BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Enhancing LGBTQ+ social services to better support queer Muslims

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Experiences with LGBTQ+ Social Services

Queer Muslims often experience difficulties navigating the social service landscape in their journey to find safe and validating mental health care. When asked about their experiences with mainstream LGBTQ+ social services, queer Muslims indicated that these tend to be the first type of organization they access on this journey. However, there are several factors that cause these individuals to withdraw from these services in search of those that better reflect their intersectional experiences. Throughout this guide, we will highlight several of these factors as well as specific suggestions that queer Muslims had for enhancing services to better support queer Muslims.

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Addressing Systemic Oppression

When asked about their experiences with mainstream LGBTQ+ social services, queer Muslims often spoke about the negative impacts that systemic oppression had on their ability to access adequate support and care.

Queer Muslims often share that people in mainstream LGBTQ+ services with little understanding of Islam rely on stereotypes and misinformation. As a result, these service providers and/or service users can make harmful assumptions about a queer Muslims' experiences causing the individual to withdraw from services.

People within mainstream LGBTQ+ services may also place their own values onto queer Muslims. In some cases, service providers and/or service users have encouraged queer Muslims to cut family members out of their lives or withdraw from their families completely if they are not accepting. As many queer Muslims are raised in families who possess collectivist values, this may not be an effective solution for someone who feels they are responsible for supporting their family.

Some ways that mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations can address systemic barriers include:
- Acknowledging systems of oppression, such as capitalism, and how these systems impact queer Muslims' mental health and wellbeing
- Critically reflecting on the beliefs, values, and biases that are held and reflected by the organization and demonstrating a commitment to upholding those values
- Challenging behaviours and attitudes that perpetuate racism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and colonialism within the organization

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Strengthening Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is the ability to acknowledge, understand, and appreciate someone who holds different identities and experiences than our own. Queer Muslims hold many intersectional identities, such as their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity, that influence their experiences and how they navigate the world. As a result, it can be difficult for someone without similar experiences to provide adequate care to a queer Muslim person.

Queer Muslims spoke about several experiences when LGBTQ+ organizations and services providers demonstrated a lack of cultural competence. In many cases, queer Muslims had to educate their service provider about their cultural norms and practices in order to receive culturally relevant care. Other individuals had to defend themselves against Islamophobia, microaggressions, and stereotypes spoken by service providers and other service users.

Some ways that mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations can enhance cultural competence include:
- Providing training and education to staff and service providers about Islam, cultural norms and practices, and common stereotypes and microaggressions experienced by queer Muslims.
- Hiring staff who are representative of the community needs and hold a diversity of skills and identities, including language, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity
- Consulting with queer Muslim people about ways to tailor services to community needs
- Developing and upholding anti-oppressive policies to demonstrate support for queer Muslim service users

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Improving Accessibility

When asked about their experiences with mainstream LGBTQ+ social services, queer Muslims identified many barriers to the accessibility of services. One factor that many queer Muslims speak about in relation to accessing services is cost. There may be several reasons why queer Muslims are not able to pay for services, including financial instability from leaving home, or a lack of financial independence from their parents. In addition to service fees, LGBTQ+ social services often host events in spaces that require individuals to spend money to attend.

Queer Muslims also identify safety as an important consideration when accessing an LGBTQ+ social service. If the individual has not disclosed their identity to their families, it may not be safe for them to attend mainstream LGBTQ+ social service organizations or events that are highly visible in the community.

Some ways that mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations can enhance accessibility for queer Muslims include:
- Hosting events and services online so queer Muslims can access them in a private place
- Providing services that are free or reduced rates for individuals with financial concerns
- Planning events that do not require people to pay to participate
- Developing programs and groups specifically for queer Muslims and vetting attendees to ensure the space is safe for all queer Muslims

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What Can we Learn from Queer Muslim Spaces?

Spaces that are intentionally created by and for queer Muslims are important places for these individuals to build a sense of community and belonging. Queer Muslims who attend these spaces share that they incite feelings of safety, affirmation, validation which can be new feelings for many individuals. By creating programs or groups specifically for queer Muslims, your organization can create space for these individuals to be their authentic selves.

Some practices that queer Muslim spaces incorporate into services and programs to incite such feelings include:
- Paying queer Muslims both to work as facilitators, and to participate in services and/or events
- Learning to pronounce participants names correctly, and not shortening people's names without their permission
- Acknowledging holidays and providing space for participates to practice these holidays as they wish
- Understanding that 'coming out' is a western concept and not all queer Muslims perceive or value this as a milestone in their personal journey
- Embodying the values of inclusion throughout all levels of the organization

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FURTHER READING

If you would like to learn more about these topics and find out what resources or supports are available in your area, check out the following options!

Books:

An Arab Melancholia
by Abdellah Taïa
We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir
by Samra Habib

Resources:

Black Muslims in Canada: Challenging Narratives of Belonging and Rootedness
by Fatimah Jackson-Best
How to be culturally competent when supporting LGBTQ+ Muslims
by Rahim Thawer
Queer & Muslim: Nothing to Reconcile
by Blair Imani
Brown, trans, queer, Muslim and proud
by Sabah Choudrey
A Muslim Mental Health Response to Homophobia
by Sarah Huxtable Mohr

Community/Social Groups and Organizations:

Salaam Canada
Masjid el-Tawhid / The Unity Mosque
Queer Muslim Network Toronto
MASGD

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In July 2022, Salaam Canada shut down its operations as a national organization.

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