

# Becoming a Better Ally

Understanding Sexual and Gender  
Diversity within Muslim Families

# What is Sexual and Gender Diversity?

Sexual and gender diversity, in the simplest terms, is not conforming to the societal expectations of being heterosexual and cisgender (being the gender that was assigned to you at birth).

- People can vary in all sorts of ways regarding gender and sexuality, and often feel that they do not fit within the rigid boxes of gender and sexuality outlined by society
- Most prominently known identities are under the LGBTQ+ umbrella: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer.
- Although these are some of the most common terms, gender and sexual diversity is an incredibly personal thing and every individual has a different experience with regards to their race, class, gender, religion, etc.

## Allyship: What is it and Why is it Important?

Allyship begins with understanding that you hold more power in society than people who are part of a marginalized group. Understanding this means that you will be more willing to look at your interpersonal relationships with such groups of people, how you interact with others, and your behaviour. In general, allyship involves building relationships based on trust and accountability.

- For family members of queer Muslims, it is important to understand the ways queer Muslims are shamed and isolated in their families through religious interpretation and cultural beliefs.
- Allyship for queer Muslim kin by family members can look like:
  - Educating others about queer Muslim experiences
  - Using the appropriate pronouns and names
  - Listening empathetically and validating their experiences
  - Standing up to others on behalf of your queer Muslim kin
- When queer Muslims experience allyship from their family members and/or kin, they often talk about feelings of validation, support, and enhanced well-being.

## Concerns and Hopes of Family Members

Families often have hopes that their kin will live happy and successful lives. Since society has outlined norms for what it means to be happy and successful, it can be difficult when one's kin leads a life that is different from these prescribed paths.

- Family members may have several reasons why they do not approve of sexual and/or gender diversity:
  - Religious interpretation
  - Cultural beliefs
  - Fear that their kin will not be successful or will have a hard life
  - Feeling that they are being personally punished
- In some cases, the reasons outlined above are based in feelings of love and a need to protect their queer Muslim kin. Unfortunately, queer Muslims do not see these attitudes as supportive or validating
- Although these concerns and hopes may be your first response when your queer Muslim kin discloses their identity, there are many ways that you can continue to show support for them and work towards greater understanding and acceptance

## How to Improve your Understanding

Building understanding and acceptance can be a long, and sometimes difficult, journey. As a family member or kin of a queer Muslim, you can engage in several strategies to enhance your understanding of sexual and gender diversity and work towards acceptance. These strategies may help to strengthen your relationships with your queer Muslim kin.

## *Education*

Families educating themselves on queerness can include learning about allyship, advocacy, and simply listening to their queer Muslim kin. An important aspect of educating oneself as a family member is reframing your understanding of what it means to be queer and Muslim.

- Family members may ask their queer Muslim kin questions to better understand their kin's identities and experiences. Some queer Muslims may find that by answering their questions, their family members begin to make incremental changes in their attitudes
- Although queer Muslim kin can provide some answers, when family members continue this path to learning and growth on their own, it can make queer Muslims feel supported and it also reduces the emotional labour required of queer Muslims kin
- Accessing affirming resources in a language or depiction that is more in-line with family members' ways of knowing may help reframe misunderstandings of queerness, such as that it is a choice or a result of trauma

## *Understanding*

Although family members and kin of queer Muslims may not approve of sexual and gender diversity, they may still choose to maintain their relationship with their kin because they love them and do not want to lose them.

- If a queer Muslim disclosed their identity to you, consider if the person is any different than they were before they disclosed their identity to you. The person has always been a queer Muslim, whether you knew about it or not. By understanding this, it may help you to see them as the person you have always known and loved.
- When family members tell their queer Muslim kin that they will love them regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, queer Muslims talk about feeling supported, loved, and accepted for who they are

## *Community Support*

Family members and kin of queer Muslims can benefit from finding support within their community. There are many members of the Muslim community as well as religious leaders who are advocates for queer Muslims and can help families to build their understanding of how queerness and Muslimness fit together.

- When family members experience support from their communities and extended families, it can help them to feel as if they are not alone in their experiences and can reduce the feelings of shame that are often associated with maintaining honour in one's family
- Queer Muslims who witness and experience support from members of their community also talk about the many positive impacts this experience has on their lives and well-being, sharing their feelings of validation, safety, and comfort



## *Open Communication*

Practicing effective communication skills can allow queer Muslims and their families to maintain their boundaries and have transparency about queerness and the coming out process.

- Some queer Muslims experience denial or silence from family members after disclosing their identities, making them feel unheard and unimportant
- Family members who try to listen and engage with their queer Muslim kin, even if in small increments, can eventually lead to a more open and transparent relationship. When both the queer Muslim and their family member share their vulnerability, it can lead to a stronger connection and relationship

## *Exposure and Representation*

Exposure to queer Muslim content, media, communities, and stories can facilitate more acceptance among family members, particularly in cases where communication may still be difficult.

- Utilizing forms of media which family members already enjoy, such as film or television, helps them see positive representations of the queer Muslim experience
- When a family member builds a relationship with their queer Muslim kin's significant other, it shows that they are taking their kin's sexual and/or gender identity seriously, and can further expose them to more queer Muslim experiences
- Getting a sense of how big the queer Muslim community is may help family members understand the magnitude of this experience, challenging notions they held which contributed to their lack of acceptance

## 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:

Faith in Our Families: Talking About Faith, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

by PFLAG

Homosexuality is Not a 'Test' From Allah

by Junaid Jahangir

Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society

by Muhsin Hendricks

A Muslim Mental Health Response to Homophobia

by MuslimMentalHealth.com

### Community/Social Groups and Organizations:

Salaam Canada

Masjid el-Tawhid / The Unity Mosque

Queer Muslim Network Toronto

MASGD

This pamphlet was written by Emily Cox and Anonymous for Salaam Canada, 2023. The funding for this manual was provided by a SSHRC funded grant Service Needs of Sexually & Gender Diverse Muslims and Their Families: A Partnership with Salaam Canada. The partnership Engage Grant was led by Dr. Maryam Khan from Wilfrid Laurier University. For more information about the study visit:  
<https://muslimfamiliesresearch.ca/>

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