A Minority within A Minority: British Non-heterosexual Muslims
(Award Ref. No. R000223530)

Executive Summary

1. The primary aim of this exploratory study is to examine the life circumstances of British non-heterosexual Muslims of Asian descent, a hitherto unresearched population. Specifically, it aims to generate a qualitative dataset, demonstrating significant processes, meanings and strategies in the negotiation and management of identity and social relations.

2. The objectives are to examine their lived experiences on three levels: Individual (e.g. personal negotiation of identity dissonance), Interpersonal (e.g. familial and kin relations), and Intergroup (e.g. relations with support networks).

3. The project employed a wide range of sampling methods to access this largely hidden population: support group networks, non-heterosexual Press, personal networks, snowballing, and non-heterosexual venues/events. The effective employment of such methods led to the achievement of the recruitment target.

4. The majority of the sample of 20 women and 22 men are young, highly educated, in full-time employment, and live in Greater London.

5. The main research method is individual semi-structured interview. This is supplemented by a brief questionnaire (to collect biographical data) and discussion with two focus groups.

6. On the individual level:

(a) The vast majority of participants acknowledge that non-heterosexuality is strictly censured in Islamic religious texts (i.e. the Qur’an, the Shari’ah, and the Hadith).

(b) Most acknowledge the importance of Islam in their lives. While some do not consider themselves ‘practising’ Muslims, most, particularly female participants, recognise the significance of the ‘Muslim’ label in an ethnically and religiously different British society, as a potent cultural and political marker of difference.

(c) Some participants succumb to the perceived incompatibility of Islam and non-heterosexuality by relinquishing their religious faith in practice. Others retain the religious dimension by underplaying it. Almost all, however, argue that their sexuality is intrinsic and God-created. Trusting that God is
compassionate and loving to all peoples, they rationalise their struggle as a 'test of life'.

(d) Most participants adopt a context-specific strategy of compartmentalisation, which does not lead to the relinquishing of either the sexual or the religious dimension of their identity. The prominence taken on by one of these aspects in a specific context is counter-balanced by the prominence assumed by the other in a different context.

(e) Several participants also attempt to re-frame Islam within a sexuality-affirming paradigm. Two strategies are used: the critique of traditions, by distinguishing heterosexist traditional cultural practices from inclusive Islamic principles; and the critique of conventional interpretation of religious texts, by arguing for a contextualised re-interpretation, reflecting contemporary socio-cultural realities.

7. On the interpersonal level:

(a) Three issues are particularly significant in managing familial relations: expectation to marry (as a social and religious duty), maintenance of family honour (izzat), and respect for elders.

(b) Some participants succumb to parental and cultural pressure to get married. Marriage, ironically, offers a cover of convenience. Having fulfilled their duty of marriage and distanced themselves from the ‘parental gaze’, they obtain the space to explore their sexuality outside marriage.

(c) Another significant issue that affects familial relations relates to the Muslim/Asian community’s position as a religious and ethnic minority. Participants report that non-heterosexuality is widely perceived within their community as a ‘western disease’, a natural outcome of the majority society’s secularity, individualism and permissiveness. Expressing one’s non-heterosexuality as Muslim is therefore considered not merely the defilement of one’s moral character, but also the symbolic defilement of the community’s collective religious and cultural purity. This affects negatively the participants’ willingness to disclose information about their sexuality.

(d) Participants think that the close-knit kinship network is important as a support base. However, it also serves as an extension of the ‘parental gaze’. This significantly complicates social relations, for instance, in negotiating the boundary beyond which information about their sexuality should not exceed. Although they have become tolerant of their children’s sexuality, some parents insist that such information should be kept within the nuclear family, for fear of tarnishing the family’s honour within the community.

(e) The participants are unanimous that, given the strict censure of non-heterosexuality within their community, disclosing their sexuality exacts high social and psychological costs.
8. On the *intergroup level*:

(a) All but one participant have access to the predominantly ‘white’ non-heterosexual community, since they live in or near urban areas where the facilities concentrate, which also offer anonymity. Very few of those who are not actively involved cite fear of exposure as the reason.

(b) They generally acknowledge the importance of this community for network establishment and mutual support. Nevertheless, their ethnicity and religion could be potentially inconvenient, even problematic. Some participants consider the high consumption of alcohol (and to a lesser extent cigarette) a deterrent to their access.

(c) Some are put off by queries from ‘white’ non-heterosexuals who, under the assumption that Islam and non-heterosexuality are strictly incompatible, appear to be amazed by their sheer presence. They consider such attitude a manifestation of ‘Islamophobia’.

(d) Only a small minority of participants describes the community as ‘racist’. To most, ‘exoticism’ (being seen as exotic and different) is what they encounter when ethnicity becomes an issue. Some find it an advantage, but some find it off-putting for being ‘looked at’ and considered sexually appealing due to their ethnicity.

(e) The participants acknowledge the current scarcity of support groups for non-heterosexual Muslims. They assert that such groups are crucial, given that their specific nature should minimise, if not eradicate, the difficulties posed by their ethnicity and religion in the broader non-heterosexual community.

(f) Those who are not involved in such groups provide two reasons: they have developed a positive personal identity; they have established a primary support base consisting of friends, and in some cases, partners and family members.

(g) Those who are involved assert that the groups are an important platform for the exploration of their sexuality and religion, as well as mutual support. Most argue that such groups should respect the specificity of their religion and culture, instead of adopting uncritically a ‘western’ model.

(h) Most argue that there is no non-heterosexual Muslim ‘movement’ at present. However, they are optimistic that current efforts will gradually effect change. They identify support and education as the primary functions of this movement. In engaging the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in productive dialogue, they are confident that significant changes are possible. Nevertheless, current efforts are embryonic and in great need of support.