muslim jurisprudence and in the legal systems of Muslim countries and UK law.
- 4.15 There is a need for information and resources to be provided for Muslim LBT mothers, for example information on parenting support groups in suitable confidential locations.
- 4.16 Issues relating to artificial insemination, adoption and raising children outside of a heterosexual family need to be sensitively explored in relation to Muslim religious principles.
- 4.17 There is a need for more positive images of LGBT families with children both within gay communities and within society in general.

5. Domestic Violence & Refuges

Findings

Domestic violence can take many forms. We will use the Police Authority's definition that encompasses all family violence, including that committed by parents, in-laws, siblings and children as well as spousal abuse.

- 5.1 Not conforming to the sexual and gender norms of the community can result in domestic violence. Being LGBT in a Muslim context is considered particularly threatening as it is considered unnatural and a sin. Public knowledge of a person's homosexuality can bring enormous dishonour and shame to the family. LBT women do not fulfil the identity and sexual roles that are required of them and they threaten the patriarchal status quo. Therefore, some families or family members will resort to domestic violence to control and hide transgressions of sexual or gender norms. Because of their prescribed gender roles, women are expected (and forced) to reconcile themselves to these abusive situations.
- 5.2 Fear of domestic violence prevents many Muslim LBT women from coming out. It also stops them from revealing the underlying reason for the breakdown of a marriage or from explaining their refusal to get married. (See also under Coming Out.)
- 5.3 Women with children are often reluctant to leave an abusive husband because they do not want to take their children away from their father, or because they fear custody struggles or even the abduction of their children. (See also under Marriage and Children.)
- 5.4 Many Muslim women feel unable to disclose that they are subjected to domestic violence. Some even feel that they "deserve to be punished." This is related to feelings of guilt and shame stemming from the belief that being lesbian, bisexual or transgender is a sin and morally 'wrong'. Disclosing domestic violence would often result in coming out as the causes for the domestic violence would become public. This can be very problematic for reasons relating to a woman's mental health, feelings of shame as well as the possible consequences for family members, including children. (See also under Identity and Mental Health and other relevant headings.)
- 5.5 Most Muslim LBT women are brought up to believe that the only real protection that one can have is offered by the family or within the community. For many Muslim women their best friends are members of the family, such as sisters, aunts and cousins. Therefore, protection and support is primarily sought within the family or close community. As a result

of the pressure to conform to sexual and gender norms and patriarchal structures within the family, domestic violence is often ‘put up with’.

- 5.6 Muslim LBT women are reluctant to approach the police. None had used the Community Safety Units (CSU) in London or lesbian liaison officers outside of London. The police and other organisations ‘external’ to Muslim communities, are often perceived as hostile and racist. Involving the police or other ‘external’ organisations in a situation of domestic violence is usually considered a form of ‘betrayal’ of the family and the community. Their involvement could therefore, in effect, worsen the situation for a Muslim LBT woman. In addition, the police are still widely perceived as homophobic.
- 5.7 Isolated Muslim LBT women who are subjected to domestic violence often do not know how to get to a refuge. Most who did eventually go to a refuge found out about them via a friend who had obtained the information for them.
- 5.8 Muslim LBT victims of domestic violence tend to prefer refuges that are race-specific. Those who attended the Safra Project conference considered it important to be around other women from similar backgrounds and in similar situations in order to deal

with their feelings of isolation. However, many felt that being LBT was often perceived negatively in black and Asian or predominantly Muslim refuges and community projects. Although Muslim LBT women did want to be able to preserve confidentiality and did not necessarily want to be out to everyone in the refuge, they did feel that it was important to be able to be out to their caseworker.

- 5.9 Some Muslim LBT women who were caseworkers in refuges themselves were asked by their employer not to be open about their sexual orientation and/or an environment was created where they did not feel comfortable being out. Some caseworkers were also discouraged from asking clients in refuges about their sexual orientation even when they thought this might be a relevant issue. Asking about this was considered to be irrelevant, culturally insensitive, embarrassing or insulting.
- 5.10 The invisibility of LBT women in refuges, both in terms of caseworkers and clients, makes it more difficult for LBT women to come out. Visibility of out lesbian caseworkers as well as the visibility of imagery and information, (for example through posters), is crucial in making LBT women in refuges feel confident and welcome.

“When I came into the refuge, the first thing I noticed was a poster on the wall for the gay and lesbian helpline and I thought: here I can finally be myself and be accepted. It really meant a lot to me and I will never forget that moment of relief.”

- 5.11 Some women found that black and Asian refuges were not always able to provide necessary security services, particularly when they are located in areas with large black and Asian communities.
- 5.12 Special refuges for LBT women were not considered appropriate or useful. Instead, existing refuges should be all-inclusive and there should be a choice in types and locations of refuges, as different situations require different types of refuges.
- 5.13 Access to appropriate refuges is problematic for some vulnerable groups, such as mothers with children and women with limited rights due to immigration status. Refuges are reluctant to accept asylum seekers fleeing domestic violence, as these women are not entitled to housing benefit, which is a source of income for the refuge.

Needs

- 5.14 There is a need for more information on services dealing with domestic violence to be available in libraries, colleges and doctor surgeries and other places that are perceived as respectable centres of information.
- 5.15 There is a need for refuges that are appropriate for Muslim LBT women. All refuges, whether race-specific or not, should have LGBT visibility such as posters and information on help-lines or support groups for LBT women.
- 5.16 Caseworkers in refuges need to be aware of and able to deal with women who are coming out or dealing with sexuality or gender identity issues. There is a need for visibly lesbian caseworkers.
- 5.17 More funding should be available to refuges so that they are accessible to women who are not entitled to housing benefits, such as asylum seekers.
- 5.18 Awareness of issues concerning domestic violence needs to be increased particularly within Muslim communities. It is necessary to empower Muslim LBT women to protect themselves and seek assistance.
- 5.19 More specific research should be done on the barriers preventing Muslim LBT women from reporting either crimes of domestic violence or hate crimes relating to race and/or sexual orientation and gender identity.

6. Housing

Findings

6.1 Some Muslim LBT women feel pressure not to leave the parental home and live alone as this is not considered respectable. Some parents try to manipulate their daughters by making them feel guilty about wanting to leave the parental home. For example, some parents will say that the family will be 'shamed' in the community if a woman does not live with her parents or with a husband. Some Muslim women are also told that by leaving home they would be ruining the chances of marriage for a younger sibling.

6.2 Young Muslim women are often isolated at home, dependent on male relatives for support and ill prepared for life independent from family. Women, particularly from poorer backgrounds, find it difficult to get the financial resources that would enable them to leave home. There are few support mechanisms for women who are forced to leave the family home or the marital home other than in situations of domestic violence. Women who are socially isolated often do not know of available hostel space or lodgings that they can access. For some young Muslim women with problems at home, it is sometimes an acceptable solution to live (temporarily) with another respected family member, such as an aunt.

However, for out Muslim LBT women this is often not an option as often all family members will disapprove of her transgression of sexual and gender norms. This situation leaves many Muslim LBT women in an undesirable housing situation or even homeless.

6.3 There are not enough appropriate safe hostel spaces for women with children. Being placed in inappropriate and unsafe housing can lead to increased depression and other mental health problems.

“Living in that hostel with my daughter was a nightmare. We were harassed and even found out that our neighbour was a convicted sex offender. We were not allowed to stay there because my asylum claim was still not decided, but we stayed there anyway because we had nowhere to go. The police came to tell us we had to leave. The situation really got to me, and after all that I had been through, fleeing my country and leaving my husband, I finally collapsed and had to be admitted to a mental hospital for a few months.”

Needs

6.4 The situation for 16-18 year olds is extremely difficult as they are neither entitled to housing benefit nor to the care provided for younger children.

6.5 Currently available information on gay and lesbian youth homelessness does not reflect the complexities and specific factors that young Muslim LBT women encounter.

6.6 According to a recent survey conducted by the Resource Information Centre, only 71 bed spaces (out of 22,249) are allocated for lesbian and gay homeless people in London. Stonewall Housing has 41 of these with only one house for black and ethnic minorities.

A social worker:

“Sexuality does not rate as a vulnerability or a support need in terms of current welfare and social service policies. This needs to change; there needs to be some obligations in policy terms that ensures that service providers have to act.”

6.7 There is a need for information on housing and hostel spaces to be made available for Muslim LBT women who are homeless or need to leave home.

6.8 There is a need for more safe and appropriate hostel space and accessible housing, particularly for women with children, young people and people with limited rights due to their immigration status.

6.9 Research on homelessness needs to reflect the situations experienced by Muslim LBT women.

7. Employment

Findings

7.1 Some Muslim LBT women are not encouraged to pursue employment outside the home by families who gear their daughters towards a full-time role at home as a wife and mother. It can be difficult to find employment and become financially independent for those women who then need to leave home or need to relocate to a different area of Britain to be safe from violent family members.

7.2 In particular, women from poorer backgrounds often do not have full access to education, which is an obstacle in entering employment.

7.3 Many LBT women, particularly those from a black or ethnic minority background, tend to seek and/or find employment with organisations dealing with women's rights, LGBT issues, race politics and non-discrimination issues. However, working in these environments does not necessarily guarantee non-discrimination of employees and all-inclusiveness in the workplace. For example, some women said that they did not feel comfortable to 'be out' in their workplace or were even told they should keep their sexual orientation quiet, particularly in race or religion-specific organisations. One woman working for an LGBT organisation felt that a number of her colleagues were Islamophobic. (See also under Domestic Violence and Refugees.)

“I work in a South Asian women’s organisation and my employers and colleagues said that it was offensive to South Asian culture, and therefore to our clients, if I would be open about the fact that I am lesbian at work.”

7.4 There is little research on the employment choices and experiences of LBT women in general, leave alone taking ethnic and religious backgrounds into account. According to a UNISON representative, lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to be out at work if they are members of a trade union. Moreover, workplaces are 20 per cent more likely to have an equal opportunities policy if they are unionised. Although not all unions have been quick to take up the rights of their black and ethnic minority and/or LGBT members, many unions now have groups of black and LGBT members.

7.5 For Muslim LBT women who suffer discrimination in their employment, UK anti-discrimination legislation is incomplete and inconsistent. At present, women are protected from discrimination on the grounds of their gender and race but not on the grounds of their religion or sexual orientation. A recent EU Directive is now requiring the UK Government to bring in new legislation protecting workers from discrimination on the

grounds of sexual orientation or religion by the end of next year (December 2003). Having separate laws for different grounds of discrimination, using different terms and definitions, keeps the law inaccessible and does not take multiple discrimination into account.

7.6 There is also the possibility of conflicts between the rules seeking to protect against discrimination on various grounds. Of particular relevance to Muslim LBT women is the possible conflict between protection against discrimination on the grounds of religion and protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. The new anti-discrimination law will most likely include an exception for religious organisations. In that case a Muslim organisation may be allowed to discriminate against LGBT (prospective) employees, and do so without violating the law

Needs

7.7 For women who need to leave home and/or relocate to a different area, extra support to find (new) employment, education and/or training needs to be given.

7.8 Muslim women, in particular those from poorer backgrounds, should have the opportunity to obtain the further education and skills that are needed to find

employment and increase their chances to be independent and less isolated.

7.9 Employers need to ensure that their employees are able to work in an environment in which they are not treated less favourably as a result of their sexual orientation, gender identity or religion, or a combination of these. Workplaces should be all-inclusive and LGBT issues should not be compromised in the name of cultural sensitivity or respect for religion.

7.10 More research should be done about the employment choices and experiences of Muslim, black, Asian and ethnic minority LBT women. More research also needs to be done on multiple discrimination at work and on possible conflicts between the protection regimes on various grounds of discrimination, particularly religion and sexual orientation.

7.11 The Government needs to be encouraged and pressured to provide for comprehensive, strong and equal legislation on discrimination in the workplace. Muslim LBT women could take part in this via unions and community groups. It is particularly important that the issue of multiple discrimination is covered in the new legislation and that attention is paid to possible conflicts between the protections against discrimination on the grounds of religion and those against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

8. Asylum

Findings

- 8.1 Many LGBT refugees have difficulties fitting into the existing definition of a 'refugee' according to the Refugee Convention. Initially the main obstacle was the question of whether or not lesbians and gay men could be considered 'members of a particular social group' for the purpose of this definition. This obstacle now appears to have been largely resolved in UK case law, but other difficulties remain. For example, the concept of 'persecution' is usually interpreted as immediate actions undertaken at a particular moment by state agents. In many countries this form of persecution, often in the guise of 'prosecution', does take place. However, the type of discrimination and 'persecution' LGBT people (and women in particular) suffer is often accumulative and consists of prolonged discrimination and harassment in the private sphere. Case law is very unclear about how severe and prolonged discrimination would have to be before it amounted to 'persecution' under the Refugee Convention or to 'inhuman or degrading treatment' under the Human Rights Act.
- 8.2 In addition, when persecuted in the private sphere, that is by so-called 'non-state agents', an asylum seeker will need to prove that the state is not 'willing or able' to protect them. In practice, this means they would have to normally seek protection from the police and courts in their own country before claiming asylum abroad. However, in countries where homophobia is widespread, LGBT people will be extremely reluctant to go to the police to complain of a homophobic crime. Many LGBT refugees will therefore need to prove additionally that it was reasonable for them not to have first sought protection in their own country, which can be very difficult.
- 8.3 Those making decisions on asylum claims often do not believe that an asylum seeker is really LGBT. This is particularly the case when he or she comes out late in the procedure, for example after a first negative decision, authorities may claim that an asylum seeker is 'making it up' to strengthen their case.
- 8.4 Sometimes legal representatives request reports from mental health providers to submit as expert evidence to the court in support of an asylum seeker's claim. It is difficult to use these reports to 'prove' that someone is really lesbian, gay or bisexual, although this may be useful for transgender people. Usually, all that these reports can confirm is the state of a person's mental health according to a professional. This may include the professional's opinion that certain mental health problems are related to someone's sexual orientation or the persecution or ill treatment that they have suffered in the past. One LGBT mental health service provider indicated that guidelines on what these reports should contain would be useful.
- 8.5 Asylum decision-makers may also perceive the fact that someone is/was married; that she is/was otherwise engaged in a heterosexual relationship, or, that she has children as indications of heterosexuality. However, many Muslim women marry at a young age and have children, sometimes before they come out to themselves or to others as being lesbian, bisexual or transgender. One practitioner pointed out that some lesbian refugees have limited, or no, sexual experience and in these cases it can be very difficult to prove that she is lesbian and/or that she would be persecuted as such.
- 8.6 Sometimes asylum decision-makers argue that lesbians or gay men would not suffer any persecution if they would not be openly gay in their country. This 'stay in the closet' argument is often supported with evidence that there are known 'cruising areas' in the country of origin. This argumentation reduces the personal identity of LGB people to 'being able to have sex with same-sex partners'.
- 8.7 There is a lack of country information on the persecution of LGBT people in Muslim countries. Many national and international human rights groups and the media still consider this a taboo subject. Some groups, particularly religious groups such as some Muslim human rights groups, do not consider discrimination against LGBT people to be a human rights issue. They often state that gay rights are a 'western concept'. Other more sympathetic groups may still consider the persecution of LGBT people to be of less importance than other human rights abuses in their country. Local human rights groups also risk losing support, credibility, esteem and funding, or they may even be persecuted themselves, if they would take on LGBT rights issues. This lack of information complicates asylum claims when legal representatives can not find sufficient objective country information to support their client's claim. For lesbians this 'invisibility' is doubled by the general 'invisibility' of problems facing women.
- 8.8 Most LGBT asylum seekers find it extremely difficult to come out to the Home Office interviewer, their legal representative and/or in the presence of an interpreter. This is particularly true if the legal representative or interpreter is Muslim themselves or from a Muslim cultural background. Those who did come out often had

bad experiences. For example, one female Muslim asylum seeker came out to her male solicitor (who was also Muslim) and his immediate reaction was to ask her whether she thought she was a good Muslim. Another woman found that her male Muslim solicitor became unprofessionally interested in her sexual orientation. He asked her inappropriate questions and altered her asylum claim, describing details she had never told him and that had never occurred. She subsequently had to inform the Home Office that parts of the asylum claim as portrayed by her previous solicitor were not true, which was not only extremely embarrassing but could also potentially jeopardise her credibility and thereby her asylum claim.

8.9 Some LGBT asylum seekers were not able to speak about their sexual orientation or about what had happened to them, particularly if they were raped. This was often because of trauma, fear, self-hatred and other mental health issues. Many also considered their sexuality an extremely private matter. Because of the inability to speak out, some feel forced to invent other stories as to why they had fled their country.

8.10 Some asylum seekers did not realise that they could claim asylum on the basis of being persecuted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some also had an asylum claim on other grounds and did not realise that their sexual orientation could also be relevant to their claim.

8.11 The problems in relation to housing, employment, education, mental health and social isolation that other Muslim LBT women in the UK may encounter, are often even worse for refugees because of their legal status, lack of knowledge about the country, language barriers and very limited financial resources.

Needs

8.12 There is a need for training, education and awareness raising amongst asylum decision makers, legal representatives, interpreters and others working with refugees to increase their understanding of the issues that (Muslim) LGBT asylum seekers face. This could include the development of 'guidelines' similar to the 'gender guidelines'.

8.13 There should be more information sharing between legal practitioners, particularly on successful cases. This could be done through the creation of a LGBT refugee legal group and/or on-line information sharing.

8.14 Research of, and information provision on, objective country information on the treatment of LGBT people in countries of origin needs to be increased.

8.15 There is a need to improve and provide mental health care at an early stage and social outreach for LGBT asylum seekers. This should also include the development of information on the preparation of expert reports to be used in court.

8.16 More research needs to be done into the legal and practical problems LGBT refugees encounter when claiming asylum.

8.17 A resource list for LGBT asylum seekers, signposting them to sensitive and good legal representatives, interpreters, refugee organisations, social groups and other useful contacts should be developed.

8.18 (LGBT) Service providers should always ensure that the refugee and/or immigrant perspective is taken into account when developing their services in areas such as housing, employment and social welfare.

Summary of Recommendations

Policies and Practice

1. All service providers need to be inclusive of, and non-discriminatory towards, Muslim LBT women. Service providers that are race-specific, religion-specific, gender-specific, LGBT-specific or a combination of these, should be aware that a compartmentalised approach to diversity often overlooks the needs of Muslim LBT women.
2. The inclusiveness of all service providers can be enhanced through an increased awareness of the factors relevant to Muslim LBT women's lives that relates to their sexual orientation or gender identity, such as:
 - The struggle to reconcile sexual orientation or gender identity with religion
 - The consequences of coming out or being found out
 - Feelings of guilt and shame
 - Isolation and rejection by family and friends
 - Domestic violence
 - (Forced) marriage and divorce
 - Child custody and child abduction
 - Homelessness and housing
 - Access to social and legal services
3. The common perception that 'Muslims can not be LGBT' and that 'LGBT people are not Muslim' needs to be broken down to ensure inclusive social and legal services.
4. The rights of women who challenge so-called 'norms of their community', should not be compromised in the name of cultural sensitivity.
5. All service providers need to be more gender and LGBT sensitive when dealing with situations of domestic violence, forced marriage, child custody and child abduction. It is crucial that when sexual orientation or gender identity play a role in causing these problems, that this role be recognised and understood as such.
6. Service providers should ensure that Muslim LBT women are able to raise issues of race, culture and religion as well as sexual orientation and gender identity with them when using their services. A visible presence of LGBT people is crucial in facilitating this.
7. Service providers and other agencies such as unions, should formulate social policies that are inclusive of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, race, religion, immigration status and class as multiple factors of discrimination experienced in combination, rather than as separate issues.
8. Service providers and organisations, such as schools, colleges and housing agencies, need to put sexual orientation on the agenda as a vulnerability that

requires positive action in terms of welfare and social services.

9. Service providers should always ensure that immigration status and refugee experiences are taken into account when developing their services in areas such as domestic violence, housing and social welfare.

Information and Access

1. Service providers should advertise their services and provide information that addresses Muslim LBT women's needs. These services and informational material should be made available in accessible places such as libraries, colleges and doctors surgeries. More information needs to be available on:
 - Mental health services, particularly counselling
 - Social and support groups, incl. on coming out, parenting, refugees
 - Housing, hostels and refuges
 - Domestic violence and forced marriage
 - Legal services on divorce, child custody, child abduction and asylum
2. Social and legal services should be located in safe and confidential environments so that they are accessible to Muslim LBT women.
3. More relevant information on lesbian, bisexual and gender identity issues within Islam is needed for Muslim LBT women, Muslim communities and service providers.

Further Research

Further research is needed on most of the issues mentioned in this report, including:

1. Sexual orientation and gender identity in Islam (from a gender-sensitive perspective).
2. The factors that impede Muslim LBT women who are subjected to domestic violence from protecting themselves and seeking assistance.
3. Barriers preventing Muslim LBT women from reporting domestic violence, forced marriage and hate-crimes that have resulted from racism, homophobia and transphobia.
4. How coming out or being found out affects Muslim LGBT people and their families and what their needs for support and information are.
5. Information regarding treatment of Muslim LGBT asylum seekers, in their countries of origin for the support of asylum cases.
6. The legal and practical difficulties that LGBT refugees encounter when seeking asylum.



January 2003

£2.00