Let there arise out of you a band of people enjoying what is right, forbidding the wrong. They are the ones to attain success. Qur’an: 3:104.
About The Inner Circle

The Inner Circle (TIC) is a leading human rights organization based in Cape Town, South Africa. It was established in 1996, but during this time it remained an informal organization. TIC continued to grow and in 1998 it was established as the Al-Fitr Foundation before it was registered as TIC in 2006. At the heart of the organization is the quest for spiritual transformation in the Muslim community and faith in relation to the intersection between Islam, sexual orientation and gender identity. TIC seeks to ensure that the Muslim community makes a paradigmatic shift from the orthodox belief that only heterosexuality is permissible in Islam, to an Islam which embraces sexual orientation and gender identity and counters the endemic patriarchy in orthodox Islam. It seeks an Islam which does not discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

TIC believes that authentic Qur’anic hermeneutics demonstrates that sexual diversity is acceptable. It strongly believes in the rarefied values of human dignity, diversity, equity and justice as enunciated in the Quran. TIC conducts a number of programmes which fall into the categories of public education, capacity building, networking, tools for transformation, advocacy, movement building, and the provision of psycho-social services. These include the International Personal Empowerment Program, Islam and Sexual Diversity, On Becoming You, Annual International Retreat, Training of Trainers, International Conference for the Empowerment of Women and psycho-spiritual support programme. TIC works in collaboration with other queer Muslim organizations and is a member of the Global Queer Muslim Network. It supports and mentors emerging queer Muslim organizations with the objective of strengthening the Global Queer Muslim Network.
**Executive summary**

This research agenda seeks to provide evidence-based knowledge about the intersection between Islam and gender orientation and sexual diversity in the South African context. Research on this subject has tended to be primarily desktop, resulting in a dearth of empirical-based research. However, this research acknowledges that there is a number of research works which have sought to inquire into the subject. These include works by Farid Esack, Mahomed Nadeem, Scott Kugle and Muhsin Hendricks\(^1\). It is against this background that TIC sought to conduct cutting-edge research on this subject in order to build on the existing knowledge base. From this research, it has emerged that the Muslim community has rudimentary to non-existent knowledge about queer Muslims. It is this “knowledge deficit” that is at the heart of discrimination, rejection and homophobia against queer Muslims in the mainstream Muslim community. Education, advocacy and awareness campaigns have therefore emerged as the most important tools which should be used in the quest for a shift in attitudes and belief systems.

However, the education agenda is faced with a number of daunting challenges, primarily that the Muslim community is not ready to engage in dialogue on this topical issue. In fact, a sizeable constituency of Muslims hold the extreme view that it is *Haram* (an Arabic word which means forbidden/sinful) to talk about Islam and sexual orientation and gender diversity. Another challenge is that there are Muslims who vehemently deny the reality that there are Muslims who are queer. They maintain that if there are Muslims who are queer, such people do not qualify to be Muslims. Another section of the Muslim community believes that there are Muslims who are queer but, regard them as “bad Muslims”.

Queer Muslims face a myriad of challenges which include being ostracized by their families and communities, discrimination at work places, the withdrawal of support, physical, psychological, verbal and emotional abuse and discrimination in the delivery of social

\(^1\) Esack, F. & Mahomed, N. “Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality”. *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*. 2011. Kugle, S. Queer Jihad: A View from South Africa. *ISIM Review*. 2005. Muhsin Hendricks has conducted a number of research projects which sought to interrogate the challenges which are faced by queer Muslims in South Africa and how queer Muslims try and negotiate these challenges.
The queer Muslim community has specific needs and aspirations which need to be addressed and different actors need to play different but coordinated and complementary roles. These needs include being accepted by their families and communities, living in a society in which they are not judged, an end to all forms of homophobia and respect for diversity. Actors who should be involved in the struggle for the rights of queer people include religious leaders, the government, not for profit organizations, gender activists, queer Muslim activists and teachers.

**Key words**

_Haram_, homosexual, queer, heterosexual, sexual orientation, sexual diversity, gender identity, patriarchy, discrimination, reconciliation, homophobia, _Hadith_, Islam, orthodox, Qur’an, _Sharia_, _Sunnah_, _Fiqh_, _Madahi_, _Hasan_, _Mawdu’_, hetero-normative, _moffie_, _faggot_, cognitive dissonance, hermeneutics, _Qaum Lut_.

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2 18% of the queer Muslims who participated in the research stated that they were discriminated against in the health delivery system.
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Section 1

This section details the objectives of the study, the research methodology, limitations of the study and ethical considerations which were adhered to during the collection and analysis of data.

1. Introduction

When TIC was founded in 1996, its knowledge base about the challenges and needs of queer Muslims was largely anecdotal. The organization assumed that all queer Muslims are willing to reconcile their faith with their sexuality and that they all aspire to come out of the closet. The organization developed a number of programmes which sought to promote the rights and wellbeing of queer Muslims. However, when the organization conducted its first needs analysis research in 2008, it was realized that for varying reasons, not all queer Muslims seek to reconcile their sexuality with their faith and that not all queer Muslims see coming out as necessary.

This research is a follow up to the one that was conducted in 2008. It was conducted from 26 May to 15 August 2014. It sought to delve into a range of issues which are, inter alia, whether there has been a shift in the Muslim community in terms of attitudes towards queer Muslims, the nature and characteristics of the challenges which are faced by the queer Muslim community, the ways in and through which queer Muslims negotiate these changes, whether there is space in Islam for queer Muslims to express their sexual orientation, ways which are used by queer Muslims to mobilize themselves and create safe spaces, the Muslim community’s understanding of the interface between Islam and sexual diversity, the efficacy of the queer Muslim advocacy agenda and the degree of homophobia in the Muslim community.

The research is also one way through which TIC seeks to make an appraisal of its programmes and interventions. TIC notes that needs are not static, but they change over time. It is therefore important for the organization to constantly ensure that its programmes remain relevant to the changing needs of the queer Muslim community. This will ensure the efficacy

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3 Research Report by The Inner Circle. Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Western Cape Muslim Community, 12 December 2008.
of the programmes and eventually the realization of the organization’s objectives. This research focused on four provinces, namely Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal. The unit of analysis for the research were queer Muslims, straight Muslims and scholars who have extensively taught, researched and/or published on the thematic area of Islamic studies. Three distinct interview guides were prepared and each of them was used for a specific target population. This was intended to ensure the relevance of questions to target groups and also to ensure that the data gathering process is standardized. The research was conducted with the assistance of four Research Interns who were contracted by TIC to gather data in each of the aforementioned provinces. The Research Interns were trained on how to effectively conduct interviews. They were also instructed to uphold the research methodology and ethical considerations critical to social science research.

This research is intended to be a tool which will be used by a variety of actors. These include human rights organizations, queer Muslim organizations, community and religious leaders, governments, regional and international organizations, human rights activists, academic institutions, feminists and the media fraternity. The research will therefore be disseminated in ways which will make it accessible to these institutions. These include the use of TIC’s website, social networks, workshops, conferences and TIC’s programmes. It is also expected to inform policy research and policy making institutions and TIC’s publications and training manuals.

TIC believes that there are a number of reasons why this research project is not only important, but also timely. Over the past couple of years, violence against queer people has intensified in Africa in particular and the world in general. One of the drivers of homophobia in Africa is the sponsorship of homophobic policies by American right-wing Christian fundamentalists. Kaoma, a Zambian Anglican Priest, has written two ground-breaking reports on the role of American Christian fundamentalists in homophobia in Africa. In the first report which is entitled *Globalizing the Culture Wars*, he discusses the role that American right-wing evangelists, such as Scott Lively and Scott Warren, played in supporting the anti-homosexuality legislation in Uganda. In the second, which is entitled *Colonising African Values*, he discusses how right-wing Christian organisations are
influencing politics and policy in African countries by claiming to “defend African traditional values” against a neo-colonial assault from the liberal west⁴.

The forms of violations perpetrated against queer people include the denial of access to basic rights, physical abuse and in some cases, brutal killing. The violence has not been only targeted against queer people, but also against people and organizations which advocate the rights of queer people. For example, Fannyanny Viola Eddy, an outstanding activist of the rights of sexual minorities in Sierra Leone was killed on 29 September 2004. She was the founder of the Sierra Leone Lesbian and Gay Association.

On 26 January 2011, David Kato, who was a Ugandan gay rights campaigner, was killed⁵. The print media is also involved in the propagation of homophobia in Uganda. For example, the Rolling Stone published the pictures of people it said are gay, including that of Mr Kato. In February 2014 President Yoweri Museveni signed a draconian legislation into law that imposes penalties of up to life in prison for “aggraviated homosexuality”⁶. In Zimbabwe, incumbent President Robert Mugabe is one of the most virulent anti-gay leaders in Africa. He is known for his statement that homosexuals are “worse than pigs and dogs”⁷. In the run-up to the 2013 elections and during the inauguration following his re-election, Mugabe condemned homosexuals, saying the government is going to take tough action against them⁸. President Mugabe came out in support of Uganda’s anti-gay laws.

In the Gambia, President Yahya Jammeh states that homosexuality is strictly prohibited in the country and he referred to it as “more deadly than all natural disasters put together”⁹. Some Gambian newspapers have been involved in publishing the names, addresses and photographs of homosexuals. In Swaziland, the country’s Prime Minister referred to homosexuality as “an

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⁴ Gevisser, M. Human rights versus homophobia: who is winning Africa’s cultural wars? 2010
⁵ BBC News Africa. Uganda gay rights activist David Kato killed. 27 January 2011
⁶ Business Day Africa News. Museveni signs anti-gay bill into law. 02 March 2014
⁷ Business Day Africa News. Mugabe backs Uganda’s anti-gay law. 03 March 2014
⁸ The Telegraph. Robert Mugabe criticizes Barak Obama’s gay rights stance. 24 July 2013
⁹ The Huffington Post. Jammeh condemns homosexuality. 10 November 2013
abnormality and a sickness”¹⁰. In Nigeria, some northern states adopted a Sharia law code that includes the death penalty for same-sex relations. The Same Sex Marriage Act “prohibits a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex, and provides penalties for the solemnization and witnessing of the same thereof¹¹”. As soon as the legislation was signed, many queer people were arrested and some of them were lashed¹².

Beyond the African region, homosexuality is criminalized in so-called Muslim countries. In Saudi Arabia, people convicted of homosexuality are sentenced to a range of penalties including corporal punishment and executions. A report by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) notes that in Saudi Arabia, “homosexuality is punishable by death or flogging. Reporting discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender workers to the authorities could threaten their lives”¹³. Similarly, the United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office noted that “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights are entirely denied in Saudi Arabia. Homosexual acts are illegal and potentially carry the death penalty”¹⁴.

In Iran, the “Islamic Penal Code” criminalises homosexuality with some homosexual acts carrying the death penalty. It was ratified by the Islamic Consultative Assembly in 2009 and by the Guardian Council in 2013 and it provides that sexual relationships between two men or two women shall be subject to punishments known as hudud (singular, hadd) under

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¹⁰ Kenworthy, P. “We are not victims, says Swaziland’s gay movement”. Pambazuka, http://pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/89759. 27 November 2013

¹¹ Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013. The Government of the Republic of Nigeria

¹² Human Rights Voices. Four accused gays whipped in north Nigeria Court. 07 March 2014


Shari‘a law. In some cases, state security forces raid houses and monitor internet space in search of queer people who are then arrested, harassed and detained.

1.2. Research Methodology

This section briefly discusses the methods used to obtain, organize and analyse data. Credibility and rigor was ensured through the use of confirmed qualitative research methods. Triangulation and random sampling were used to avoid bias by the researchers. Checks relating to the accuracy of data were conducted during and after the data collection process. The lead researcher conducted monitoring and evaluation visits to the provinces where the research was being conducted.

A total of 291 interviews were conducted. The table below shows the distribution of the interviews by province.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kwazulu Natal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Male)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Female)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of interviews</strong></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gauteng</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Male)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Female)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of interviews</strong></td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---


A focus group discussion was conducted to complement the data that had been gathered through interviews. The discussion sought to make a robust and in-depth interrogation of the intersection between Islam and sexual diversity. The composition of the discussion was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Male)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (Female)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3. Limitations of the research

Although a random sampling method was used, the research also employed a non-random sampling method. The Snowball sampling method was used for queer Muslims and academic interviewees. Regarding queer Muslims, the reason is that it is challenging to find them,
especially considering some of them are still in the closet. In snowball sampling, the researcher starts by identifying a few respondents who fit the criteria for inclusion in the study. After interviewing these respondents, the researcher requests them to recommend others they know who also meet the selection criteria. Scientifically, this method is biased because queer Muslims were not given a non-zero chance of being selected.

The snowball sampling was also suitable for academics because the research targeted those academics with expert knowledge in the thematic area of Islamic studies. Academics generally network with each other in many ways. Once the researcher got in touch with a few academics who meet the selection criteria, it was easy to be referred to other academics. The selection of academic interviewees thus did not ensure an equal chance of being selected. The challenge with the academics was that many of them were reluctant to participate in the research, primarily because of their busy schedules. Eventually, the research did not meet the targeted number of academic interviewees. The table below shows the initially planned number of interviews and the number of interviews that were conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population</th>
<th>Number of interviews planned</th>
<th>Number of interviews conducted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual Muslims</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Muslims</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.4. Data analysis

This research notes that interviews and focus group discussions are qualitative methods of data collection. For this reason, the tools which were used to analyse the data are primarily qualitative. However, quantitative tools of analysis were also used in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The analysis of data was done step by step. First, the researcher sought to have a detailed understanding of the data and its context. This was acquired through the reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts. Second, the data was categorized or coded. This involves the identification of themes or patterns of the data and organizing them into coherent patterns. Third, patterns within and between categories and sub-categories were
identified. An assessment of the relative importance of themes and the key ideas expressed within categories was conducted. Having achieved this, the data was rigorously interpreted.

1.5. Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the research, including information on who is conducting it and the reasons for conducting it. Their participation in the research project was voluntary and based on informed consent. They were also informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any unfavourable consequences and that they will not be harmed as a result of their participation or non-participation in the project. Given the nature of the study, the research ensured the safety of participants by using the dual principles of anonymity and confidentiality. The research ensured that it impossible to identify a given response with a specific respondent.
Section 2

This section is a brief discussion on the history of the South African context. This includes the history of Muslims and the trajectory of state politics and society, particularly in terms historical discrimination and the fight against all forms of discrimination.

2. South Africa: A historical context

Muslims are a religious minority who are not indigenous to South Africa. They came to South Africa in the 1600s from different parts of the world. The first group of Muslims came to South Africa as exiles and slaves from Dutch colonies in the Malay Archipelago and South India17. They were brought to the Cape as a way of stopping them from fighting anti-colonial struggles in their countries and also as slaves to provide a pool of labour to the Dutch administration18. Muslims were also among the Indians who were shipped to South Africa to work in the sugar-cane plantations in Natal.

Other slaves were brought from different parts of Africa. They faced many forms of oppression by the colonial state. They enjoyed no rights, were not allowed to build mosques, teach Islam or convene religious gatherings and were subjected to arbitrary arrests and their marriages were declared illegal. There were three consequences for disobedience, viz. confiscation of property, imprisonment or execution19. The attainment of the freedom to worship and the emancipation of slaves in 1834 helped Islam to flourish20. This is because Muslims could now pray and were able to propagate their religion.

The majority of the Muslims either submitted to apartheid or supported the system while a minority became involved in the struggle against apartheid. Some of the Muslims who

17 Rasool, E. “South African Muslims over Three Centuries: From the Jaws of Islamophobia to the Joys of Equality”, 2010

18 Mahida, M. E. History of Muslims in South Africa: A Chronology, 1993

19 Rasool, E. op cit

20 Mahida, M. E. ibid
became active in the anti-apartheid struggle are Faried Ahmed Adams, Feroza Adams, Ameen Akhalwaya, Yusuf Dadoo, Cassim Amra, Abdul Kader Asmal, Mohamed Suleman Asmal, Saleem Badat, Sedick Isaacs, Ahmed Timol, Farid Esack, and Imam Abdullah Haron\textsuperscript{21}.

South Africa is one of the African countries which consist of people from diverse religious backgrounds. It is historically a deeply divided society which was characterized by different but intricate forms of discrimination. The most pernicious and entrenched form of discrimination was constructed along racial fault lines, namely the system of apartheid. The system was constructed on “white supremacy” and the disenfranchisement of “the other”. However, other forms of discrimination based on gender, religion and sexual orientation were also institutionalized.

In recent decades, the imperative to promote and defend the rights of queer people took a relatively rapid ascendancy on the international policy agenda. This witnessed a rise in the promulgation of legislations which recognize same-sex marriages in a number of countries including Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Uruguay\textsuperscript{22}.

Countries such as Israel, Switzerland, Chile, Turkey, Australia, and Germany are debating the legalization of same-sex marriages\textsuperscript{23}. However, same-sex marriages are not legal in countries where the majority of the people are Muslims. South Africa is one of the countries which positively responded to the agenda of protecting the rights of queer people. With the advent of the post-apartheid era in 1994, the new African National Congress government introduced sweeping constitutional reforms with the view to address historical discrimination and disenfranchisement. The South African constitution is today the linchpin of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Section 9 of the Bill of Rights prohibits discrimination against people on grounds of gender, sex and sexual orientation\textsuperscript{24}. In 2006, South Africa enacted the Civil

\textsuperscript{21} Vahe\textsuperscript{d}, G, Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle. Madiba Publishers, 2012

\textsuperscript{22} Wikipedia the Free encyclopaedia, accessed 05 September 2014

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid

\textsuperscript{24} Constitution of the Republic of South Africa: 1996
The Narrative of Islam and Sexual Diversity

The Unions Act, the first legislation in Africa to legalize same-sex marriage\textsuperscript{25}. The Act followed a ruling by the South African Constitutional Court that a prohibition on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional\textsuperscript{26}.

In terms of legislative provisions which seek to end discrimination, South Africa is regionally and internationally regarded as a “paragon of democracy”. The contemporary South African context is characterized by a progressive legislative edifice which protects and upholds the rights of queer people. This witnessed the emergence of a burgeoning movement of activists and not for profit organizations fighting to promote the rights of queer people. Organizations which are advocating the rights of queer people include The Inner Circle, the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. There is also a growing network of queer people though social sites, support groups and social places such as clubs. In May 2014 the country elected the first black gay Member of Parliament (Zakhele Mbhele) and for the first time, an openly lesbian cabinet member (Lynne Brown) was appointed\textsuperscript{27}.

However, despite the progressive legislative provisions discussed above, discrimination, rejection and violent hate crime against queer people continue to obtain across the South African society. In a poll of survivors of homophobic hate crimes which was conducted by the Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre in 2008, 66% of women said they did not report their cases because they would not be taken seriously. Of these, 25% said they feared exposing their sexual orientation to the police while 22% said they were afraid of being abused\textsuperscript{28}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2014
\item \textsuperscript{26} Minister of Home Affairs and Another v Fourie and Another 2005
\item \textsuperscript{27} The Guardian, South Africa appoints the first lesbian to cabinet. 26 May 2014
\item \textsuperscript{28} Vetten, L. “Tracking Justice: The Attrition of Rape Cases through the Criminal Justice System in Gauteng”, (2008), Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre to End Violence Against Women, 2008
\end{itemize}
Figure I shows people who are protesting against homosexuality.

Figure 1

Queer women in South Africa face endemic “corrective rape”\textsuperscript{29}. For example, Eudy Simelane, the former star of South Africa’s Banyana Banyana national female football team was gang raped and stabbed\textsuperscript{30}. In February 2012, four men were convicted and sentenced for murdering a lesbian in Cape Town\textsuperscript{31}. The Muslim community continues to vociferously condemn homosexuality as totally unacceptable in Islam. This has engendered a climate of insecurity among queer Muslims. Some queer Muslims stated that they refrain from acting in ways which express their sexual orientation because of fear of violence. They also avoid places which are associated with violence against queer people. They spend time in the company of people they trust.

\textsuperscript{29} The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2014


Section 3

This section analyses the responses of heterosexual Muslims who participated in the research project. This include their views on the intersection between Islam and sexual diversity, their attitudes towards queer Muslims spiritually and socially and their interpretation of Islamic.

3. The Muslim community in South Africa and its views on homosexuality

In order to make an analysis of the South African Muslim community’s perceptions of homosexuality, it is important to understand the sources of Islam. There are various sources which underpin the Islamic faith. These are the Qur’an (the Book of Revelation which is the Word of God as revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Sunnah (the practical traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), Hadith (the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), Fiqh (Jurisprudence), Madahib (Schools of Law), and the Shariah (the code of life that regulates all aspects of Muslim life)\(^{32}\). However, of all these sources, the Qur’an and Hadith are regarded as the most important ones\(^{33}\). Of these two, there is no doubt that the Qur’an is regarded by Muslims as the primary text because it is the unadulterated word of God which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

3.1.1. The story of Lut

The story of Lut is at the heart of the narrative of the intersection between Islam and sexual diversity. This story is the cornerstone of the theological justification for the rejection of homosexuality in Islam. As long as a restrictive interpretation is attached to this story, it is difficult to see how the mainstream Muslim community can make a shift in attitudes. 80% of heterosexual Muslims who participated in the research cited the story of Lut and/or Hadith collections as the basis for the position that homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. Homosexuals are referred to as qaum Lut (the People of Lut). Participants stated that Prophet Lut preached against homosexuality but the people refused to listen to him. The major argument here is that the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorah were destroyed because of homosexual practices, an indication that homosexuality is not acceptable before God. In the

\(^{32}\) Mernissi, F. ”The Regulation of Sexuality in the Pre-Islamic Social Order“ in Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society. 1975

Quran, the story is found in a number of chapters which are 7:80-84, 15:57-79, 21:74, 22:42-43, 26:160-175, 27: 54-58, 29:28-34 and 54: 33-40.

Interviewees made frequent reference to Chapter 7:80-81 which says that Lut said to his people: "do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds". Viewed through the lens of the story of Lut, homosexuality is regarded as the “transgression of all transgressions” in Islam. Some of the interviewees defended their interpretation of the story of Lut by making reference to the Christian Bible. “It is not only Islam which does not accept homosexuality, you can find the story of Lut also in the Bible and you can see clearly that homosexuality is not allowed at all”, remarked one of the interviewees. In the Bible, the story of Lut is found in the book of Genesis. Of particular interest is chapter 19: 4-8 which state that;

4 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. 5 They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” 6 Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.

According to the Bible, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire. The story of Lut is also used in Christianity to defend the position that homosexuality is not acceptable among Christians. Through the lens of the story of Lut, an eminent Egyptian scholar Qaradawi, to argues that;

We must be aware that in regulating the sexual drive, Islam has not only prohibited illicit sexual relations and all ways which lead to them, but also the sexual deviation known as homosexuality. This perverted act is a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man’s sexuality, and a crime against the rights of females. The spread of

34 The Qur’an
35 The Bible, New International Version
this depraved practice in a society disrupts its natural life pattern and makes those who practice it slaves to their lusts, depriving them of good decent taste, decent morals, and a decent manner of living\textsuperscript{36}. 

Similarly, Duran asserts that the Qur’an is “very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals in Islam”\textsuperscript{37}. However, other scholars maintain that the position that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexuality is based on a “misdiagnosis” of the story and its context. For example, Ibn Hazm, the 11\textsuperscript{th} century Sunni Islamic scholar maintains that the people of Lut were not destroyed exclusively because of homosexuality but because of other malpractices including their unwillingness to accept Lut as a true prophet\textsuperscript{38}. 

From a textual analysis of the verses which are related to the story of Lut, Kugle concludes that interpretations which consider this story as prohibiting same-sex marriages are bogus and unfounded. Kugle argues that such interpretations are in contradiction with the letter and spirit of Islam and the diversity of creation. Kugle further argue that homosexuality is not clearly and positively prohibited in the history of Islam and that ancient jurist viewed it via the lens of acts as opposed to sexual orientation\textsuperscript{39}. According to Jamal, the story of Lut does not specify that people were destroyed for a particular sin because the sins which were committed were numerous\textsuperscript{40}, including disregarding Prophet Lut and hostility to strangers. 

The argument that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were not destroyed because of homosexuality is not viewed by the heterosexual Muslims who participated in the research as compelling. They believe that the story of Lut unambiguously condemns homosexuality and 

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Qaradawi, Y. \textit{The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam}, 1997: 169
\item \textsuperscript{37} Duran, K. “Homosexuality and Islam”. 1993
\item \textsuperscript{38} Habib, S. Queer-Friendly Islamic Hermeneutics, 2008
\item \textsuperscript{39} Kugle, S. “Sexuality, Diversity and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslim”, 2003
\item \textsuperscript{40} Jamal, A. The story of Lot and the Qur’an’s perceptions of the morality of same-sex sexuality. \textit{Journal of Homosexuality}. 2001
\end{itemize}
that those narratives which regard homosexuality as acceptable in Islam are based on false hermeneutics.

3.1.2. The Hadith Literature

Apart from the Qur’an, Hadith is used to defend the orthodox position that homosexuality is not permissible in Islam. Many participants stated that Hadith prohibits homosexuality but they did not mention specific Hadith to support this view. However, a couple of participants made reference to the Hadith which they claim says homosexuals will enter hellfire while others stated that the practice of homosexuality is a sign that the day of judgement is near. Other respondents said that according to Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said that those who do what Lut’s people did (homosexuality) are cursed. There are many collections of Hadiths and these collections were done 200 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

This is because the Prophet prohibited their collection. For example, Ibn Saeed Al-Khudry reported that the Prophet said "Do not write anything from me EXCEPT QURAN. Anyone who wrote anything other than the Quran shall erase it." Hadith can be regarded as authentic (Hasan), weak (Da’ef) or inauthentic/fabricated (Mawdu’). This is because Hadith literature is characterized by inner inconsistency. Fazlur Rahman argues that "a very large proportion of the Hadith were judged to be spurious and forged by classical Muslim scholars themselves." This explains why, for example, Ibn Hazm, completely repudiates the Hadith that claims that lesbianism is “women fornicating with each other”. The Hadith collections

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41 Arlandson, J. M. Islamic law and its punishment for homosexuals, 2010

42 Arlandson, J. M. Ibid: 4

43 See Hendricks, M. On Becoming You. The Inner Circle.

44 Rahman, F. Islam. 1968: 70

45 Habib opcit
by Muhammad Ibn Ismail Al-Bukhari and Abu Al-Husayn Muslim are believed to the most authoritative ones.\textsuperscript{46}

However, this should not be taken to mean that \textit{Hadith} is less important in Islam. \textit{Hadith} is important in that it has been the lens through which the Qur'an has been interpreted. Underscoring the importance of \textit{Hadith} in Islam, Fazlur Rahman states that "if the Hadith literature as a whole is cast away, the basis for the historicity of the Qur'an is removed with one stroke"\textsuperscript{47}. Similarly, Alfred Guillaume maintains that:

\begin{quote}
The Hadith literature as we now have it provides us with apostolic precept and example coveting the whole duty of man: it is the basis of that developed system of law, theology, and custom which is Islam.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Despite that the authenticity of \textit{Hadith} literature is characterized by controversy, participants demonstrated that they believe in the authenticity of \textit{Hadith}, particularly when it comes to the relationship between Islam and sexual diversity.

\textbf{3.1.3. Patriarchy and Islam}

Many scholars argue that Islam is inherently patriarchal\textsuperscript{49}. For example, Riffat Hassan argues that the sources of Islam “have been interpreted only by Muslim men, who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women”\textsuperscript{50}. Although men and women are acknowledged as equal in the statements made by Prophet Muhammad and although women such as the Khadijah and A’ishah (wives of the Prophet Muhammad) and Rabi’a al Bash (the outstanding woman

\textsuperscript{46} Warner, B. \textit{Ibid}

\textsuperscript{47} Rahman, F. \textit{Ibid}, 73

\textsuperscript{48} Guillaume, A. \textit{The Traditions of Islam}. 1966

\textsuperscript{49} Baffoun, A. "Women and Social Change in the Muslim World" in Women's Studies International Forum. 1982.

\textsuperscript{50} Hassan, R. “Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam”, 1998: 30
Sufi)\textsuperscript{51} feature prominently in the history and trajectory of Islam, Muslim societies have historically been male-centred and male-dominated. The chances of Muslim women to actualize their potential were thwarted through disenfranchisement in both private and public spheres of life. A sub-standard status was imposed on women through laws, cultures, beliefs and practices. However, some scholars argue that the position of women in Islam has since improved significantly. They argue that for example, unlike women in ancient Muslim communities, contemporary Muslim women have increased access to education and resources\textsuperscript{52}.

It is in and through the interpretation of the Islamic sources and patriarchal beliefs and practices that the South African Muslim community views the interface between Islam and sexual diversity. Muslim religious leaders and established institutions such as the Muslim Judicial Council and the Islamic Council of South Africa play an important role in shaping attitudes towards homosexuality in the Muslim community. Some queer people who participated in this research stated that religious organizations such the Muslim Judicial Council promulgate homophobic attitudes in the Muslim community.

These organizations promulgate the position that homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. For example, when TIC published a book entitled *The Gender Based Lie* which interrogates the relationship between Islam and sexual diversity, The Muslim Judicial Council stated that TIC is “outside the fold of Islam”\textsuperscript{53}. The organization further stated that if South Africa was a Muslim country, Muhsin Hendricks (the founder and Director of TIC), would have been killed for defending homosexuality\textsuperscript{54}. Contrast this with the example of Imam Abdullah Haron who, due to his principled fight against apartheid, paid the ultimate price by being tortured and murdered while in detention.

\textsuperscript{51} Hassan, *Ibid.* P 41

\textsuperscript{52} *Ibid.*

\textsuperscript{53} This message was emailed to Muhsin Hendricks, the founder and Director of TIC.

\textsuperscript{54} *Ibid.*
Given that patriarchy is characterized by power and the domination of one by the other, same-sex marriages may be generally viewed by Muslim men as a threat to their power in their families and communities. Probably this explains why men tend to be more homophobic towards queer Muslims as compared to women. Some of the queer Muslims who are now out of the closet stated that it was easier for them to come out to their mothers as compared to their fathers.

They stated that it is because mothers tend to be sensitive and empathetic to queer family members even though they may be strongly against homosexuality. The responses of the interviewees also shows that compared to men, women’s homophobia towards homosexuality tend to be meshed with empathy. For example, responding to the question: “what should be done to queer Muslims”, 68% of the respondents whose responses fall under the category that they “should be punished” were men. Women were 71% of the respondents whose responses fall under the category that queer Muslims “should be rehabilitated”.

3.1.4. Views on homosexuality

Like other Muslim communities, the mainstream South African Muslim community espouses a strictly restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts. The widely held view is that the Quran unequivocally states that homosexuality is *Haram* (forbidden). It is on this basis that being queer is regarded as antithetical to authentic Islamic beliefs, norms and practices. Some of the interviewees stated that homosexuality is a perverse sexual orientation which is the manifestation of the “work of the devil” and that queer Muslims are “evil incarnate”. From their point of view, the phrase “queer Muslim” is regarded as an “oxymoron” because the two identities are viewed as inherently incompatible. Others expressed the view that homosexuality in Islam is a recent phenomenon which is being driven by Western imperialism through the democracy and human rights agenda. The argument here is that historically, there were no queer people in Islam. Reasoning from this point of view, one of the respondents said that;

I think that we are beginning to have the problem of homosexuality because of western influence on our religion and society. They (The West) want to change our religion because they think that it is oppressive not only to homosexuals but also to
women. But we are not going to accept ideas which are being imposed on us by those who think that everyone should think the same way they think in order to be regarded as a good person.

However, some scholars maintain that homosexuality and Islam are not only compatible identities but that the Islamic tradition is historically characterized by homosexuality. For example, Kugle argues that the terms “gay” and “Muslim” “belong together because they form the basic identity of actual people in Muslim communities throughout the world”55.

Some participants stated that in Islam, even anal penetration between heterosexual partners is not allowed. However, they did not cite Qur’anic verses to support this view. The idea here is that if this is not allowed, then homosexuality is definitely not allowed. 3% believe that queer people are responsible for some of the problems which are afflicting the contemporary South African community, such as immorality and the HIV/AIDS scourge. They believe that HIV/AIDS is a punishment which was imposed by Allah on societies because of homosexuality.

While it is generally believed by the queer and the human rights agenda that there is need to engage in dialogue if attitudes towards queer people are to change, there is a strong disinterest among Muslims to talk about Islam and sexual diversity, making it difficult to engage them. It is interesting to note that although 66% expressed the view that they are willing to engage in dialogue, the primary purpose of the engagement would be to “find out what is wrong with queer Muslims”. The purpose is not therefore to seek an understanding of homosexuality from the experiences and frame of reference of queer Muslims. There is a widely held belief among queer Muslims that homophobia is driven by sheer lack of knowledge about queer people. It is difficult to see how this “lack of knowledge” can be addressed given the Muslim community’s attitude towards dialogue on homosexuality in Islam.

For those who stated that they would not engage in dialogue, their unwillingness is based on various reasons. One of the reasons is the belief that there is “overwhelming evidence” that

55 Kugle, S. Queer Jihad: A View from South Africa, 2005
homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. From this point of view, the burden of proof (that it is acceptable) lies with those who believe that it is acceptable. Others believe that engaging in dialogue would be to give attention to an issue which is not worthy of their attention. There are also others who expressed the view that those who believe that homosexuality is acceptable have a “cerebral deficit” and thus not worthy to engage.

12% expressed the view that any dialogue on Islam and sexual diversity is *Haram*. This view is also held by some of the people who refused to participate in the research. For example, a family in Port Elizabeth refused its member to participate in the interview and wrote a letter in which it stated that; “We deliberated on the matter that you want one of our family members to participate in. As a family, we have decided that we are not willing to share our knowledge and beliefs on the issue of Islam and sexual diversity. We are aware of the thinking and activities of the group (The Inner Circle) and we do not agree with it. We do not want to discuss the issue of homosexuality in Islam because it is not allowed at all to discuss that issue. Even if it is allowed, there are no homosexuals in Islam so there is no reason to discuss things that do not exist”. The contents of this letter may explain why the mainstream Muslim community is not willing to associate and positively engage organizations which work to foster an Islam which accept sexual diversity such as TIC.

Approximately 30 people initially agreed to participate in the research, but withdrew their participation in the course of the interview when they were asked questions to do with homosexuality in Islam. Some also refused to participate arguing that the purpose of the research project is to dishonestly “expose” Islam and to impose and promote “unIslamic” beliefs and practices. A participant in Kwazulu Natal stated that “I know that the real intention behind your survey is to try and know more about us as Muslims and try to influence us to accept things which are not allowed in Islam. That is very bad because as Muslims, we are prepared to defend Islam. That is why you see organizations such as *Boko Haram* in Nigeria, it is all because people want Muslims to accept things that are not allowed in Islam”.
Figure 2 shows responses regarding the attitudes of interviewees towards dialogue.

![Figure 2](image)

The majority view is that homosexuality is anathema in Muslim communities. 87% stated that it is absolutely unacceptable for queer Muslims to express their sexual orientation. The general idea is that it is unacceptable for Muslims to be queer and that in the event that a Muslim is queer, it is better for that person to conceal that identity. Expressing the queer identity is regarded as a behaviour which “profanes” the Islamic religion.
Figure 3 shows responses on whether it is acceptable for queer Muslims to express their sexual orientation.

Figure 3

3.2 Queer Muslims, children and the family

The debate as to whether it is acceptable for queer Muslims to adopt children raises a lot of arguments and counter arguments. 89% expressed the view that queer people should not be allowed to adopt children and raise a family. Participants expressed the view that although there are many destitute children who need to be taken care of, it is better for the children to continue living in abject socio-economic circumstances than to be adopted by queer people. Some of the participants said that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was seriously concerned with the welfare of children (especially orphans) and how they should grow up. They stated that putting children in the custody of queer people would be disregarding what the Prophet taught about the principles of raising children. The concept of family is viewed through the lens of patriarchy. The view is that a family is a union between heterosexual partners with a reproductive obligation. From this point of view, a same-sex marriage “cannot make a family”.
The dominant belief is that being queer in itself is an orientation which is inimical to the family institution, particularly procreation and the raising of children. Expressing this view, one of the participants remarked that “Why should homosexuals adopt children? The fact that they are homosexual indicates that they do not want children so I do not see any reason as to why they should adopt”. The general view is that anyone who wants children should enter into a heterosexual marriage and conceive them. 91% of the participants expressed serious concern about “the kind of children that can be raised by homosexuals”.

The concern is not that queer Muslims may be abusive or that they may not have the resources to take care of adopted children. This is because there are heterosexual parents and guardians who are abusive and who do not have the resources to take proper care of children under their custody. The major concerned is that children who are raised by queer Muslims can receive “improper” moral, religious and ethical guidance, resulting in the plummeting of the moral order. The general concern is that allowing queer people to adopt children will empower them with the capacity to promote the queer identity. However, queer Muslims maintain that it should be legally and morally acceptable for queer people to adopt children, as long as they meet the minimum threshold for adoption.
Figure 4 shows the views of participants regarding queer Muslims and the adoption of children.

3.3. Homosexuality: Is it a choice or a natural orientation?

The debate as to whether homosexuality is a choice or a natural orientation is a highly controversial one. On the one hand, there are those who believe that “homosexuals are made”. This position is used to build the case that homosexuality is not “part of Allah’s plan” and therefore a personal choice. Participants who espouse this position made reference to theological as opposed to scientific reasoning. Reference was made to the story of creation. The view here is that Allah created human beings as male and female and that procreation is at the core of this plan. Interviewees referred to a number of texts in the Quran. These include 51:49 which states that “and we have created everything in pairs, that perhaps you may remember” and 30:21 which says that “and among Allah’s signs is this: that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, so that you might find rest in them; and he has set between you love and compassion. Truly there are signs in this for people who reflect”.

25
Islam regards marriage as a highly sacred institution which is “half the religion”\textsuperscript{56}. It is therefore argued that Allah cannot create a sexual orientation which is antithetical to his very purpose of creation. Reasoning from this point of view, a particular respondent said that “there is no doubt that homosexuality is a choice and not a natural orientation. How can Allah create people for procreation and then make some of them homosexuals knowing that procreation cannot take place in homosexual unions? It defeats the entire purpose of creation altogether”.

The story of Lut is also used to dismiss the position that homosexuality is a natural orientation. The argument here is that if Allah indeed created homosexuals, then He should not have destroyed the people of Lut. Homosexuality is therefore regarded as an “aberrant sexual orientation” which threatens the moral fabric and the continued existence of the human society. There is also a minority view that homosexuality is “a punishment from Allah” for wrong doings. Other participants stated that, apart from Islam, homosexuality is not acceptable from a moral and cultural perspective. They stated that homosexuality is not part of the history of human societies and that it is not accepted across all “morally upright” societies.

However, a couple of respondents believe that it is possible for someone to be born as intersex. Asked why Allah would create an intersex person when He “condemns” other sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, some respondents expressed the idea that intersex is a result of a “defect in the chromosomes”, just like a person can be created naturally with certain deformities. The idea is that intersex was not created as a distinct form of sexual orientation but it is a deformity which can be “rectified”, particularly through sex reassignment surgery. In Iran, sex reassignment surgery is permitted and transsexuals are recognized under the law\textsuperscript{57}.

The widely held belief that homosexuality is a choice makes it difficult for the Muslim community to view it is acceptable in Islam. This is because this position is used to build the case that homosexuality is not acceptable not only in Muslim communities but in all human

\textsuperscript{56} Maqsood, W. R. \textit{The Muslim Marriage Guide}, 2000

\textsuperscript{57} International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Human Rights Violations on the Basis of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Homosexuality in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2011
societies. Citing the examples of Uganda, Nigeria and Malawi, a couple of respondents remarked that if homosexuality is a natural orientation, then states would not enact anti-homosexual legislations. This is because states are viewed as having the capacity to make scientific inquiry into homosexuality and come up with a definitive position.

*Figure 5 shows responses about whether homosexuality is believed to be a choice or a natural orientation.*

**Figure 5**

![Graph showing attitudes towards homosexuality](image)

3.4. **Attitudes towards the queer Muslim community**

The attitudes of the mainstream Muslim community towards queer Muslims are homophobic. 62% of the respondents believe that queer Muslims should be “punished”, particularly through rejection by families, friends and the community, refusing them all forms of support and imprisonment. The imposition of punishment is believed to be a tool with which to discourage Muslims from becoming queer. From this view, it is justified for the Muslim community to ostracize queer Muslims because this is the only way they can be influenced to “abandon their aberrant sexual orientation”.

27
The other view is that queer Muslims should be “rehabilitated” through “soft” ways such as prayer, counselling, dialogue and medical examination. It is important to note that although the majority of participants expressed homophobic views, only 4% hold the extreme view that queer Muslims should be killed. 5% refused to respond for varying reasons. The major reasons are the belief that there are no queer people in the Muslim community and that only Allah has the prerogative to deal with queer Muslims. This research noted that while it is a reality that queer Muslims exist, there are Muslims who vehemently deny their existence.

This rejection is based on the idea that the moment a Muslim identifies as queer, the Muslim identity instantly vanishes. The acceptance by the Muslim community that queer Muslims do exist is a very important condition for dialogue. It is important to note that the major trend in the responses in Figure 6 indicate that the Muslim community believes that queer Muslims should either be punished or re-admitted to their families and society on condition that they have changed their sexual orientation. This is a strong indication that the South African Muslim community is not ready to tolerate, let alone accept, queer people as members of their religion, families and communities.
Figure 6 shows the views of participants regarding the forms of actions which should be taken against queer Muslims.

Figure 6

One of the major findings in this research is that there is potential for straight Muslims to “tolerate queer Muslims whom they do not know”. The “tolerance net” closes in as the social and/or biological relationship between the straight Muslim and the queer Muslim becomes closer and closer. For example, a family may tolerate a queer Muslim who lives in the same vicinity than one who is a member of their family.

A comparative analysis of the responses in figure 6 and those in figure 5 shows that homophobic attitudes against queer people increase as the net narrows down to the family level, namely the nuclear and the extended. The responses in figure 6 shows that having a family member who is queer is generally seen as the worst thing that can happen to a Muslim family. Of the 13% who refused to respond, some said that they cannot respond to the question because they cannot envisage a situation in which one of their family members is queer, because it is a “curse” to the family.
Figure 7 shows responses regarding the forms of action which respondents will take should they discover that one of their family members is queer.

Figure 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will ostracize that person</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage dialogue/pray for that person</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will kill that person</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused to respond</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discrimination against queer Muslims does not take place in a social vacuum, but within communities. 68% of the participants stated that they have “never” discriminated against a queer Muslim because they have never known one. There are basically two inferences which can be made from this response. First, it may indicate that many queer Muslims are still in the closet and hence cannot be consciously discriminated against. What it means is that some of these respondents could have discriminated against queer Muslims “by default”. Second, it may also indicate that these Muslims have not discriminated against queer Muslims not because they consider it bad to do so. That they have never discriminated against queer Muslims does not mean that they accept queer Muslims. These interviewees can therefore discriminate against queer Muslims, especially considering that in figure 6, 84% stated that should they discover that one of their family members is queer, they will ostracize that person.
Only 8% stated that discriminating against queer Muslims is bad. This is based on primarily two reasons. One reason is that from a human rights perspective, people should not be discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The other reason is that although it is not acceptable under Islam to be queer, queer Muslims are still human beings like anyone else. That 8% stated that they have discriminated against queer Muslims may indicate that many straight Muslims are not willing to admit that they have actually discriminated against queer Muslims. It may also indicate that some Muslims do not even have a clear idea of what it means to discriminate against queer people. It is therefore easy for the Muslim community not to consider certain forms of discrimination against queer people as discrimination. This is especially considering that 8% said they are not sure whether they have discriminated against queer Muslims or not.

*Figure 8 shows responses to the question as to whether interviewees have ever discriminated against queer Muslims.*

*Figure 8*


3.5. **Spiritual association with queer Muslims**

From this research, it has emerged that there are basically two levels of association with queer Muslims which the mainstream Muslim community strongly dislike, *viz.* the family and
the spiritual. 88% regard it as unthinkable for a homosexual to pray with them in the same mosque. They maintain that gays are not allowed into mosques because they have a “profane” sexual orientation. Among those who refused to respond, 30% refused because they found the question insulting. Among those who stated that they cannot pray next to a queer Muslim, 32% said that they can only do so if they do not know that the person next to them is queer.

The 4% who said they can pray next to a queer Muslim did not say so because they think that it is acceptable for queer Muslims to pray in the same mosque with them. Their “yes” is based on the view that they do not want to judge people because they believe that only Allah has the prerogative to do so. However, when asked whether they can participate in a prayer session which is led by a queer Imam, 14% refused to respond and 86% said that they cannot do so. What it means is that people who said that they cannot judge queer Muslims may not judge at one level, but may judge at another level.

*Figure 9 shows responses regarding whether participants would pray next to a queer Muslim.*

*Figure 9*
The most unacceptable thing in the mainstream Muslim community is to participate in prayer sessions which are led by a queer Imam. In fact, there is a strong belief among participants that it is totally unacceptable for one to be a queer Imam. This is particularly because Imams are regarded as custodians of the Islamic faith and they play an essential role in the spiritual lives of Muslims. Accepting queer Imams to lead prayers is seen as a development which will cause Islam to “rot from the head”. 21% regarded the question as to whether they would participate in prayer sessions led by a queer Imam as too sensitive and insulting resulting in some of them refusing to give a response. 8 interviewees withdrew their participation at the point when they were asked this question.

*Figure 10 shows responses to the question as to whether the interviewee would participate in a prayer session which is led by a queer Imam.*

*Figure 10*

Homophobic attitudes towards queer Muslims are very low when it comes to the issue of access to social services. 86% of the participants believe that queer Muslims should be afforded the same treatment in the provision of social services such as education and health care. This attitude is based on a number of reasons. One of the reasons is that from a human
rights perspective, they are entitled to receive social services. The other reason is that South Africa is a democratic country which recognizes same-sex marriages. The idea is that the same government which recognizes same-sex marriages cannot be expected to discriminate against queer people in the provision of social services.

This shows that democratization can in a way change people’s attitudes towards queer people. Some of the respondents stated that if South Africa was a Muslim country, then queer Muslims were going to be discriminated against in the provision of social services. Others said that queer Muslims should be equally treated because the Muslim community has no control over the distribution of social services. However, 20% of those who said “yes” stated that queer Muslims should not use the facilities which are used by heterosexual people.

*Figure 11 shows responses regarding whether participants believe that queer Muslims should be accorded the same treatment in the provision of social services.*

*Figure 11*

This research noted that there are a number of demographic factors which influence attitudes towards homosexuality. These include age, sex and geographical location. Young Muslims tend to be more tolerant as compared to older ones, including those who are educated.
Regarding the parents of queer Muslims, women tend to have better attitudes towards queer family member(s) as compared to men. In terms of geography, it has emerged that Western Cape is the least homophobic province with Kwazulu Natal being the worst. This difference is probably rooted in the history and trajectory of patriarchal beliefs and practices in these provinces, with Kwazulu Natal having a relatively strong patriarchal history.
Section 4
This section makes an analysis of the responses from queer Muslims who participated in the research project. This includes the challenges which they face and how they negotiate them.

4. The challenges faced by queer Muslims in South Africa

From this study, it has emerged that queer Muslims face a myriad of complex challenges which are very difficult to cope with and to negotiate. They have to negotiate the strictly hetero-normative space which is the creation of patriarchal structures of socialization and a restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts. Many queer Muslims stated that they were born and bred in families which are very orthodox. They were taught over and over again that any sexual orientations other than heterosexuality are antithetical to authentic Islamic identity. The challenges which are faced by queer Muslims are discussed below.

4.1.1. Rejection

Human beings across societies share the same basic needs, that is, they need to feel appreciated, loved, respected and valued. Philosophically, human beings are inherently social animals. The satisfaction of these needs absolutely depend on the interaction and relationship of one person with another. Queer Muslims indicated that they live in an atmosphere of the fear of being judged by their families and society. This judgment, which is usually built upon the belief that being queer is not acceptable in Islam, is the basis for the rejection of queer people. Rejection takes place at many levels which include the family, friends, educational institutions, work places, the community and mosques. 55% of the queer Muslims stated that their families consider it to be a “serious misfortune” for a Muslim family to have a member who is queer.

Being ostracized is the major challenge which queer Muslims endure. In fact, it is the “challenge of challenges”. The consequences of being rejected are spiritual, social, emotional, economic, and psychological. In many cases, rejection is characterized by the withdrawal of material and many other forms of support, social exclusion and the use of hate speech. This leads to desperation and depression among many queer Muslims, especially those who are economically impoverished. Queer Muslims expressed the view that being rejected is a very traumatizing experience which, if not handled properly, can give rise to
suicidal tendencies. For example, a queer Muslim articulated this challenge in the following quotation:

you find that the only people you expect support from are the ones that actually discriminate against you. Any individual needs family support to live happily, but when those people desert you, you feel helpless and miserable. I remember when I decided to come out of the closet and let people know that I am gay, I lost so many people, close friends and family, I felt so weak, and I felt so alone. I wanted to kill myself. So basically what I’m saying is that when you face that kind of exclusion, you need a shoulder to lean on and that should be your close friends and family. But it was very challenging for me because I had no one by my side, I was emotionally messed up.

Rejection also causes lower esteem. It also disrupts essential life activities such as education and career development. For example, 2.8% of queer Muslims were forced out of school because their parents stopped to pay their fees because they are queer.

4.1.2. Homophobia, discrimination, harassment and abuse

Discrimination, harassment and abuse can take place at home, school, work and other social spaces. 4% of queer Muslims said that they were fired from their work places because of their sexual orientation. 10% stated that they always conceal their sexual orientation from their work mates in order for them to avoid being discriminated against at their work places. They have to “act as a straight person” in order for them to ensure that they are accepted and that they retain their jobs. Queer Muslims in educational institutions, particularly in schools, are often ridiculed by their colleagues. There are cases at work places and educational institutions in which people ask rhetorical questions about queer people for the sake of ridiculing them. 40% stated that they encountered incidents of sexual and verbal harassment at their workplaces.

For example, during a debate about homosexuality in which emotions ran high, a lesbian Muslim was told by a male colleague at work that “I want to have sex with you so that I can prove to you that you are indeed a woman”. Although queer Muslims are vulnerable to abuse, foreign queer Muslims are the most vulnerable. For example, a foreign queer Muslim who resides in Cape Town stated that she was raped. She came to South Africa as a way of
running away from her family. At the time that she was raped she was unemployed and her asylum had expired. She was afraid of reporting the matter to the police because she was no longer legal in the country. She feared that she may be deported. She reported the case after she sorted out her legal status but the perpetrator has not been brought to book. She also encountered physical abuse when she went into prostitution as a way of raising income.

Hate speech is also used to denounce any sexuality that is not heterosexual in the Muslim community. Such speech is emotionally and psychologically abusive to queer Muslims. For example, a lesbian respondent stated that from the day that she disclosed her sexual orientation, members of her extended family always refer to her as a “moffie”. They also stopped attending functions which are held by her family. Another queer Muslim said she suffered discrimination at home and school. For example, at a family function, her cousin sister said to her “do you know that Allah condemns faggots? So you should stop behaving like one”.

Faggot is a derogatory term which is used to refer to queer people, particularly gays. 20% stated that they encountered varying abuses when they were still young. Homophobia is one of the gravest challenges which are faced by queer Muslims in South Africa. 53% of the interviewees stated that they feel insecure because of the potential of physical violence against them. For example, a queer Muslim respondent who lives in Johannesburg was severely beaten when he visited a local club.

4.1.3. Reconciling Islam and sexual orientation

Queer Muslims find it difficult to reconcile Islam and sexual orientation. This is particularly because it is difficult to find inclusive mosques and progressive Imams who can assist them in their journey of reconciliation. Self-acceptance and self-confidence are very important for reconciliation. 25% suggested that although it is important to reconcile one’s faith with one’s sexuality, it is important to reconcile one’s social relations, particularly with one’s family because the feeling of belonging to a family is empowering. Queer people who have reconciled their sexuality with Islam tend to have a positive attitude towards their religion and their inner being. The reconciliation of Islam and sexual orientation is generally regarded as a empowering spiritually, psychologically and emotionally.
4.1.4. Race and social class

Although queer Muslims generally encounter the same challenges, the degree of suffering may differ depending on factors such as race and social class. Some black queer Muslims stated that they suffer double discrimination, viz. discrimination from the Muslim community as well as racial discrimination from the queer Muslim community itself. Queer Muslims who have little, no or unreliable income also encounter more challenges than those with middle class privilege.

4.2. Empirical cases

Detailing cases of the experiences of queer Muslims is important in order to give readers an insight into the challenges which queer Muslims face. Below are select cases of the experiences of some queer Muslims.

4.2.1. Case 1

A lesbian was in a heterosexual marriage for four years. They had two children in this marriage. However, the husband was a very abusive person. He would physically assault her, even in the presence of their children. She decided to seek advice and intervention from the local Imam. The Imam told her that marriage is a gift from Allah and that she needs to be “patient” with her husband despite the abuses she was suffering. The Imam also asked her to pray for the marriage. She approached her parents and her mother in law for advice and they also told her to “be strong” in the marriage with the hope that the abuse will come to an end. She found the advice useless and she began to drink alcohol and take drugs as a way of dealing with her depression. She developed a strong dislike of her husband in particular and men in general. She eventually decided to divorce her husband and she took their children to her mother in law. She met a straight woman who was having social problems with her family members, particularly her parents. The parents wanted her to have a relationship and subsequently marry someone whom they were pleased with. She didn’t love this particular person but they kept on exerting pressure on her. She strongly disliked this and she decided to defy cultural and religious principles and practices which she thought were being used as the basis to impose decisions which are against her personal choices. The two eventually got
into a love affair. They are presently planning to marry. They went to an organization in Durban for counselling sessions. They confessed that they are still drinking and abusing drugs as a way of trying to cope with their painful experiences.

4.2.2.

Case 2

A lesbian was staying with her parents. She was doing her matric. She was afraid of coming out to her parents. She came out to her friend at school. Although she had told her friend not to disclose her sexual orientation, the friend disclosed it to other students. She was bullied and abused by other school children and the school authorities were reluctant to protect her from abuse. Her parents finally got to know that she was lesbian. They interrogated her but because of fear of rejection she initially refused to admit that she is lesbian. Her parents threatened her and she eventually disclosed her sexual orientation. She was immediately moved out of the main house and she was asked to use a backyard structure. Her parents told her that she no longer have any business with them because she was a ‘disgrace’ to the family. They treated her as a persona non grata to the point that they even refused to buy her groceries, but they continued to support her education because they wanted her to complete her matric. They took some efforts to “rehabilitate” her including taking her to Imams for counselling and prayers. In order to avoid the continuation of the “rehabilitation process”, she told her parents that she was no longer lesbian. She was re-admitted in the family house but they continued to monitor her sexual behaviour. After a couple of months, they began to doubt that she had indeed changed and they started to ask her about her sexual orientation. At this point, she was tired of living in the closet so she told them that she was still a lesbian and that she will never change. She was eventually sent away from home. She is presently staying alone and she is being assisted by a nongovernmental organization in Pietermaritzburg from where she participated in this research project.
4.2.3.

Case 3

A lesbian was staying with her parents. She has had secretive relationships in which she introduced her partners to her family as “friends”. She stated that “I was so scared of how my parents and relatives would react if they discover that I was in a relationship with a woman”. She got a job and relocated to another province. She took this opportunity to freely express her sexual orientation. This gave her the confidence to come out to her parents. One weekend she visited her family and came out to her mother. The mother kept it a secret for a couple of months because she was afraid of telling the father and the rest of the family. The mother told her that since she came out to her, she was having sleepless nights because she was very worried about it and that she was always crying. She was worried to the degree that the father realized that something was troubling her and he asked her why she had suddenly became so distraught. She could no longer keep the secret so she told her husband about it and he was furious and disappointed. The father called her and told her that he will never accept her as a queer daughter. He told her not to come back in the family again. Her mother calls her regularly but she does it without the knowledge of the father because the father wants all ties to be cut until she becomes heterosexual. She is so troubled about the relationship between her and the family that she is considering to get married to a man, although she is currently staying with her partner. She stated that “I will do anything for my family to accept me once again”. She also said that she will not just change to be a heterosexual woman but will also pray that she will be able to rebuild the fractured trust and relationship with her family.
4.3. Coping mechanisms

Queer Muslims adopt a range of mechanisms in order to try and cope with the challenges discussed in the section on “challenges faced by queer Muslims in South Africa”. These are discussed below.

4.3.1. Substance abuse

The challenges which queer Muslims face can cause severe depression, especially to those who are economically disadvantaged. In order to “cope” with this, a sizeable number of queer Muslims stated that they resort to substance abuse. This enables them to “forget” their challenges. 70% of those who stated that they abuse substance are currently unemployed or they have low paid jobs. This may indicate that those with low or no income are more likely to abuse substance than those who belong to the middle class population. However, some queer Muslims admitted that the abuse of substance often leads to irresponsible sexual behaviour and in some cases to sexual abuse.

4.3.2. Abandoning Islam and/or one’s family

Although these may not be seen by others as coping mechanisms, some queer Muslims view them as tools through which to deal with some of their challenges, particularly the challenge of being ostracized by their families and communities. This occurs when queer Muslims delink themselves from Islam and/or their family. The delinking may be partial or complete. Some have completely abandoned Islam while others still identify as Muslims, but they do not participate in prayers and other spiritual activities. 2.8% have turned to atheism. The purpose of delinking is to retreat from the social and/or spiritual context in which one is not accepted on grounds of sexual orientation. This may enable them to cultivate a deeper sense of spirituality away from the “geography of homophobia”.

4.3.3. Praying

A couple of queer Muslims suggested that praying is a very powerful tool in trying to cope with their challenges. They stated that spiritual edification equips them with the strength to face challenges with the hope that they will eventually overcome rejection. However, they stated that the challenges which queer Muslims face can be very dispiriting thereby making it difficult for them to strengthen themselves spiritually. For example, once a queer Muslim is
out of the closet, it is generally unacceptable for them to be seen attending prayers in mosques, let alone to lead prayers. This affects the spiritual life of queer Muslims because they will have to look for queer-friendly mosques.

4.3.4. Self-acceptance

There is a small number of queer Muslims who believe that without self-acceptance, queer Muslims will not be able to comprehensively deal with the challenges which they face. Self-acceptance is a process in and through which queer people accept their inner dispositions as they are, regardless of what society says about them. This equips them with the ability and willingness to be sincere to these inner dispositions. Some participants stated that counselling is one of the tools which they use to ensure self-acceptance.

4.3.5. Carving out a queer-friendly social space

This is the most important way in which queer Muslims deal with their challenges. This occurs when queer Muslims create a social niche which consists of people who accept them, particularly friends and partners. The creation of this space includes networking with other queer Muslims and with queer friendly heterosexual people who may be Muslims or from other faith backgrounds. This space is very important because it gives them a sense of belonging as opposed to that of rejection and it allows them to practice their religion without being judged. The carving out of this space is often achieved through the use of social networks such as facebook, visiting queer-friendly public places, attending public and organizational events where the rights of queer people are advocated, taking part in the activities of queer friendly organizations and praying in queer friendly mosques. This also includes avoiding places which are characterized by violence against queer people and cutting ties with homophobic people.
Figure 12 shows the major ways which are used by queer Muslims to deal with their challenges.

Figure 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the major way which you use to cope with your challenges?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leave my family/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carve out a queer-friendly social space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek counselling/medical aid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4. Coming Out

The debate about the essence of coming out of the closet is controversial, even among queer Muslims themselves. There are many arguments and counter-arguments regarding this debate. The debate considers the essence, incentives and disincentives of coming out from a two-pronged point of view. One view is that given the prevailing attitudes in the Muslim community towards queer Muslims, the advantages of coming out are outweighed by the disadvantages. From this point of view, although there are advantages of coming out, the consequences are difficult to shoulder. These include rejection by one’s family, friends, and the Muslim community at large. This rejection has social, spiritual, psychological and material consequences. This view suggests that even when one has an inner desire to come out, this is suppressed by the fear of being ostracized.

There is a minority argument that coming out is a western-oriented ontological and epistemological understanding of sexuality which should not be universalized. The idea is
that one’s sexual orientation should be restricted to the private space. In Islam, heterosexual relationships are also expected to be restricted to the private space. The basis of the argument is that sexual orientation should not be conceived as the cornerstone of a person’s identity. While those who advocate coming out believe that the closet is a space in which one is “oppressed”, 30% of the queer Muslims expressed the view that the closet is not as bad a space as many people regard it to be.

They said that coming out is a decision that makes one vulnerable to many challenges including hate speech, excommunication, oppression and abuse. One of the queer Muslims said “I regret the decision to come out, I was more secure, comfortable and happy when I was in the closet than I am today”. There are some eminent scholars who hold a positive view of the closet. For example, Esack and Mahomed argues that “the importance of the “closet” as a dynamic redemptive queer space beyond the punishing and disciplinarian eyes of religious authority and political power should neither be underestimated nor ignored”58. Similarly, Didier maintains that;

The closet has so often been denounced by gay activists as a symbol of shame, of submission to oppression, that we have forgotten or neglected the extent to which it was also, and at the same time, a space of freedom and a way...the only way...of resisting, of not submitting to normative injunctions. And for many gays it is that still. In a certain sense, it was a way of being “proud” when everything pointed toward being ashamed59.

Boellstorff also argues that the closet might be an empowering space for many queer Muslims where they are able to maintain a stable balance between their faith, sexual orientation and society60. The “pro-closet” argument could be based on the view that the

58 Esack, F. & Mahomed, N. Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality, 2011


60 Boellstorff, T. A. Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia, 2007:158
closet gives queer people the space to allow their sexual orientation to flourish without them having to engage the public sphere about it.

However, the majority view is that coming out is a metamorphosis to a new way of life which is not only empowering, but liberating. 70% stated that it is a courageous step which enables queer Muslims to stand up and challenge homophobia in their families and communities and to celebrate their queer identity. They stated that it is difficult to fight homophobia from within the closet. One of the queer Muslims has this to say “It is really hard being in the closet, you feel lonely and empty but when you come out, you feel free, empowered and be able to be yourself.

Hiding yourself and the person you are is tiring and stressful”. The general trend is that queer Muslims come out to people whom they trust and believe that they accept them, especially close friends. The other advantage of coming out which was frequently mentioned is that it gives queer people the platform to network with other queer people and with organizations which are queer friendly. It therefore helps queer Muslims to carve out a social space in which they are accepted. A queer Muslim participant said that “when I came out, I got to know many queer people whom I didn’t know when I was in the closet”.

However, there is a general view among participants that the decision to come out or not is often based on circumstances which differ from one case to the other. For example, queer Muslims who are economically dependent on their parents and/or relatives (particularly those who are still studying) find it difficult to come out because of fear of losing the much needed support. What came out of the study is that the socio-economic status of a queer Muslim is a strong determinant in the decision to come out. Economically independent queer Muslims have a higher chance of coming out as compared to economically dependent ones. Some of the queer Muslims who are now out stated that they stayed in the closet until at a time when they were able to independently sustain themselves.

From the responses, it has emerged that in many cases, coming out is essentially a step by step process of moving out of the “inner closet” to the “outer closet”. The idea here is that coming out is not absolute. This is because some of those who came out of the closet are in a way in the “outer closet” because they conceal their sexual identity from other people.
Section 5
This section analyses the responses from academics who participated in the research. This includes their views on Islam and sexual diversity, the challenges which are faced by queer Muslims and how they can be addressed.

5. Academics

Apart from heterosexual and queer Muslims, the research project also targeted academics that are knowledgeable in the thematic field of Islamic studies. All of the academics who were interviewed are lecturers in Universities in Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal provinces. This section discusses the responses from academic interviewees. There are two positions from which academic interviewees view the relationship between Islam and sexual diversity. One view is that these two identities are inherently irreconcilable while the other view is that they are reconcilable. These views are discussed separately.

5.1. Irreconcilable identities view

73% of the academic participants believe that homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. This reasoning is based on the interpretation of Islamic texts, particularly the Qur’an. Much reference was made to the story of Lut and Hadith literature to support this position. One of the participants said that “the story of Lut is absolutely clear about homosexuality in Islam. The story is about sex and sexuality. We should look at specific words and their meaning. Those who argue that the story of Lut does not condemn homosexuality are using false hermeneutics to arrive at that position”. Asked whether it is acceptable for queer Imams to lead prayers, a participant said that “It is abhorrent to be queer and Imam. In fact, you cannot be a homosexual and an Imam because you will face strong resistance from the Muslim community”. The other argument which was raised by some of the participants is that homosexuality is not acceptable from a moral point of view and that it is a defiance of the natural order. One participant said;

If you are Muslim you cannot be homosexual. Allah created men and women and each one was created for a purpose. A man is a man and a woman is a woman. The Qur’an indicates that there is no compromise. Homosexuality creates an abnormal
society. Imagine if we have a nation of gays, it means the destruction of the natural order.

Regarding whether they view homosexuality as a natural orientation or a choice, these participants argued that it is a choice. However, one of the respondents stated that it is possible for Allah to “punish” parents for their wrong doings by making their children homosexuals. 29% stated that while other forms of queer identities are a choice, a person may be born with a sexual composition that does not fall in the binary of the male/female dichotomy. The argument is that it is possible for someone to be born with an intersex genetical composition. However, another participant said that the debate as to whether homosexuality is a choice or a natural orientation is too simplistic because it does not address the “problem of homosexuality” and that it is merely used as a tool to support positions.

5.2. Reconcilable identities view

27% of the academic interviewees believe that Islam and homosexuality are reconcilable identities. They argue that the position that these identities are mutually exclusive is not compelling. The starting point in their position is that the undeniable reality is that there are people who are homosexual and Muslim. From this point of view, the real challenge is not to look at whether homosexuality is acceptable or not but how to deal with the society in which the queer identity is not accepted. The challenge is to shift attitudes and make people think in different ways. One of the participants maintained that although the reality of the Islamic text is that there are some verses in the Qur’an which appear to clearly indicate that any sexuality other than heterosexuality is unacceptable, there are multiple ways of interpreting the text. The participant further argued that there is need for more textual work to be done because the arguments which are presented for and against homosexuality are not convincing. The participant said that the argument about diversity in the Qur’an is potentially compelling and should be the starting point for those who argue that homosexuality is permissible in Islam. The reason is that diversity is an intrinsic way in and through which human nature is conceptualised in the Quran.

Regarding whether they view homosexuality as a choice or a natural orientation, the participants stated that some people are born homosexuals while others became homosexuals as a result of the interaction between natural and social circumstances. For example, one of
the participants stated that it is becoming clearer scientifically that there is a genetic component in the unfolding of sexual orientation. However, the participant expressed the concern that the position that homosexuality is entirely a natural orientation is being used by the queer agenda in order to build the case that it would be a conundrum of injustice for God to create homosexuals, but then regard homosexuality as unacceptable.

The other argument which was raised is that in Islam, the truth is negotiated through the interaction of the text, the environment/social reality and spirituality. From this point of view, taking one of these factors in isolation will not address the issue of Islam, sexual orientation and spirituality in a holistic way. The view is that it is difficult to find the truth in the text alone. The text therefore has to speak to the realities and to what is going on in people’s spiritual realms.

*The diagram below shows the relationship between Islam, the Social Environment and Spirituality.*

Regarding the reconciliation of Islam and sexual diversity, one of the participants argued that spirituality is completely ungendered. The argument here is that at the deep level of people’s relationship with God, it does not matter whether someone is heterosexual or queer. The
reconciliation of Islam and sexual orientation therefore happens when queer people understand that they are embodiments of the spirit of God and that this cannot be compromised by their sexual orientation. However, the reconciliation process requires a social space of support which makes queer Muslims to understand that their sexual orientation is part of who they are.

The spiritual, social and psychological damages which come from ostracization by families and the society were cited as some of the major challenges which are faced by queer Muslims. However, interviewees noted that queer Muslims suffer differently because identities are at the intersection of many hierarchies. For example, those with middle class privilege are protected from a lot of things, including violence. And the poor face structural barriers to protection, with queer Muslim women being subject to corrective rape.

In terms of the actors who should be engaged in order to change attitudes, it was noted by participants that it is important to get religious leaders on board. This is because they occupy influential positions in communities. However, the major challenge is that many of them are busy investing in their authority and power. The human rights agenda is also important because it creates social space for dialogue on topical issues such as Islam and sexual diversity to occur. Feminist activists are important because they have the willpower to take public positions on queer issues apart from offering private support to these issues. It is also important to engage those people who are on the spectrum of engaging dialogue. However, participants questioned pride marches, suggesting that they are not useful to queer Muslims because they tend to be alienating. Education has been singled out as a powerful tool with which to shift mindsets.

One of the participants made a potentially compelling but controversial argument that coming out of the closet is a western notion of giving private identities a public face. From this point of view, the closet is regarded as a place which is not as bad as it is often regarded. The argument is that it allows queer people to live without needing to constantly engage the public sphere about their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation (whether heterosexual or queer) is a private issue that should be given the space to flourish from within the closet. The queer rights agenda should therefore stop assuming that all queer Muslims want to give a
public face to their sexual orientation. It should consider that for some queer Muslims, their sexual identity is not necessarily central to who they are.

*Figure 13 shows views of academic interviewees regarding the relationship between Islam and sexual diversity.*
Section 6

In addition to interviews, a focus group discussion was conducted at TIC offices on 22 August 2014. This section briefly analysis the outcome of the discussion. It was attended by heterosexual and queer Muslims.

6. Focus group discussion

The arguments which were made in the focus group discussion are not that different from the responses that were gathered though interviews. Both of the heterosexual Muslims who attended the discussion are at the spectrum of accepting queer Muslims. Attempts were made to include a heterosexual Imam but orthodox Imams are generally unwilling to engage organizations which advocate the rights of queer people. It was therefore difficult to get a heterosexual Imam on board. It was also difficult to get orthodox heterosexual Muslims to participate in the discussion because they are also reluctant to engage organizations such as TIC.

6.1. Attitudes towards queer Muslims

There was a general agreement among participants that while South Africa has good policies in place at policy level, the challenge is that attitudes towards queer people remain highly homophobic. This is evidenced by the use of hate speech, hate crimes, corrective rape, discrimination in social spheres and the rejection of queer Muslims by their families, friends and communities. These attitudes are based on the masculinities of patriarchy and the restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts, particularly the story of Lut and Hadith collections. The attitudes are also propagated by some orthodox Muslim leaders and established religious institutions which maintain that homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. Homosexuality is regarded as a sexual orientation which goes beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour in Islam.
6.2. Challenges faced by queer Muslims

Participants stated that queer Muslims face a lot of challenges, chief among them being the fear of being ostracized by their families. People want to belong to a family but queer people are disowned by their families. They will have to try and negotiate rejection, but it is so difficult that some queer people consider suicide as an option. It was also noted that despite scientific evidence that HIV/AIDS is transmitted through a number of ways, there is a belief in the mainstream Muslim community that HIV/AIDS is caused by homosexuality. As a result, homosexuals are regarded as perverts.

Participants also stated that the Muslim community has a patriarchal view of marriage and the family. The expectations from this community are that once one reaches a “marriageable” age, they will have to get married and bear children. These expectations are imposed on queer people by their families and communities. Queer Muslims also face spiritual challenges. For example, a participant stated that it is difficult to have a sense of connection to God when one is queer. The reason is that the society propagates the view that God does not like queer people. This gives queer people a feeling of self-condemnation.

One of the participants noted that queer Muslims who are foreign nationals encounter a number of structural barriers to protection. The participant summarized his challenges in the following quotation:

When I came to South Africa, I had no choice. I was not working, my asylum status had expired and I had no identity documents during that time. I had to sleep outdoors and I was exposed to the risk of getting raped. When abused, I could not open a case because I was afraid of getting arrested. I did not know what to do and where to get help. I could not speak to my family. Even if the family rejected me, I still have a strong feeling of belonging to that family. If, for example, one of my family members dies, I feel that I need to mourn with my family, but I am afraid of interacting with it because of my sexual orientation. I cannot go to the Mosque because I will be judged.
The other issue which was raised concerns queer Muslims’ access to justice. Participants raised the concern that when queer people encounter corrective rape, some of them may not report the cases because they believe that they will not be taken seriously.

6.3. Coping strategies

Leaving one’s family and/or community is one of the ways which queer Muslims use to cope with their challenges. Participants stated that there are social spaces which are friendly to queer people. For example, in Cape Town, Woodstock was picked as one of the places which is historically queer friendly. However, participants noted that there are consequences of delinking. One of the participants stated that “when I left my family and country, I had to take responsibility for myself. It was not easy since I was not working. Such circumstances can force people into prostitution just for the sake of raising income. This exposes them to abuse, including rape”.

Participants raised the point that it is important for queer people to build their own spirituality in order to reconcile their faith and their sexual orientation. Programmes such as the International Personal Empowerment Programme (IPEP) which is offered by TIC are regarded as important in assisting queer Muslims to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation. Connecting to people who understand and accept queer Muslims and going to inclusive mosques and seeking guidance and counselling from progressive Imams is also important. There is also need for queer people to accept themselves. Queer people also need a strong understanding of textual knowledge in order for them to be able to defend themselves when they debate with straight people.

6.4. Coming out

Participants generally agreed that coming out should be regarded as a personal choice. There are basically two positions. One position is that it is not necessary to come out because sexual orientation is a private issue. Reasoning from this point of view, a participant remarked that “straight people do not come out so why should queer people come out? You can
successfully navigate your way through life without necessarily giving your sexual orientation a public face”.

The other view is that the closet is a place where one is oppressed. From this point of view, a closet is a place where queer people “live a lie” because they are afraid of facing their families and communities. However, participants generally agreed that the choice of coming out or not should be based on a number of considerations which may differ from case to case. For example, a participant stated that “I was afraid of coming out because of the fear that I will disrupt my education. I knew that my family will stop paying my fees should I tell them that I am queer. I needed to finish at least high school”.
Section 7

Using the index of progressive realization, this section analyses the South African society using the responses from heterosexual Muslims in section 3. The concept of progressive realization in this research refers to the changing of attitudes towards queer people in the Muslim community from one stage to the other. It is this change that will lead to the decrease and eventually the obliteration of homophobia.

7. Progressive realization of the rights of queer Muslims

In order to analyse the South African Muslim community in terms of attitudes towards the queer Muslim community, it is important to analyse the responses of the participants within the index of progressive realization which is discussed in Figure 14. Ideally, Muslim societies should move as expeditiously and deliberately as possible towards a society which is free from homophobia. There is a general pessimism among queer Muslims that it will take a long time before the South African Muslim community begin to tolerate queer Muslims, let alone to accept them. Expressing pessimism, a queer Muslim interviewee stated that “I do not think that it is necessary to come out because the Muslim community is not going to accept us for some centuries to come”. For the purposes of this research, a four-phased index will be used to evaluate the South African Muslim community. The phases are;

• Homophobic

This society is characterized by a highly patriarchal, homophobic, and restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts. Queer Muslims are regarded as “untouchables” and the use of hate speech is embedded. The space for queer Muslim to express their sexual orientation is asphyxiating. Severe forms of punishment such as death penalty and protracted imprisonment can be imposed on queer Muslims.

• Tolerance

In this society, the mainstream Muslim community tolerates queer Muslims without necessarily agreeing that their sexual orientation is acceptable in Islam. It is characterized by pockets of homophobia and pockets of tolerance. Forms of punishment which are not severe can be imposed on queer Muslims. Association with queer Muslims is still limited.
• **Acceptance**

In this society, homophobic attitudes withers away and the Muslim community accepts queer people as equal and valuable members of their families and communities. Association with queer Muslims is extensive, although it may be limited at spiritual and family levels.

• **Celebration**

This is the highest stage of tolerance in which queer and heterosexual Muslims join hands and celebrate their sexual orientations and gender identity.

*Figure 14 shows the index for progressive realization of the rights of queer Muslims*

The data in this report indicates that the South African Muslim community is unwilling to move from the homophobic to the tolerance stage. This is especially so when one looks at the responses of heterosexual Muslims regarding their views on Islam and sexual diversity and their attitude towards queer Muslims. The trend which comes from the responses below is that queer Muslims are generally not accepted.
### Summary of findings

- **21%** of heterosexual Muslims who are aged 18 to 35 years have the willingness to tolerate queer Muslims. 68% of them are women and 42% men.

- **7%** of heterosexual Muslims who are 36 years and above have the willingness to tolerate queer Muslims. 55% of them are women and 45% are men.

- There are basically two levels of association with queer Muslims which the mainstream Muslim community strongly dislike, viz. the family and the spiritual.

- The queer rights agenda should be self-reflective and stop assuming that all queer Muslims want their sexual identities to be in the public sphere.

- There is no clear relationship between one’s level of education and one’s attitudes towards queer Muslims. Even some of the highly educated interviewees expressed homophobic attitudes.

- There is a “knowledge deficit” about queer Muslims in the Muslim community. This is exacerbated by the fact that the Muslim community is not keen to seek this knowledge.

- The Muslim community does not have the willingness to engage in dialogue regarding Islam and sexual diversity. For those who are “open to dialogue” the primary purpose is to “find out what is wrong with queer Muslims”.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remark</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would not participate in a prayer session which is led a queer Imam</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The queer identity is not acceptable in Islam</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not pray next to a queer Muslim</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not acceptable for queer Muslims to express their sexual orientation</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would ostracize a queer family member</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Muslims should be punished</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some queer Muslims abandoned their religion at the point when they started to identify as queer.

Vilification and rejection by the family and community are the major challenges which are faced by queer Muslims. This engenders the loss of social, economic, emotional and psychological support, a development which causes depression among many queer Muslims.

Reconciliation of Islam and sexual orientation is a two-pronged process which consists of internal and external processes which reinforce each other. The internal process includes reconciling the inner dispositions while the external process involves the carving out of a queer friendly social space.

Queer people who have reconciled their sexuality with Islam tend to have a positive attitude towards their religion.

It is important to establish organizations which help parents of queer Muslims to accept and celebrate queer family members.

Western Cape is relatively the least homophobic province while Eastern Cape and Kwazulu Natal are the most homophobic provinces.

Some Muslims believe that Islam is not historically characterized by homosexuality. Homosexuality is believed to be a result of the West’s influence on Islam.

Queer Muslims who are accepted by their families and communities have the willingness to positively engage the society than those who feel marginalised and excluded.

Some heterosexual Muslims refuse to admit that there are queer people in Islam.

The majority of heterosexual Muslims are not aware of the challenges which are faced by queer Muslims.

There is a constituency of people who adhere to the restrictive interpretation of the Quran but at personal level they have “no problem with homosexuality”. These people try and maintain a maverick world view and are important “entry points”.

Foreign queer Muslims who are residing in South Africa comparatively suffer many forms of abuses including rape.

On the index of measuring the progressive realization of the rights of queer Muslims, the South African Muslim community is still largely on the homophobic phase, with a small proportion of the population on the tolerance phase.
Section 8

This section discusses the views of queer Muslims on what they think needs to be done in order to change attitudes in the Muslim community.

8. Conclusion

One of the primary objectives of the research project was to delve into the needs and aspirations of the queer Muslim community, particularly the nature and characteristics of the society in which they aspire to live in. This is primarily because for many queer Muslims who participated in this research, the South African society is still worlds apart from the society which they aspire to be part of. There are a number of key characteristics of a society which queer Muslims want to live in which are;

- A society in which people are open minded and open to dialogue;
- A society where queer people are not judged by others;
- A society which is free of homophobia and patriarchy;
- A society in which queer people are accepted and celebrated by their families, friends and communities;
- A society which is characterised by equality, peace, love, justice and compassion;
- A society where queer Muslims are free to express and celebrate their sexual orientation.

There is a strongly shared belief among queer Muslims that the mainstream Muslim community does not have an understanding and knowledge of the queer identity and that this “knowledge deficit” explains why homophobia against queer people is still embedded in the South African society. What complicates this problem is that the mainstream Muslim community does not have the willingness to seek the knowledge. Queer Muslims also raised the concern that it is important for the Muslim community to accept the reality that queer Muslims do exist and that being queer is not a choice but a natural orientation. The view is that as long as the mainstream Muslim community holds the twin belief that it is not
acceptable to be queer in Islam and that the queer identity is “unnatural”, it is difficult to see how attitudes towards the queer community can be changed.

A queer Muslim interviewee stated that “the Muslim community should know that we were born like this and that we cannot be changed through prayer, hate crime or counselling”. Education, including in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, has been pointed out as the most powerful tool with which to effect a change of attitudes in the Muslim community. Advocacy and awareness campaigns were also mentioned as essential tools to counter the “straight socialization” and ensure a change of attitudes. The view here is that institutions of socialization, starting from the family level, play a very essential role in sculpting the values, beliefs and practices of human societies. It happens that “straight socialization” is anti-queer. *Figure 15* shows the process through which attitude change in the Muslim community can possibly be achieved.

*Figure 15*

![Diagram of attitude change](image)

Queer Muslims have varying views as to the actors who should be involved in the process of changing attitudes. However, the general consensus is that this process requires collaboration between diverse stakeholders. The view here is that no actor can achieve this without working with other actors. The following actors were mentioned as essential in the process of attitude change;
8.1.1 The Government

Queer Muslims believe that the government is an essential actor because it is its responsibility to ensure that citizens are not discriminated against on any grounds, including gender identity and sexual orientation. While queer Muslims generally believe that the South African government has done much in terms of legislations which criminalizes discrimination, the reality is that attitudes towards queer people are hardly changing. The government needs to put efficient and effective measures in place in order to fight discrimination against queer people, including in the delivery of services and justice. Queer Muslim noted that the government has little willingness and/or capacity to stop, investigate and punish hate crime against queer people. This makes queer people live in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. It is important for government departments to partner and collaborate with not for profit organizations in the fight against homophobia and patriarchy.

8.1.2 Queer Muslims

12% of queer Muslims hold the view that although many actors should be involved in the process of changing attitudes, queer Muslims themselves should be at the centre of the struggle. The argument here is that queer people should fight for their rights (through advocacy, awareness campaigns and demonstrations) because they are the ones who know what they are going through. Reasoning from this point of view, a queer Muslim interviewee stated that “We have situations where straight people who have poor or no understanding of queer issues speaking on our behalf. While we do not refuse to work with those who support us, the voices of queer people should be more vocal than those of straight people. If you want to be heard, you should shout for yourself”. This argument is anchored on the belief that queer Muslims can speak and fight for their rights from a point of knowledge and experience.

8.1.3 Not for profit organizations

Not for profit organizations are believed to be essential actors in the struggle for attitude change. This is especially because they have the capability to implement programmes which contribute to attitude change which include education, awareness campaigns and advocacy. Not for profit organizations are also regarded as having the willingness to fight for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. They can also offer support and services to queer people including counselling. Interviewees raised the concern
that there are very few organizations which advocate the rights of queer Muslims. Some queer Muslims mentioned that they got assistance from not for profit organizations.

8.1.4. Religious leaders

Religious leaders were frequently mentioned as important in the quest for an Islam which is free from homophobia. The major point which was raised is that it is critical for religious leaders to be progressive and liberal in their interpretation of religious texts. Such leaders tend to be open to dialogue as far as the intersection between faith and sexual diversity is concerned. Given their positions in communities, religious leaders can strongly influence attitudes and belief systems. This makes them indispensable “points of entry” into orthodox religious communities. Interviewees mentioned that it is important for Muslim leaders to categorically propagate the position that it is acceptable to be queer and Muslim. They should also denounce all forms of discrimination against queer Muslims. This is important, especially considering that one of the findings in this research is that the mainstream Muslim community believes that queer people should not be allowed to enter into Mosques and pray among others. The problem is that many Muslim leaders are not prepared to come out in support of queer Muslims because of the fear of being discriminated against just the same way queer Muslims are discriminated against.

8.1.5. Teachers

Teachers were mentioned as important actors because of two primary reasons. First, interviewees stated that there are cases of harassment, discrimination and hate crime against queer people in schools and that school authorities have not been able and/or willing to combat such cases. It is therefore important for teachers to educate children on the need to accept sexual diversity. Second, teachers play an important role in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of children. In fact, schools are one of the major agents of socialization. They are influential and they play a big role in the socialization of young people. Teachers are social agents bearing the mark of culture, religion, sexuality and gender. It is important for young people to be taught that all forms of discrimination are not acceptable in human so


8.2. **Reconciling Islam and sexual orientation**

The criticism against homosexuality by the mainstream Muslim community has sculpted and consolidated the view that being queer and Muslim are mutually exclusive identities. Because of this, the moment someone identifies as queer, that sexual identity will inevitably struggle against the “straight socialization” that was inculcated into them through patriarchal/homophobic indoctrination. A yawning chasm between the two identities begins to develop. The chasm manifests itself internally and externally. Externally, queer Muslims start to experience active or passive rejection by their families and communities and internally, they go through a protracted phase of cognitive dissonance. They will face three choices, that is, embrace their queerness and abandon Islam, embrace Islam and abandon their queerness, or embrace the queer and Muslim identity. This explains why some queer Muslims end up abandoning Islam altogether. It is generally assumed that reconciliation of the two identities is an exclusively internal process.

However, this research has unearthed that it is an interaction of both internal and external processes which mutually reinforce each other. Internally, it consists of developing and consolidating an inner feeling, disposition and orientation that indeed these two identities are inherently compatible. Externally, it consists of carving out a social space where one is accepted. A social space where queer people are accepted is important in the reconciliation process because it empowers them with a strong sense of belonging. The more queer people interact with people who accept them, the more they develop a positive attitude towards their inner disposition, something which is important in their journey of reconciling their identities.

Reconciliation of one’s sexual orientation and Islamic identity has been described by many queer Muslims as a long, difficult and tortuous journey and many of them are struggling to reconcile. Queer Muslims live in a social space where the socialization is anti-queer. This makes it inevitable for their queer identity to struggle against the “straight socialization” both internally and externally (the social environment). In this contest, the queer identity has to prevail. It is possible at this stage for queer Muslims to partially or completely delink...
themselves from Islam and/or their families. Once the queer identity has been consolidated, it can be aligned and eventually reconciled with Islam.

*Figure 17 shows the journey to reconcile Islam and sexual orientation.*

*Figure 16*

Inclusive mosques and progressive Imams are important in the reconciliation of Islam and sexual orientation.

The South African Muslim community is still largely orthodox and homophobic. Patriarchy, moral and cultural beliefs and practices and the restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts are meshed together to support the position that homosexuality is not acceptable in Islam. The majority view is that homosexuality “profanes” Islam and that it is an “anti-Allah” orientation which “disrupts the natural order of creation”. This explains why the South African Muslim community is not willing to associate with queer Muslims, particularly at the family and spiritual levels. From the perspective of queer Muslims, homophobic attitudes are primarily based on the dearth of knowledge about queer people. For example, they believe that the view that homosexuality is a choice is based on the sheer lack of knowledge hence the need for Muslims to be educated so that they can understand queer issues from the experiences and
point of view of queer people. Education, advocacy and awareness campaigns are thus the most powerful tools to change attitudes in the Muslim community.
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