



(Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation

# LGBT Muslims Seeking Inclusion

*Urooj Arshad*

*Associate Director, Advocates for Youth*

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

## About The Author



### Urooj Arshad

*Associate Director, Advocates for Youth*

Urooj Arshad builds the capacity of organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean to empower young people as advocates within their countries and at international forums on reproductive and sexual health and rights. She has also designed a project that addresses the reproductive and sexual health needs of Muslim youth. Ms. Arshad has presented at domestic and international conferences, including the International HIV/AIDS Conference 2010 in Austria and 2012 in Washington, DC; the European Science Foundation's conference on Religion, Gender and Human Rights 2011 in Sweden; the LGBT Pride and Heritage Event hosted by the White House Office of Public Engagement and the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; the State Department; the National Press Club; Georgetown University and Princeton. Ms. Arshad also keynoted at the LGBTQ Symposium 2013 at American University. Ms. Arshad is a steering committee member of the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD) which addresses the impact of Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. Ms. Arshad has been a member of the Center for American Progress' Women's Health Leadership Network and the Faith and Reproductive Justice Institute. Ms. Arshad was an American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute fellow and a current member of the Kalamazoo College Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership Global Advisory Board.

*On Friday and Saturday, April 11 and 12, 2014, the Alwaleed Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University hosted a two-day workshop (Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation to discuss the ways in which American Muslims define themselves, and are defined, in the twenty-first century. The workshop brought together a diverse slate of American Muslim activists, artists, scholars and advocates in a constructive dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting Muslims in the United States. In five sessions over two days, the group addressed challenges regarding the ideas of American Muslim identity and representation while encouraging a discussion of the opportunities and a broader view of the communities encompassed in the umbrella term ‘American Muslims’.*

*What follows is Urooj Arshad’s presentation from Session 5 of the conference that explored the topic of muslims seeking inclusion.*

## Introduction

---

As someone who has been active in community organizing within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Muslim community in the U.S for the last fifteen years, I have witnessed first-hand and personally experienced the heart breaking desire of countless LGBT Muslims who long to find a way back home, “to the tent of Islam” which for many seemed impossible. There was a time, not long ago, when saying “I am gay and Muslim” was equated with being an oxymoron. No one believed that it was possible to be Muslim and be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. We were shunned both publicly and privately from our families and communities. LGBT Muslim leaders feared for their physical safety and had to organize in creative ways to minimize risk for themselves and members of the LGBT Muslim community. But most damaging of all, LGBT Muslims internalized this message, further isolating us from our faith. Tremendous efforts by LGBT Muslim activists, scholars and allies within the last fifteen years has helped to change that narrative. While LGBT Muslims who were “out” and “open” about their sexuality or gender identity were unwelcome in “mainstream” Muslim communities, we began to create our own spaces that were safe and inclusive.

LGBT Muslims under the umbrella of organizations including Al-Fatiha (now defunct) organized conferences and retreats that brought together LGBT Muslims to discuss issues facing our community including (re)integrating Islam within our lives, alternative interpretations of Quranic verses that condemn homosexuality, women’s religious leadership, challenges of coming out to our families, racism from within and outside of LGBT communities, and the intersections of oppression. LGBT Muslims have led countless workshops on the challenges facing our community and we have participated in forums discussing the intersection of Islamophobia and homophobia/transphobia. We have marched in LGBT pride parades to show our visibility, written affidavits and testified in cases for individuals seeking asylum from predominantly Muslim countries that persecute LGBT people, provided personal support and spiritual counseling, advocated for inclusion of LGBT Muslim concerns within the larger LGBT movement, developed resources, and advocated for religious scholarship that focuses on Islam in the context of LGBT issues. But most importantly we have dramatically changed the discourse. The discourse that once looked at LGBT Muslims as only non- religious, somehow outside the realm of mainstream Muslim life, not impacted by Islamophobia or other issues facing American Muslims, and not being LGBT and Muslim at the same time.

---

*There was a time,  
not long ago, when  
saying, “I am gay  
and Muslim” was  
equated with being  
an oxymoron.  
No one believed  
that it was possible  
to be Muslim  
and be lesbian,  
gay, bisexual or  
transgender”*

---

Attending the (re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation convening was a truly transformative experience for me and has given me so much hope for what the possibilities are to push the “mainstream” Muslim community to understand and accept LGBT Muslims. The conversation on inclusion and the plurality of the Muslim world’s theological and lived experiences was inspiring. Even though I know that the reality on the ground might take years to shift (especially when Muslims living in the U.S are dealing with civil rights violations and national security issues in an increasingly polarized world) and when many communities choose to maintain rigid cultural norms around issues of sexuality and gender, regardless of emerging feminist and LGBT-friendly Muslim theology, I believe that my presence alone in a room with other Muslim thought leaders to share the experiences and challenges of LGBT Muslims, was reflective of a huge shift in discourse that has been years in the making.

## Five challenges and/or opportunities for American Muslims

---

“Mainstream” Muslim spaces continue to remain inaccessible to LGBT Muslims, leading to stigma, discrimination, self-hate and disassociation from familial, cultural and religious institutions. We can also understand this as the phenomenon of “spiritual violence.”<sup>2</sup>

LGBT Muslims face the multiple and simultaneous burdens of Islamophobia as well as homophobia/transphobia which increases their vulnerability to both state-based and familial, cultural and religious violence and discrimination.

There is a momentum from younger Muslims to create “third spaces,” outside of traditional and “mainstream” Muslim communities. These spaces can be a great opportunity to address the complexities surrounding gender and sexuality and to welcome LGBT Muslims.

Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD) (which organizes the annual LGBT Muslim retreat) has created opportunities to strengthen and organize the LGBT Muslim community. MASGD offers a unique opportunity for mainstream Muslim communities looking to create partnerships and to collaborate around common concerns.

Religious scholarship and literature on sexual diversity in Islam and the concerns facing LGBT Muslims is widely available. These resources (see the attached document for resources) can be a great resource to expand our understanding of LGBT Muslims.

---

*There is a momentum from younger Muslims to create “third spaces”, outside of traditional and “mainstream” Muslim communities.*

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.whosoever.org/v5i6/violence.html> for more information on “spiritual violence” and its affect on LGBT people.

## Recommendations for American Muslims

---

*Follow up to the (re)Presenting American Muslims:* Broadening the Conversation: Building upon the work of this particular convening which brought together thought leaders that represent the American Muslim diversity is crucial to continue this important dialogue and to think about concrete ways to translate ideas generated into skills sharing and peer support on the ground, in mosques, national organizations, and within the broader American Muslim community.

*Support and invest in leadership development for American Muslims including LGBT people:* Programs like the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute are crucial to the continued growth of the community and allow space for reflection, networking and skills-building. A concerted effort should be made to include dialogue on sexual and gender diversity within Islam. These leadership development opportunities allow American Muslims to learn from each other's diverse experiences and create room for further ideological, personal, organizational and theological growth.

*Leveraging the momentum of "third spaces:"* There is a momentum within the Muslim community, especially among young people to create "third spaces." These spaces offer a unique opportunity to address complexities surrounding gender and sexuality and can be places that welcome LGBT Muslims.

*Diversity of religious scholarship:* Religious scholarship and literature on sexuality and Islam should be used as a resource to expand our understanding of the many concerns and challenges facing LGBT Muslims. This scholarship however has to be understood and incorporated into the work of Imams and other religious and community leaders to have a significant and large scale impact.

*Safe, inclusive and welcoming spaces:* It is vital to create safe, inclusive and welcoming spaces within existing institutions like mosques and Islamic centers where LGBT Muslims can find acceptance and resources especially around spiritual counseling and reconciliation with families.

*Engaging youth:* MSAs on college campuses and after school and weekend programs can be a good opportunity to create safe, fun and inclusive environments for a future generation of Muslim leaders who respect diversity. Engaging students and youth in conversations and skills building around inclusivity provides a good framework for sustainability and long term movement building.

*Broadening the dialogue around gender inclusion:* Hind Makki's work on the "Side Entrance" project is a great example of important discourse challenging patriarchal gender norms. Challenges faced by LGBT Muslims almost always stem from a patriarchal discourse around gendered norms that get coded around strict interpretations of sexuality and gender. Working to broaden the discourse around gender within Islam to include LGBT Muslims can provide a great opportunity to build solidarity and disseminate a broader message about the importance of inclusive, welcoming and safe Muslim spaces.

---

*"Third spaces"  
offer a unique  
opportunity to  
address complexities  
surrounding gender  
and sexuality and  
can be places  
that welcome  
LGBT Muslims.*

---



## Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. ISPU conducts objective, empirical research and offers expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

© 2015 The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.



Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

1110 Vermont Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005 | 1.202.768.8749 | [info@ispu.org](mailto:info@ispu.org)

6 Parklane Blvd., Suite 510, Dearborn, Michigan 48126 | 1.800.920.ISPU (4778)

[www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org)