



## My LGBTQ+ journey as a brown Muslim female

“On the other side of fear lies freedom” Anon.

I remember the first girl I fancied, being an Arab Muslim child in the Middle East, I didn't know what to call the tingly feelings of excitement every time her name was mentioned. I must have realised these feelings were prohibited because I didn't mention them to any of my friends or family.

At the age of 11 my family and I moved from Bahrain to the UK, where I learnt a whole new language and social and cultural norms. My teenage years were spent busily deciphering all of this information, including new names to old feelings: bisexual, gay and lesbian. Suddenly I had words to explain some of the emotions I had always felt, but I was still finding it hard to publicly identify with them.

I started coming out gingerly at the age of 17, at first to close friends who were incredible allies and as soon as I turned 18 accompanied me to the LGBTQ+ world in London. I began meeting new people and exploring my identity, but I rarely saw others who looked like me, further compounding my fear that I can't safely be Muslim, brown and gay.

I moved away from home and began living two lives, being careful not to let them interact where possible. I could not imagine that my family would ever fully accept me. Trying to separate myself into pieces put a considerable strain on my wellbeing and ability to achieve my true potential.

A year ago I met my currently partner and I knew then that she would be the one. I realised that living two separate lives would mean that a long term future with her would be difficult and unfair. I took the step and came out to some close family members. Their reactions were considerably less dramatic than I had imagined! My sisters said “Oh, we thought so, can we meet her?” my brother said “Great, so how have you been?” and my uncle said “Does she make you happy? Then you've got my blessing”.

Being a gay Arab Muslim female can feel isolating when it comes to facing new issues or looking for role models, but I am aware of the platform it gives me and others to support those who are less visible. A friend once said to me “If there are no others here, then why not you?” As the Patient Engagement Manager for a large Ambulance Service I have organised and taken part in LGBTQ+ Prides across the South West of England and beyond. I will continue to champion the rights of marginalised people and groups and

I feel a personal responsibility to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are key features within my work stream.

I realise that there will be members of the general public, and within my wider family group, who will react negatively to me identifying as being a gay woman, but I also realise that it no longer matters like it did previously. Living to my potential means living my true self, every part of it. We're going out for sushi with my family next month and I can't wait for my lives to collide, because I'm now sure that on the other side of fear lies my freedom.

Sharifa Hashem, April 2020

