

BRINGING COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Enhancing mainstream Muslim social
services to better support queer Muslims

Experiences with Muslim Social Services

Queer Muslims often experience barriers when navigating mainstream Muslim social services in their journey to find safe and validating mental health care. When asked about their experiences with mainstream Muslim social services, many queer Muslims indicated that, as they get older, they tend to withdraw from these services because they do not align with their values and experiences as a queer Muslim. Throughout this guide, we will highlight several ways that Muslim social services could be enhanced to better support queer Muslims.

Addressing Discrimination

When asked about their experiences with mainstream Muslim social services, many queer Muslims spoke about experiences of discrimination, including sexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. These experiences often had negative impacts on queer Muslims' mental health, self-esteem, and sense of self.

In some cases, Queer Muslims spoke about not feeling welcome or accepted in mainstream Muslim social services. Many queer Muslims shared that they feared judgement from service providers and/or service users. As a result of these experiences, queer Muslims may withdraw from Muslim social services or from the Muslim community in general which could lead to feelings of isolation.

Some ways Muslim social services can address discrimination and oppression include:

- Providing training and education to staff and service providers about LGBTQ+ identities and the impact of discrimination on queer Muslims' mental health.
- Developing and upholding anti-oppressive policies to demonstrate support for queer Muslim service users
- Challenging behaviours and attitudes that perpetuate sexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia within the organization

Appreciating Diversity in Islam

Experience, practice, and adherence of Islam varies from person to person. The way a person identifies in relation to their sect, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation can change the way they experience Muslimness. It is important to understand that although you experience Muslimness in one way, someone else may experience it in a very different way and both of these experiences are valid.

Queer Muslims represent various sects of Islam which can significantly alter the ways in which they understand their queer identity. For example, queer Muslims who are Ismaili, they may perceive that God has made them this way and experience greater self-acceptance than queer Muslims who perceive their queer identity as sinful.

Many queer Muslims may also identify as culturally Muslim, in which case, they do not practice Islam. While this could be because they had negative experiences, it could also be because they do not feel they are a religious person. In either case, it is important to accept their choice in how they understand their Muslimness.

Some ways that Muslim social services can acknowledge diversity include:

- Encouraging participation from all queer Muslims no matter their sect, approach, or level of practice
- Developing curriculum that recognizes the diversity within Islam and teaches youth about varying sects and approaches to Islam
- Building relationships with queer Muslim organizations to demonstrate a commitment to allyship

Addressing Gender Norms

When asked about their experiences with mainstream Muslim social services, one barrier that many queer Muslims identified in relation to accessing these services was gender norms. In many Muslim social services, there are strict gender norms related to dress codes, where and how someone may participate, and ways in which they must act.

For queer Muslims who identify as non-binary, trans, and/or gender non-conforming, it can be difficult to navigate gender norms within mainstream Muslim social services. When these individuals are expected to dress in a way that does not align with their gender identity and/or expression, it may cause feelings of discomfort or gender dysphoria.

Some ways that Muslim social services can reduce the impact of gender norms for queer Muslims include:

- Demonstrating that individuals from all gender identities are equally valued.
- Teaching service users about gender norms and their impact on queer Muslims
- Allowing queer Muslims to express their gender identity in a way that they are comfortable with, including wearing what they want
- Encouraging queer Muslims to sit on the side that best reflects their gender identity and/or expression.

What can we learn from queer Muslim spaces?

Many queer Muslims share that they withdraw from mainstream Muslim social services or Islam in general because of experiences that made them feel unsafe, unwelcome, or invalidated. However, these individuals also share a longing to reconnect with Islam and the Muslim community. Spaces that are intentionally created by and for queer Muslims are important places for these individuals to reconcile their intersectional identities and learn to accept both their identity as a Muslim and a queer person.

Some practices that queer Muslim spaces incorporate into services and programs to incite such feelings include:

- Discussing interpretations of the Quran that are affirming and validating for queer Muslims
- Identifying and addressing behaviours and attitudes that are discriminatory of other marginalized groups
- Recognizing and acknowledging instances of systemic Islamophobia and its' impacts on Muslim communities
- Implementing guidelines for service users to follow to ensure all spaces and programs are respectful, safe, and judgement free

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

Queer & Muslim: Nothing to Reconcile

by Blair Imani

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

by Muhsin Hendricks

Community/Social Groups and Organizations:

Salaam Canada

Masjid el-Tawhid / The Unity Mosque

Queer Muslim Network Toronto

MASGD

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<https://ssgdmuslimssw.ca/>

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