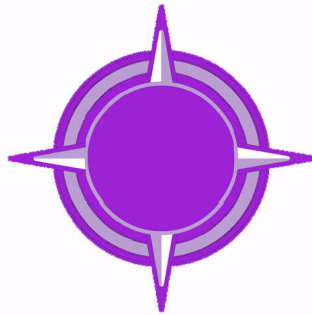




A Resource Project for LGBTQ Muslim women



Conference Report

5 June 2004

'Strategies for Empowerment and Capacity Building'

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Introduction

The Safra Project's second conference took place in central London on 5th June 2004. The conference was attended by lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning women who identify as Muslim religiously and/or culturally, and their female friends, partners and family members as well as other women who identify with the topics addressed. The conference was mainly an opportunity for Muslim LBTQ women (and others) to meet, share experiences, exchange information and knowledge, and built networks.

At the first Safra Project conference in Manchester in 2002, we identified the main issues Muslim LBT women face (published in the 'Report of Initial Findings' - www.safraproject.org). At this conference focused on strategies and methods to deal with some of these difficulties and questions: ways to empower ourselves as individual Muslim LBT women, including gaining knowledge and accepting ourselves, and building the capacity of our social and support groups and networks. The four main topics were:

1. Sexuality, Gender and Islam: legal and theological debates
2. Accepting ourselves: dealing with fears, guilt, depression and other mental health problems, including accessing suitable mental health service providers.
3. Coming out to family and friends: methods and consequences
4. Meeting other Muslim LBT women: networks and social groups

The feedback and evaluation of the conference by the participants was very positive and encouraging. All participants rated the conference and workshops as either 'good' or 'excellent'. Most participants found that the conference contributed to their knowledge and self-confidence; made them better able to deal with questions and issues, and made them feel less isolated or encouraged to take part in social groups.

"The Safra Project is very much needed and has helped many people already, but there is still a long way to go for Muslim LBT women, so the Safra Project is VITAL."

"I am pleased about the level of participation & how willing to talk people were. There just wasn't enough time. I wished the workshops were longer. The topics were very pertinent & more valuable than I ever imagined!"

Sexuality, Gender & Islam

Talk 1: Sexuality, Gender & Islam: legal & theological debates (Suhraiya)

In September 2003, the Safra Project launched a groundbreaking new section to the website on Sexuality, Gender & Islam (SGI). This research project was undertaken in response to the many enquiries for information on what Islam says about same-sex sexuality between women. So I went about putting together a summary of existing work by scholars and activists from around the world.

This work built upon a thesis I had written on Muslim feminists' perspectives on Muslim family law when I was studying Islamic law as part of my Masters in Law. This was also a personal journey for me to uncover and explore all the traditions and so-called Islamic rules that exist within our Muslim communities in the UK (and beyond) on how women should behave and be treated.

The first thing to clarify, however, is what we mean by the term Islam when we ask the question what does Islam say about same-sex relationships. Do we mean:

- Traditions and/or culture that we grew up in
- The practise of religious rituals such as prayer
- A spiritual or moral viewpoint
- Classical Muslim laws known as sharia or modern state laws in countries with Muslim majority populations
- Or a combination of these?

The SGI resource only deals with Muslim laws based on sharia and Quran.

There is little information dealing with same-sex sexuality and the information that exists focuses mostly on male sexuality. The work that I have focused on comes from the Progressive Islam movement which seeks to challenge traditional ideas relating to women's roles and sexuality in classical Muslim laws. These ideas include the notion that men are superior to women and that therefore women and men are not equal but have different (set) roles in society. Many scholars have used different techniques and principles as a basis to reformulate Muslim laws and rules to deal with the male bias (or rules that favour men over women) that has become embodied in Muslim law and indeed culture. For more information on these techniques and principles please see the SGI section on the website.

Coming back to the question of same-sex sexuality between women, the techniques used by progressive Muslim scholars has been used and extended to

uncover not only the male bias that favours men over women but also the heterosexual bias that ignores and denies any sexuality other than a heterosexual one.

The supposed references to male same-sex relationships in the Quran occur in the story of Lut. These verses have also been used to extend the prohibition on same-sex relations to women. The story of Lut has however been reinterpreted as being ambiguous at best and certainly not referring to same-sex relationships as we understand them in our lives today. Please see SGI for further details on this.

What we can take away from this is that the apparent ban on same-sex sexuality is not as clear cut and cannot be said to be come from the Quran as definately as if often believed and claimed. It is up to us to look at the sources of Muslim laws and the different opinions on same-sex sexuality and then make our own conclusions about whether Islam prohibits same-sex sexuality between women.

Workshop 1: Sexuality, Gender & Islam: legal & theological debates

(Facilitator: Suhraiya)

In the SGI workshop, participants were asked what they thought of the resource, what they had learnt from it and whether it was helpful to them in answering questions they had. They were also asked to give their suggestions on how to improve the resource and make it more accessible. This is a summary of their comments.

- Everyone found the resource interesting
- The resource was obviously based on clear scholarship that could not be dismissed (although more/clearer referencing of sources would help)
- It gave people the idea that authority comes from knowledge and not from people just because they have a title such as leader or Imam
- It was good that there was an emphasis on individual responsibility to find out about laws, rules and religion, and it is important to make our own conclusions and accept them for ourselves
- It is very exciting to find out about 'progressive Islam'.
- It is really important that the Safra Project exists and that information like this is out there.

"This information was new to me especially compared to the way Islam is portrayed. It made me think about who has the right to speak and be an authority on telling us how to live our lives"

Suggestions:

- Have a summary of the resource at the beginning as there is a lot of information.
- There's too much text, it is very bulky. Perhaps have a list of key points
- The language could be simpler – it could act as a barrier
- The font could be bigger
- The message that it's ok to be who you are needs to be more central, obvious and clear especially for people in doubts about their sexuality. For example, there should be some key statements or stories that are instantly affirming to anyone visiting the website.
- The Safra Project does not promote any ONE belief and respects the diversity amongst LGBTQ Muslims in how they interpret and understand issues around Sexuality, Gender and Islam. It remains each individual's responsibility to explore the issues and decide for them selves what their position is. Affirmation can also take place in other ways, e.g. in social groups and sharing experiences - this needs to be developed further.
- The issue and theme of power also needs to be made more clear – the idea that people can only make you feel that your sexuality is wrong if you let them. A lot of how we feel is actually in response to others.
- The struggle to reconcile yourself and others with your sexuality it not just about Islam requiring you to be a certain sexuality, but also about misogyny and power within the culture and communities in which we exist.
- We should all have certain statements that mean something to us to help us through the process of reconciling our sexuality and religion or culture. E.g. one person said that her mother always told her that the most important thing is to always tell the truth and that was crucial for her when she came out to her family.

The Safra Project will take these suggestions on board and is currently trying to address the need for more instantly affirming and accessible information. The Safra Project is developing a '**Telling Our Stories**' section for the website for which we would like women to contribute poetry, stories or even artwork (as long as it can be uploaded onto a website). This is an important way for us to affirm and encourage each other with the knowledge that we can and will exist as Muslim women who love other women. It is also an important tool to share our experiences and break the

isolation of women who cannot get to events. So please if you would like to contribute to this project, send in your contributions to info@safraproject.org or contact us if you would like to discuss it.

Summary

The key message that came out of this workshop is that the information in the SGI resource is crucial to a variety of women, but that it needs to be made more accessible, including made available in different languages and for different audiences such as youth, parents etc. Furthermore there is also a need for a resource that women can come to in order to feel reassured about their sexuality without having to undertake a whole exploration / study of Islamic law which can be very difficult.

Accepting Ourselves

Talk 2: Accepting Ourselves: dealing with fears, guilt, depression and other mental health problems (Havva Mustapha - Freelance Counsellor)

I was asked to speak today about the themes of Acceptance and Empowerment from my perspective as a counsellor, to look at how we can deal with fears, guilt and depression. I will come onto this professional perspective, but I wanted to share with you some of my own ongoing journey, to healing, acceptance and empowerment.

When I sat down to write this I cast my mind back to a long time ago when I was first coming out, I was about 15 and although this was a really hard time, I recognised that it was much easier to come out and define myself in the wider community to friends and teachers as a lesbian, and how hard I found it to say loud and proud 'I am a Lesbian!' to my family and my community. I recognised that some of this was real heart stuff, that it came from a feeling place, I was afraid of losing my family and therefore my community by coming out and that would leave me with a huge void, one that could not be filled by the wider society here. I understood that I would be taking a risk, a huge risk that something would be lost, something extremely valuable and vital to me that something of the fabric of my being would be torn away and I would be left alone.

I now understand that I was touching in on fears that come from not having a solid sense of who I was at a deep level. And I didn't have a solid sense of who I was because I was raised in a society that had at its heart a complex system whose

mortar was oppression and discrimination, patriarchal, racist, islamophobic, homophobic, classist, I could go on. And when this is the case we are not encouraged to ask ourselves 'who am I?' but we are daily educated away from ourselves. We are wounded by these forces that dominate so powerfully, that place value on some and not others. And this wounds at many levels. This sense of who we truly are can be felt to be lost.

So when we begin to look at ourselves, because we are faced with having to or we choose to, we have the opportunity and the often painful task of peeling away all of the lies. We face the lies that we have been told about who we are and that to be valued we must behave in a certain way, we face the lies we have told ourselves because of our experiences, that if we choose outside of these messages then we are unacceptable. So, what do we do? What does it mean to empower ourselves, to accept ourselves

Working as a counsellor and from my own experience, I recognise that we need to heal the wounds of the systems of domination. We need to start by recognising the depth of our pain. We need to get in touch with all the factors in our lives that are causing us pain; this will include the wounding caused by islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia, discrimination on the grounds of disability and others. We have to do this because it hurts to pretend, it hurts to live with lies. It is vital that we look at these feelings because unreconciled grief, sadness and feeling that life has lost meaning are all states of being that can lead us into life threatening depression.

I went back to a definition of empowerment I had come across a long time ago from Audre Lorde: "Empowerment – our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service our work and future." This captured for me a sense of empowerment that is not only about serving our own needs to be all that we can be, but that there is a focus on the collective aspect also. That empowerment is a communal act. I believe that choosing wellness, choosing to look at our wounds and to heal through them, is a personal and a political act of resistance.

COMMUNITY

We are often faced with looking at what it would mean to be us without community, without family. Who we are we without all of these things? This journey will take us to painful places but it can also bring us to places like this. I believe that if we choose to work collectively we will be more effective if we go through a process of self recovery that heals our individual wounds. We don't have to be totally sorted to get

involved in collective resistance, but I believe we can do both, and in fact sometimes we can recover bits of our individual selves in collective struggle and vice versa.

For me, being here reminds me of the power in claiming the right to collectively speak the reality of our truth, despite the fact that we are at every turn aware of the forces that try to silence us. Sharing ourselves with one another like this can be a place of healing. It is important to continue to speak our truth to each other.

SPIRIT GUIDES US

Of course when we are at a point when we are facing painful times and having to make painful decisions we are not only considering loss of self and community we may also be facing loss of our spiritual selves. For me Healing ourselves, and acceptance of ourselves comes from a place of spirit. Thich Naht Hanh speaks about the purpose of resistance as: "To seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly." I believe that what all of us are really searching for is the divine essence within ourselves, however we find this, the ability to hear our inner wisdom puts us in touch with this divine essence. My personal and professional experience of including our spiritual selves in our healing is that this is a return to a place of acceptance and empowerment that exists within and outside of us. Quoting Thich Naht Hanh again: "A pagoda, a temple a church, is built in a way that when you enter you recover yourself; you come into contact with the absolute reality, with God, with Buddha, with Buddhahood." And that is why the recovering of Self is seen in architecture, in decorative art, in sacred music, in many things like that. So that when you come to the church or the temple you are helped by these things to return to yourself. I think our communities of resistance should be built like a church or a temple where everything you see expresses the tendency to be oneself, to go back to oneself, to come into communion with reality.

So, however you find this, the ability to hear your inner wisdom, puts you in touch with this divine essence, this healing place. For me this must include my relationship to the earth that we walk upon, loving the earth means that I can love myself more fully. Restoring balance to the planet feels like an important part of this recovery of myself.

It took me a long time to write this and apart from my anxieties about speaking in public, I realised that it would be hard focus on this subject, that it would bring painful memories to the fore. What changed things for me is my belief that we are sustained by one another's testimony when we are in despair. I believe that if we as members of the Muslim LBT community were able to cultivate healthy self

esteem, even though institutionalised racism, homo and transphobia and islamaphobia amongst other oppressive systems would continue to exist, that sense of the dominating nature of those oppressive structures will no longer have a hold on our psyches and in our lives.

Toni Morrison Beloved - Touch me on the inside part and call me my name.

Workshop 2: Accepting Ourselves: dealing with fears, guilt, depression and other mental health problems (Facilitator: Havva Mustapha)

In this workshop we undertook a guided 'inward journey' to our inner 'landscape' or inner Self where we visualised our fears and our needs. This was a very personal, intense and valuable experience for the participants to the workshop.

'Coming Out' to Family and Friends

Talk 3: Coming Out to Family & Friends (Tamsila)

Coming Out means different things to different people, and this can also change in the different stages of our lives. There is no fixed rule to Coming Out or not. To decide not to Come Out is just as difficult as Outing yourself and requires the same amount of support.

The first Coming Out step is often Coming Out to yourself which means acknowledging your self. In my case I was aware of my feelings towards other girls from a very early age, to me it was as natural as breathing. Then, around the age of 10 I first recognised an identity as lesbianism or homosexuality and it was at the same point in which I first experienced homophobia. I was watching a gay march on the news with my parents and suddenly recognised another part of my identity as the commentary described the event. On an excited awakening to a new identity I began to Out myself to my parents, before the first word left my lips a barrage of homophobic abuse came hurtling out of the mouths of my parents. It was another 3 years before I came Out to school friends after experiencing homophobic bullying from other students, my friends were very supportive and the experience of Coming Out to them was very positive. For various reasons I am now Out to my immediate and extended family and friends and colleagues. As a result there are days that I find

it has given me a real sense of freedom and other days I find my-self defending my very existence with the people around me as extremely exhausting.

There are also judgements that need to be made on the safety of Coming Out, in some situations it would be very dangerous to do this and so the extent of being Out can also have various degrees. Due to the heterosexist structure of the society we live in, Coming Out does not end one day from which you can then carry on with the rest of your life but is an ongoing process, every time I change jobs or meet new people. With naming and identifying, it can give you greater access to communities of not only other Queer people but by expanding our political consciousness (since I do believe the personal is political) gives us the empathy and access to other oppressed communities from which coalitions can be formed in combating prejudice and bigotry for a more just society.

A number of points I've raised in addition to experiences and thoughts by other participants will be explored further in the Workshop discussion. In particular we will discuss the impact our Islamic religious &/ cultural background has on Coming Out or not. As well as a discussion on specific issues affecting refugee/asylum seekers and trans Muslim LBT women.

Workshop 3: Coming Out to Family & Friends: methods & dealing with consequences (Facilitator: Tamsila)

What do we think about coming out – how does it affect us?

'I know it's a very wonderful thing to come out and I wish we could live free from people's interference but it's scary and I'm afraid'

Everyone agreed that 'coming out' or telling people that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or transgender was not something that happened just once and then you could be done with it. Everybody had different ways of telling their friends and families or decided that they did not want to or could not (yet) come out.

Many people tell their close friends first before telling their parents or families. Most people had to decide whether or not it was actually safe to come out. Some were even forced to come out at school because they were being bullied for 'looking like a dyke'.

One young woman came out to her brother because they were at the same school and he would have found out eventually. He reacted violently towards her and she was forced to leave home as a result.

Coming out to Family

Others had not come out to their parents because they did not know how to explain it to them or because they did not feel that it was important to tell them, that it would either make their home life unsafe or unbearable. This was true for people who were also not living with their families anymore, although most people did come out to their parents after leaving home and becoming independent.

Often people did not feel able to come out because they did not have the information they needed to respond to their parents especially as it is often believed to be something that is not natural and not allowed in our culture and religion. A few people found that no matter how much information you give your parents on sexuality and religion they still could not accept it and that often it was not about the religion but actually other issues such as embarrassment they felt in their communities about having an LGBTQ son or daughter.

Some people who had come out to their parents felt that the relief they had expected from not having to hide their sexuality anymore was not as big as they had anticipated. Especially because the parent often did not understand or did not want to understand what being LGBTQ actually means. Often the parent chose to ignore their child's sexuality or just think of it in prejudiced cultural or religious terms as unnatural or stereotypical terms as portrayed by the media e.g. aids victims, camp men and butch women.

Many people who came out to their immediate families often did not come out to their extended families because either because they did not want to make the situation worse or make it harder for their parents. Many people adopted the policy of not coming out directly to the extended family but not lying about their sexuality either.

Coming out to families is often a case of compromising your own identity. Coming out also has an impact on where people can live. One person said that she could not go back to Pakistan where she loves to go back to just because it would not be safe for her there anymore. Another person also said that she could not go and live in her village in Nigeria although that was home for her. This situation was also true for people living in the West. Muslim LGBTQ people tend not to be out in areas where there is a high concentration of Muslim people because it can have such an intimidating effect.

Coming out to Friends or others

People who had been out for a long time agreed that they were still effected by how people respond to them coming out. Even if people accepted that they were lesbian

they still expected them to behave in a 'normal' or heterosexual way. It was not ok to be dykey or look butch.

Many people who came out to their friends agreed that often their friends said homophobic things because of their ignorance – often they didn't know any LGBTQ people. Once you came out to them they were actually ok and became more supportive. However, it is extremely intimidating and frightening when you experience extreme homophobia from people especially if there is nothing we can do about it.

Sometimes there can be a lot of pressure to come out from non-Muslim or white friends/LGBT communities. But they failed to recognise the complexities and costs of coming out for people from ethnic and religious minorities in Europe.

Many people actually felt that it was harder to be Muslim or a certain nationality e.g. Palestinian than come out as gay. People were harassed for their religious/national identity whereas they might be accepted by those same people for being gay

Summary

- It is important to be supported whether you decide to come out or not.
- There are different strategies for coming out and you have to find the one that is safe and suitable for you.
- Coming out is a process that continues throughout your life – sometimes it will be extremely hard and sometimes it will give you a sense of pride in your own identity
- It is extremely useful to have a network of friends or resources and organisations to assist those Coming Out and for supporting the families of those who Come Out.
- Organisations such as Imaan need to be more accessible for those Coming Out, especially in areas outside of London.

Meeting other Muslim LBT women

Talks and Workshop 4 - Meeting other Muslim LBT women: setting up support networks and social groups (Anita Naoke Pilgrim, Nassreen & Anisa)

The Safra Project (SP) is a resource project rather than a social group, but there is a lot of demand from Muslim LGBTQ women to have (more) social support groups and more social meetings. For a long time Al Fatiha UK was the only social group specifically for Muslim LGBTQ people (both men and women). Its development was

stalled for a while, but they now have a new board (two participants to this workshop are on this board) and the group changed its name to Imaan. Two members of the Safra Project MC (Tamsila and Nassreen) are actively involved in the further development of Imaan. There are also other social groups relevant to Muslim LGBTQ women such as the Kiss group (for Asian and Middle Eastern LB women) and various on-line groups.

Although the Safra Project is a resource project and not a social group in itself, the current work plan does involve 'capacity building work;', encouraging and supporting the creation, continuation and expansion of social support groups. This workshop is to identify and discuss our experiences of existing groups and the demand for developments.

Discussion on existing groups

Everyone in the workshop named the groups, organisations, activities, etc. that form their social networks – i.e. not only LGBT, Muslim or Asian groups but also professional groups, sports clubs etc. It was clear that our social networks are much larger than specifically Muslim LBT women. Nevertheless, many Muslim LGBTQ women would like to go to specific socials or groups for Muslim LGBTQ women, because they want to socialise somewhere where they can be themselves, where their identity is not questioned and/or where they can meet others in similar situations or with similar backgrounds etc.

Some participants in the workshop were aware and/or went to the Kiss group - a group for South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African lesbian and bisexual women meeting in London. Some participants said this was an excellent group and its presence was very important and essential. The Kiss Newsletter was considered especially useful.

However, it was also felt by some participants that the facilitators of the group were very directive, not leaving much scope for input from (new) members. This left the group very set in its ways and some participants also felt that the group could be quite 'cliquey'. It was also pointed out that the Kiss group can feel a bit like a 'young' group – not necessarily in age but in terms of the discussions and topics addressed, e.g. talking about coming out etc and there was a need for something beyond that (see below). Also, this group was not specifically for Muslim women and there is a need to further explore issues around Sexuality and Islam (see below).

Some participants to the workshop pointed out that professionals working with Asian women usually refer lesbian or bisexual Asian women that they come across in their work to the Kiss group. However, there were various reports that this group had

not always been welcoming to new visitors and that not everyone who went there felt at home in the group. This was particularly true for Muslim women.

One participant had looked at the Al Fatiha website and saw nothing that was inviting to come to a social group. It was pointed out that this must have been the Al Fatiha USA website as the UK group did not have a website, only a yahoo group. Imaan (formerly Al Fatiha UK) will have a website soon. The participants that had been to Al Fatiha UK in the past, noted that there were very few women and that it was dominated by men and that this group also felt quite cliquy. These experiences were from before the latest Al Fatiha elections (spring 2004) for a new board and the name change to Imaan. The Imaan board now includes many women. One Imaan board member who was present at the workshop explained that Imaan has talked about providing women-only socials in the future and is now developing it future plans, they may have a permanent meeting space / office from September.

The existence of the Safra Project and Imaan side by side as groups for Muslim LGBT people was not seen as 'confusing' by participants at the workshop. Although there may have been some hesitation at first by some, it was clear now that they progress in different ways and are interlinked but work in separate ways and have a different function. It was noted that the Safra Project was not seen as a group for newly 'out' people or socialising but a potential place for networking and political work against homophobia, racism, islamophobia etc, which was also needed.

It was also mentioned that places to go out and socialise were limited and some felt that places like club Kali had turned into a 'freak show' where they felt exhibited and at display for a (white) audience rather than at ease amongst other LGBTQ Asians.

Findings for future developments

At the workshop we identified that there is still a need for further developments for a safe space for Muslim lesbian and bisexual women. This should be for women who identify as Muslim culturally and/or religiously and this should be clearly stated as otherwise people might feel it was a religious group and be intimidated by that.

Some felt there was in particular a need for a more 'mature' group or a group where more progressive issues can be discussed for women who have developed beyond the question of 'coming out' and want to explore other issues around their identities, culture, religion, politics as well as meeting up socially. One topic participants were interested in exploring further was sexuality & Islam. What is

needed is a balance between workshops, political events and socials / fun events – there should be more of a combination of both.

Social groups do not necessarily have to explicitly exclude ‘straight’ women if they come along as a friend, but it should remain predominantly LBQ women. Some participants also felt strongly that such a group should be women-only, as they felt more comfortable in a women only environment. It was also pointed out that mixed male/female groups often quickly get dominated by men in terms of numbers and/or issues discussed.

To develop this, it is crucial that members, including new members, are constantly involved in saying what they want and the board / organisers / facilitators to always feed back what is going on. This is the only way to ensure people want to be involved and will keep coming. For example, people could be asked at monthly meetings what they think of the progress and how they can be involved themselves.

There is also a need to encourage the building of such groups outside London, e.g. by having events outside of London. The first Safra Project conference was in Manchester and many women attended, but there was not further development of a social group there. Setting up a social group or having an event outside of London can be difficult if there are not sufficient contacts or volunteers ‘on the spot’ able and willing to take things forward. The Safra Project can make use of the networks of existing members and organisations to find more people outside London that are willing to participate.

One suggestion was that Imaan and the Safra Project could organise an event, e.g. a women only social or the launch of a leaflet and also would seek jointly support for next year’s conference that could take place in Bradford.

It was also pointed out that it is crucial to get more information and leaflets out in the communities making people aware of information and services available for LGBTQ Muslim groups. This is also as there are also groups that call themselves ‘ex-LGBT’ Muslims, aiming to attract young Muslims that are just coming out and ‘help’ them to ‘return to the faith’. It is also much needed for (LGBT) Muslims and Asians working themselves in the communities to be more ‘out’ or willing to challenge homophobia.

Participants to the workshop indicated where they find information on groups and events: e-lists, community groups, services working with LGBT people, gay press – especially for women outside London (Diva). One participant pointed out that to raise awareness of the Safra Project, it is also important not just to post leaflets but to follow up and devise strategies about how to get service providers to work on Muslim LGBTQ women’s issues.

