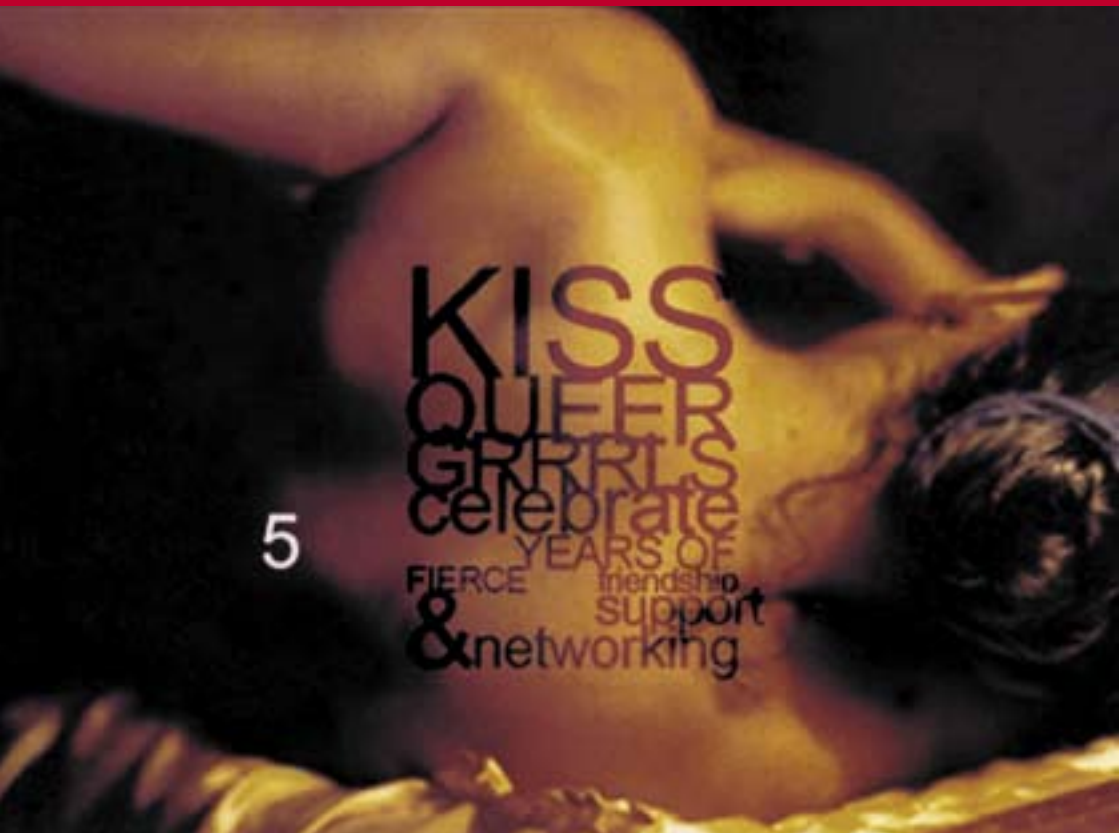


KISS AND TELL

MEMBERS SPEAK OUT

Celebrating over 5 years of the KISS group



Naz Project London

feminist review | TRUST

By KISS
Edited by Rani Kawale

Naz Project London aims to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate HIV, AIDS and sexual health prevention, care and support service, to the South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African communities in London.

KISS and Tell: Members Speak Out
Celebrating over 5 years of the KISS group
By KISS
Edited by Rani Kawale

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Five Years

Five years ago a seed was planted
which has blossomed into the most
beautiful tree, crowned with a
hundred-petal lotus flower.

Its roots reach deep, for it is strong and sturdy.

Its trunk has had its share of experiences
and is wiser for it.

Its branches are of all lengths, shades, textures and sizes,
but each branch finds its place,
and is part of the living, breathing tree.

Now we come to the best part; the blossoms

The sweet-smelling blossoms
mark this tree out from the rest.

While other trees are content to
just stare and yearn for,
this tree actively gives of itself.

Each year new lotus petals are added to its crown
and a fragrant KISS is released into the air.

If you are lucky, you may just catch it!

Legend has it that it brings luck and positive energy for
the coming year.

So draw near, celebrate, and be ready to
receive the most blissful KISS imaginable.....

KISS AND TELL: MEMBERS SPEAK OUT

Celebrating over 5 years of the KISS group

FORWARD

KISS is a London based social support group for lesbian and bisexual women and women questioning their sexuality, who also are of South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African origin. As far as we know it is the only group of its kind and size in the UK. It has had over 300 members most of whom have been based in London but also many based outside of London such as in Milton Keynes, Manchester, Southampton, Scotland, Spain and the US. KISS members are of different ethnicities and religions, some are parents, some are single and some are in long-term relationships, some are monogamous and some are not, some are married and some are divorced, some were adopted as children and some want to adopt, some are unemployed while others are students or professional workers, and their ages range from 18 years to 50+ years.

This booklet has been put together by a group of KISS members in order to document the first five years of KISS. It is a rare opportunity for our voices to be heard and for our stories and experiences to inform to all who read it. It serves an educational purpose in that it documents how the group has provided minority ethnic women with a space to:

- * come to terms with their sexuality;
- * grow in confidence and self-esteem as both ethnic and

sexual minority women;

- * share their experiences and support each other; and
- * define and develop various aspects of their lives with regard to their sexuality and ethnicity in ways that were, and are, difficult or impossible elsewhere.

We acknowledge that bisexual women, women questioning their sexuality, and Middle Eastern and North African women are under-represented in this booklet: this should not detract from the fact that women from these sections of the community do participate in KISS and maintain regular contact with the group in a variety of ways.

By producing this booklet we have chosen not to quietly revel in the success of the group but to:

- * publicise our success;
- * encourage new women to join our group or visit us whilst in London;
- * provide fresh images of women of particular sexual and minority ethnic groups in Britain;
- * offer a point of contact for women elsewhere in Britain who cannot find support locally; and
- * offer an insight into how the group operates so that it may encourage women outside London to set up similar groups wherever they are needed.

We hope to inform social and support groups for lesbian, bisexual and 'questioning' women across Britain; support groups across Britain for women of South Asian, Middle

Eastern and North African origin; and similar support groups based overseas, about some of the issues we face and how we help each other live with, or challenge, them.

This booklet is divided into three main parts. In the first part we give a history of how KISS began. In the second part we explain how KISS operates, and we identify the different elements that make KISS work. We also include extracts from testimonies by a small number of us about questioning and exploring our sexualities with reference to:

- * being of South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African origin;
- * coming out to friends and family;
- * meeting other LGBT people for the first time;
- * socialising on the London LGBT scene; and
- * attending LGBT groups prior to KISS.

Finally, in the third part of this booklet we share our thoughts and experiences of KISS including our reasons for visiting KISS the first time, and how we felt; the value of the group to us; and how KISS has impacted on our lives.

KISS

KISS AND TELL: MEMBERS SPEAK OUT

Celebrating over 5 years of the KISS group

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PART1 KISS - PAST AND PRESENT

INTRODUCTION

We begin this part of the booklet with a history of how, where and why the KISS group was set up and by who. We then explain how KISS operates and the multiple ways in which members participate in KISS activities such as the monthly meetings, enjoying London Pride together, accessing and contributing to the KISS website, annual KISS residential events and fundraising for the group.

THE BEGINNING OF KISS

After the closing of the London based group called Shakti (for South Asian lesbian, gay and bisexual men and women), the Naz Project London (NPL) initiated setting up the KISS group at the end of the 1990s. NPL is an HIV and AIDS Sexual Health Agency based in west London and runs several support groups for black and minority ethnic communities. The rationale behind setting up KISS was that while several sexual and mental health projects were being set up (many of which included a social support element) they mainly catered for men. There were no projects in London (or Britain) that provided support specifically for women who identified as lesbian or bisexual or were questioning their sexuality and also identified as South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African. While there were sexual health services available to this group

of women, none included a peer support element, something that was in increasing demand made evident from the number of calls made by women to NPL at that time. Several of these women reported experiences of sexual abuse and sexual assault, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, homelessness, and alcohol and other substance misuse, all of which were related in part to their sexuality and lack of related support. In response to the increasing number of women making such calls to NPL, KISS was launched with NPL's Client Support Services Manager Parminder Sekhon running the group in a voluntary capacity. The first attempt at setting up KISS on NPL's premises was met with limited success with only 2, 3 or 4 women attending meetings on a regular basis. With the venue deemed unsuitable the group was re-launched in a different venue in 1999 by Parminder and her friend/ political activist Sharada.

Sharada had visualised serving a small group of 5 or 6 women samosa and masala chai (tea) in a small community centre and discussing various issues about sexuality and ethnicity relevant to women in London. Parminder largely agreed with this vision but asserted that the group should be visibly 'out and proud' on the London lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) social scene. Equally, she wanted it to be a safe group in which members had control over their individual visibility. Parminder and Sharada agreed that the group should counteract the invisibility that some members felt in certain parts of their lives and also on the wider, predominantly white, LGBT social scene

in London. KISS was also to be regularly advertised in the LGBT press to raise some awareness among the LGBT community that lesbian, bisexual and questioning women of South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African origin did exist and that there was a space for them to socialise with and give support to each other. A venue on the scene that was already known to welcome women of all races and ethnicities was chosen. The Glass Bar in Euston, north London was ideal, with its enthusiastic and supportive black woman owner and her staff, its warm welcome and laid back, friendly, cosy, 'living room' environment. Parminder and Sharada recall their concerns and hopes when they set up KISS:

When we decided that KISS should meet on the London scene we wanted a degree of visibility for the group, where women could come and identify with each other and the space. But visibility is an issue for Asian women and the venue is visible to an extent but not overly visible. You wouldn't guess the Glass Bar is a gay venue full of women, it just looks like an old building on the street. And yet, it's not seedy or tucked away. It's got a safe degree of visibility, if you go looking for it you'll find it without giving much away to other passers-by. Some KISS members have issues about accessing the wider London LGBT scene, especially women who are newly 'out': going to a lesbian bar is a really, really big deal. So to have a reason to go to a bar, to have a set time and place to go where they know that they are going to meet a named KISS contact person and then other Asian and Middle

Eastern women is a real incentive, that's why we chose to have KISS at the Glass Bar. (Parminder)

We were really nervous about starting the KISS group in the beginning. I think it's a really vital space and the fact that we've had over 300 women on our mailing list indicates that it's a vital thing. It gives members one time a month where they can hang out with people like themselves and I would say for a lot of the women there they do not otherwise really hang out with other lesbian and bisexual women like themselves. There is just something that you get from being in that space that is different from what you get during the rest of your month and it's only for an hour or two unless you wanna spend longer so I think it is really important. Women can come and feel comfortable and exchange numbers between themselves and then meet up amongst themselves outside of the group. I get a lot from the Asian lesbians who I consider to be my friends and I made a deliberate point of hunting them out. I grew up in a very white environment, studied in a very white environment and then worked in a very white environment and I met some very nice people but I wanted something else that those folk couldn't give me. For a long time, I had lesbian friends and I had Asian friends and never the two shall mix if you like. You can't expect to get on with all Asian lesbians but in my experience when I have got on with them it has been really brilliant because it means that you relate on all sorts of levels. They understand where you're coming from in your families, they

understand where you're coming from in your sexuality, they understand the complexities because they're going through them themselves. There's racism in the white LGBT scene and homophobia in the Asian scene, and I wanted to create an environment for women who were excluded from those sorts of scenes. (Sharada)

HOW KISS OPERATES

There are many elements to KISS including the monthly meetings, the monthly newsletters and the website. KISS runs successfully because of the women who volunteer their time to facilitate meetings, edit the newsletters, maintain and update the website, fundraise, organise socials and residentials, and network. Most importantly KISS owes its success to all the members who attend the meetings and socials and contribute to the newsletter and website.

The KISS group meets on the last Thursday of each month (except December when a festive social is traditionally organised by other KISS members) and each month the meeting room is filled to capacity with approximately 25 members attending. Each meeting is followed by a social where non-KISS members can socialise with KISS. So for one evening each month members have the opportunity to meet and discuss particular topics and issues and/or socialise together in a safe space. Initially Parminder and Sharada were the only two KISS members who ran KISS. They put incredible amounts of time and

effort inviting members to the meetings, planning and co-facilitating the meetings, producing the monthly newsletter and publicising the group. After two years it was time to pass over some of these tasks to other KISS members. The high momentum that the KISS group has maintained consistently for over five years is due to the passion and determination of all KISS members and especially those who voluntarily perform vital duties and 'core' roles.

Although the members who perform core roles regularly change they ensure the smooth running of KISS. There are currently 5 core roles:

- * NPL officer for KISS
- * Meeting Facilitator
- * News Editor
- * Banner Sewing and Repair Committee Leader
- * Web Team Leader

Since the beginning of KISS, Parminder has remained the NPL Officer for the group but there have been 4 long-term meeting Facilitators and 3 News Editors. Each meeting always has one facilitator, or sometimes two, and follows a structure. The facilitators open each two hour meeting by stating the purpose of the group, highlighting current issues relevant to the group, passing on notices and messages submitted by members, leading the ice-breaker and introducing the discussion topic or activity, welcoming new members and adding them to the newsletter

list if required, inviting suggestions from members for future meetings, and providing a summary of the meeting for the web team and news letter editor. Each meeting takes on a different theme and can either be political, topical or fun. For example there have been discussions on the concept 'queer' and whether it is appealing to KISS members, discussions about sexuality and coming out, sexual health, same-sex marriages and commitment ceremonies, and parenting, as well as fun social activities including blind dates and quizzes. Invited speakers have also given talks and provided information about issues such as sexuality, homelessness and personal development. A vital part of the social element of the meeting is the provision of food and the facilitators ensure that samosa, pakora, chilli sauce, sweets and other nibbles are available. Given the informal environment of the Glass Bar each meeting is usually conducted in a warm and friendly way to ensure that all those present, particularly new members, are comfortable and feel welcomed.

The current KISS news editor has produced the monthly KISS newsletter for over a year. The newsletter includes news (and other items) from the internet, books, newspapers, magazines and TV programmes. KISS members also submit contributions to the newsletter via the meeting facilitator, posting them to NPL or e-mailing them to the Editor. It usually takes a day and a half to put the newsletter together and to copy and mail it to each KISS member. Many features of the newsletter have remained the same since KISS began. The front cover

still includes positive and beautiful images of women of South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African origin, and an uplifting quote or words of wisdom to accompany the image. The editorial continues to include messages from KISS members to all other members. These messages begin with the meeting facilitator's summary of the previous month's meeting. Other messages might be about members flat sharing, organising socials, informing other members about a project they might be working on such as a book, a play, or a workshop, and general information that KISS members think the group should have. The newsletter regularly includes LGBT news from London, the UK and overseas (particularly South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa) that will be of particular interest to the women at KISS. As KISS is a diverse group with women of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths and sexual identities the contents of the newsletter are necessarily broad.

LONDON PRIDE MARCH AND THE KISS BANNER

KISS is represented on the annual London Pride march. It is a time when we can enjoy the march with each other, and is particularly appealing to members marching for the first time. The visibility of KISS is maximised with some of us dressing in 'traditional' wear including colourful saris and salwar kameez, some dress in drag, and couples have been known to march together dressed as Hindu or Muslim brides and grooms. In recent years KISS and other NPL support groups have marched and danced

together accompanied with a giant elegantly dressed model elephant on wheels, with rickshaws, and with wonderful rhythms provided by dhol drummers. KISS members who do not join the official festival after the march enjoy a picnic or a game of football together in the park or party on elsewhere - so during Pride there is something for everyone from KISS.

Two KISS Pride banners have been produced by the KISS Banner Sewing Committee and the KISS Banner Repair Committee, each comprising of approximately 10 KISS members taking on different responsibilities. Kiss banners not only bring visibility to the racial and ethnic diversity of the LGBT community but simultaneously offer a sense of pride to the KISS members who march behind them and those who carry them:

I attended my first Pride march in the summer of 2004. It was thrilling to be striding through the streets of London surrounded by other KISS girls dancing and cheering. Holding the KISS banner, I did feel defiant and proud - that I was stating to the world "Yes, this is who I am", and that I refused to be invisible or covered by shame. (Daisy)

KISS WEBSITE

The KISS website was set up by Sharada and Neela in 2001 to promote the group in cyberspace. It targets current members, potential new members, women visiting London who want to know what is available for them in the city, and women overseas who want to know what is going on in Britain. The website is updated weekly and offers a way of keeping up-to-date with KISS and in touch with KISS members in between the monthly meetings and newsletters. The website currently includes the following:

- * a summary of the discussion from the latest meeting;
- * an edited version of the latest newsletter;
- * stories from KISS members about their experiences of KISS;
- * details of upcoming events that will be of particular interest to our target group;
- * links to other articles and news items that will be of particular interest to our target group;
- * links to LGBT websites and organisations around Britain and around the world;
- * e-mail circulation facility and message board;

The website has steadily developed and the web team has grown to 4 KISS members who all volunteer their time and expertise to maintain it and meet the needs of the users. It is a demanding project and we hope to fundraise in order to develop the website further.

Please visit our website: <http://www.planetkiss.org.uk>

KISS RESIDENTIALS

In addition to meeting once a month, KISS members can also enjoy annual residential breaks outside of London at a period building with peaceful grounds in the countryside. Each residential comprises workshops and activities to support and encourage relaxation, creativity and personal development:

I'd like to praise the organisers of the KISS residential that we had last month. For a really cheap ticket we got pampered in a beautiful cottage with all the perks, and the workshops were really enjoyable and rewarding. I came back feeling de-stressed and snugly ready for another week of hard work! I look forward to the next KISS residential. (Laila)

RAISING MONEY FOR KISS

Lesbian and bisexual women are not a high priority on primary health care promotion agendas and rarely benefit from health care budgets. While South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African women are represented, and sometimes over-represented, in certain areas of health the needs of lesbian, bisexual and 'questioning' women from these groups are overlooked. To ensure that some of our needs are met by various KISS projects and activities members raise funding in range of creative ways. In 2004 these included:

* Formal applications for funding

This booklet was possible largely due to a successful application to an external funding body. KISS has also worked in partnership with Newham Asian Women's Project to raise funding for annual residential trips.

* Raffle

Raffle prizes at the KISS 5th birthday party were donated by Fortnum and Mason, Body Shop, River Café, Benetton, John Lewis, and The Tate. The sale of raffle tickets at the party raised over £200.00.

* Sponsored events

In August 2004 a KISS member cycled from London to Brighton and raised over £400.00.

* Encouraging donations

Some of our families, friends and colleagues regularly donate money to the group, some of which has been used for this booklet. Outreach work at Club Kali has also lead to donations from clubbers, and some KISS members have donated money themselves.

* Selling artwork

£500.00 was raised from the sale of photographs taken by a KISS member photographer.

CONCLUSION

KISS members are regularly encouraged to submit their group or volunteer some of their time and skills in any way they can. Everyone who volunteers for KISS brings with them new ideas, creativity, energy and enthusiasm which are all vital for the survival and success of the group. We are rewarded with meeting new women, making new friends, growing in confidence and self-esteem, and knowing that our input makes a positive difference to ourselves and other KISS members. Thus, KISS has grown and developed both in size and as to what it can offer members. The motivating factors behind members tirelessly volunteering for KISS are key issues that brought us to the group in the first place. The next part of this booklet looks at these issues.

KISSes from Dubai

There was a femme girl from Dubai
The butch girls always gave her the eye
She teased them with her KISSes
But then she met her missus
So she waved all them butch girls 'goodbye'

From Delhi to London with Love

There is a young woman from Delhi
Who makes me turn into jelly
When she gives me a KISS
I feel the same bliss
As with the Brookside first on tele.

Let's hope when she's back in London
Our love will not become undone
As with our every KISS
We seal our promise
To dare, care and share, as one.

PART 2 KEY ISSUES FACING KISS MEMBERS

INTRODUCTION

This part of the booklet contains our comments and testimony extracts about our experiences of identifying as lesbian, bisexual or 'questioning' women of South Asian, Middle Eastern or North Africa origin and living in Britain. It looks at some of the difficulties and challenges of exploring our sexualities in relation to our ethnicities and religious beliefs; how and why some of us have, or have not, come out to ourselves, our families, friends and colleagues; how we began to meet other lesbian, bisexual and questioning women; and our experiences of the London LGBT social scene prior to joining KISS. Due to the public nature of this booklet our names have been changed, but our profiles containing our ages, sexualities, ethnicities and religious beliefs are included at the end of this booklet.

ETHNICITY AND SEXUALITY

Many KISS members have faced the dilemma of not only questioning their sexuality, but subsequently questioning their ethnic, racial, religious and cultural identities. This dilemma has often led to experiences of anxiety, insecurity, loneliness and isolation, separation from family, loss of confidence and self-esteem, loss of a sense of self, self-harm and depression. In this section, we describe

some of the problems we have experienced, from not initially knowing that other South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African lesbian and bisexual women existed, to identifying fundamental differences between ourselves and our families and childhood friends.

As I grew up and felt more kind of gay I felt this drifting apart from my culture because I felt I couldn't be as expressive with my friends, my social circle, and I felt that being gay meant there were no Asian spaces that I could go to and I kind of felt distant, I felt a loss of my culture. (Najma)

My parents began to arrange my marriage and they found the perfect man for me. He was everything they wanted in a son-in-law and everything I would've wanted in a husband. But I knew I was a gay and I didn't want to live a double-life of being married and secretly meeting other women. I refused to get married and my parents were really, really disappointed....Even though I am in contact with my parents they don't really talk to me anymore.... They won't come to visit me at home, none of my family have seen my new home. They don't think its right for an unmarried woman to live away from her parents. (Surinder)

I remember first questioning my sexuality at the age of 14 - I gradually realised that I was not attracted to men, but women. After a short period when I questioned whether or not my feelings were 'just a phase', I accepted

that I was gay. However, for the rest of my school years I felt incredibly isolated - I knew no other gay people and could not bring myself to confide in friends. I was acutely aware that my sexuality would conflict with the importance placed on marriage and family in Asian culture, ideals to which my family subscribe. (Daisy)

While I was growing up and began to understand sexuality I thought I was bisexual. I didn't like what I thought being a lesbian meant. I've now met a lot of black and Asian lesbians who thought the same way, that we didn't initially think that other black and Asian women were lesbians. And if we saw white lesbians we thought they only ever wore dungarees, were really loud and did things that we didn't wanna do. I thought "I'm not like them, they've got nothing to do with me, I don't identify with them". I still don't identify with white lesbians. I thought only white people could be gay. When I thought I could be gay I was scared so it was easier to identify as bisexual. It was a long time before I came out to myself as lesbian.... When I realised I was a lesbian I found it difficult to socialise with Asian people because I was scared about what they would say about me.... So I deliberately moved away from home and the Asian community who knew me and my family. (Amina)

RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Different KISS members have different attitudes

towards being religious and gay. Some struggle to live with the two 'identities', 'belief systems' or 'practices', and have opted to move away from their religious upbringing in order to explore their sexuality, while others have more actively embraced their religion. Here are what some of us have to say about religion, being religious and being lesbian or bisexual:

I'm a Muslim but my religion has not stopped me from going to gay places and meeting other gay people. I practice my faith very, very strongly even though the Quran states that homosexuality isn't the best thing in the world. But to me my faith is my connection with God on a one to one basis spiritually, and not always physically. Your physical and material life should not interfere with your spiritual connection to God, with the connection between your soul and God....Our religion encourages honesty and truth and I'm just being honest with myself....I am a firm believer, I have faith. (Mumtaz)

I'm a Muslim but I'm not religious. It's still a big issue for me because it's against our religion to be gay, but that didn't ever stop me from socialising on the gay scene in search of other women because I was never very religious. I knew since my early teens that I didn't have a very strong belief. I have faith in God but I don't have a belief in the religion so I've never really regarded myself as a very good Muslim....I find it quite difficult to follow the belief structure because it cuts out my sexuality, it cuts out a whole part of my life. I believe in God and I

believe in being a good moral person and not hurting other people but I don't believe in the Muslim faith because I think it discriminates against women and it discriminates against gay people. (Amina)

Some people see it that if you're gay then you have no beliefs in religion and you live a dirty life. But I have my beliefs, I live a healthy life, I have standards and principles. I'm not as religious as I used to be but I have not disowned my religion, I will always identify as a Sikh, I'm just not as religiously active as I used to be. I've kept in touch with some of my Sikh friends but I haven't told them I'm gay because I don't want to upset my family. Going on the scene wasn't me being rebellious against my family or my religion, and exploring my sexuality wasn't about disrespecting either of them. Being a Sikh didn't stop me from being gay and vice versa, I'm both. (Surinder)

I'm happy to identify as Hindu. Sometimes I feel quite proud of it, and it does give me comfort and keeps me close to my family. I pray everyday, I am always thankful to God for looking after me and my family, for giving us a good life, and for giving me a family who are very accepting and supportive of me and my relationship with my girlfriend. I have blanked out the fact that other Hindu people might think I'm not a proper Hindu because I'm a lesbian; its not up to them to say whether I'm a good Hindu or not, and its none of their business. And anyway, other Hindu lesbians accept me as Hindu. I am

doing the best I can and I won't drop my religion for my sexuality or my sexuality for my religion. (Rani)

COMING OUT TO FAMILY

KISS members have different thoughts and experiences about coming out to themselves and their families. Some of us have chosen not to come out to our close or extended families while others have come out to them and had positive experiences. Many of us are out in different parts of our lives, for example some who have facilitated KISS meetings, edited the newsletter or worked on the website, or are out to their friends and work colleagues, are not out to their families. Some of us have had long-term battles with our families over our sexuality while others of us have continued to have good relationships with our families after we came out to them. Some of our parents have welcomed our girlfriends with open arms into our families.

I'm not out to my parents or my extended family. I've done a lot of public things about sexuality because of my work but I do have to be really careful about my parents. Not just because of how they would react and how hurt they would be but because of the wider implications, of what kind of effect that would have on my siblings, and whether there would have been problems in finding them marriage partners. My extended family would also judge my parents and I know that would be awful for my mum and dad. So I haven't come out to my family, only to some friends and work colleagues. (Amina)

I came out to my sister in my early 20s and I didn't want to tell my parents but my sister forced me to. When I came out to them I felt I had to leave home which isn't the done thing for a single Asian woman....My dad said he still loved me and would try to understand what I was going through....Even though I'm out to my close family we don't want the rest of the family or the community to know. God forbid, if it ever came out it would be such a big scandal in the community...the news would spread and that would be really bad for my family. (Surinder)

I'm out to all the siblings in my family. I'm one of 5 children and in particular I live with one of my siblings and that's been really excellent because there have been absolutely no problems about my sexuality with us living together....I'm out to my mother but she doesn't want to accept it and it doesn't get talked about....I'm not out to my father or any members of my extended family. (Sharada)

I came out to my family 4 years ago. It took me a year and a half to build up the courage to tell my mum and she has gradually come to terms with it and accepted it. My younger siblings were great, they were really supportive. (Rekha)

I didn't come out to my mum, she knew I was a lesbian before I did! She knew when I was about 15 because she knew I was upset when I asked a female friend if she

wanted to go out and she said 'no'. So I didn't have to come out to my mum, she did it for me, and she was really good about it. She never tried to talk me out of it, she was very accepting. I think she actually liked it because having a lesbian daughter meant she was a little bit different from her friends. I'm out to most of my family including my extended family. (Sujata)

I began the process of coming out to others when I moved to London to study at university at the age of 18. I knew that if I was to even begin to lead the life I wanted, I would have to move away from my family. By the end of my degree I was out to my friends and my sibling, who have all been incredibly supportive and accepting. (Daisy)

When I first came out to my family it was awful. I was 18 then and I was sure I was a lesbian. My mum was devastated and cried and called me lots of horrible names. We didn't talk about it again for about 5 years when I was having a really hard time with my girlfriend and I had to tell my mum why I was so upset all the time. She was shocked and angry and told me to split up with her. She tried to get me together with a bloke we knew and we argued constantly about it. When she realised how unhappy I was she surprised me one day when she said 'Keep going to KISS and find yourself a nice Indian girl'. It's true, she really did say that, I'm not lying. My mum's come a long way and really thought about things, and she's been really good to me. My girlfriend now lives with me and my mum. My girlfriend and I are out to both

our families, and our families have met many times, had dinner together, seen theatre shows together. We've been really lucky and we know other women at KISS have been just as lucky with their families. (Rani)

MEETING OTHER LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN AND WOMEN QUESTIONING THEIR SEXUALITY

KISS members adopt a variety of methods in order to meet other lesbian, bisexual and questioning women. Some of us used the internet, others ventured out on to the social scene alone and others tried information help lines. Generally, we all found the initial stages of meeting other lesbian, bisexual and questioning women daunting and difficult for various reasons;

When I first came out I lacked the confidence to explore the London LGBT scene and had no other gay friends. I ended up moving out of London back to my parents' for two years, and began to go out on the local scene with a lesbian friend I met through a gay and lesbian website. However, I felt frustrated by the (apparent) lack of diversity on the local scene and felt my life was restricted by the fact I lived with my parents. (Daisy)

As I got older and more independent I started going clubbing on the gay scene but I was almost always on my own. I found it difficult, it was so God damn hard to meet other lesbians, and make friends with them without them

thinking you were chatting them up. Some Asian families don't let Asian women stay out late at night so you don't get to meet them on the London LGBT scene. That makes it even more difficult. (Rekha)

At university I was the only dyke and the only Asian woman in the Women's Groups. I met a few dykes at University and the local LGBT social scene was quite small so I met new women very easily. I also met lesbians at work. None of them were Asian. (Sharada)

I knew I was a lesbian for quite a while and it took me about a year to build up the courage to ring a young lesbian group that was advertised at my school....I went to the group...[and]...the first woman who came over to talk to me was huge with spikey hair and piercings and she pulled up her sleeves and showed me her cuts all over her arms and she said 'Look what I've done'. I panicked and thought 'Oh no, what is this? What's going to happen to me? I'm not like her'. So the first lesbian I'd met at a group made me think that lesbians were really strange people who did all those awful things to themselves. I decided to try something else. I went to a gay dance group and there I was worried that if a woman came to ask me to dance she really wanted to take me home for sex...So then I went to another group where I met a Jamaican woman and we decided to go out on a mission to find other black lesbians. I was so desperate to meet black women because so many white women I'd met, especially in Brighton, didn't believe that I was a lesbian

because they thought lesbians were only white. And also I had long hair so they thought I was bisexual. London has changed over the last ten years, there are more black lesbians on the scene now but there weren't many back then. (Sujata)

When I first came out I didn't really understand that I then had to go out and make friends with other gay women. I didn't know where to find them. When I realised I had to go to gay groups I expected it to be easy. I thought that we'd have this internal link because we were all gay and we would all tune in to each other. Then I realised that's not how it worked and that shocked me. We didn't all instantly understand each other about everything. I felt a bursting of the bubble. All the time I had been dreaming of a world with gay people who would understand me. Then I realised we're just the same mix as the rest of the world, and it was a real anticlimax, such a disappointment.... When I started going to gay groups I felt very gay but I felt too scared to express it to other gay people.... I realised that being gay is what brought all these women to the group but we were still all different people.... So I felt more isolated when I initially came out being amongst gay people because it was a whole new thing. (Najma)

LONDON'S LGBT SOCIAL SCENE AND SUPPORT GROUPS

KISS members socialise on the London LGBT social scene

to different degrees and have different experiences of it. All of us who have contributed to this booklet noticed 'race' and ethnicity on the scene and how the whiteness of the scene meant some of our needs and expectations are not met in most places. Here are some of our experiences:

Unfortunately there are lots of places on the London scene where you don't see many Asian or black faces. Often it's usually me, my partner and our friends who are the only women of colour and everybody else is white. When I first got into a relationship with a woman you couldn't tell that I was a lesbian from the way I looked. I looked very feminine and heterosexual. I wore short skirts, tiny tops, bangles and makeup and being an Asian woman I had long straight hair. That did cause problems for me getting into gay bars when I was not with my girlfriend or friends who looked like dykes. Some bar staff would question me about whether I knew the place was for lesbians, others would sometimes just be really hostile toward me. It was horrible. I went through a patch of dressing like my dyke friends with big trousers and boots but being Asian I kept my long hair so I still had problems getting in to gay places.... But when Asian things are trendy like our music and our clothes that's when you'll see more white people mix with Asian people on the scene, but even then they'll come to our places like Club Kali, but we still don't see many black and Asian people in other places, we just don't feel welcome enough. (Amina)

I actually find some places on the London scene intimidating only because it's very, very white and I never would've found that a problem before. It's intimidating when you walk in to a bar and everybody turns to look at you because you're Asian not because you've just walked in.... One place in particular is full of white people who look at you all the time and make you feel very repressed. Some places are better than others because you go in and nine times out of ten you will see a lesbian or gay guy of Asian or Mediterranean descent, but most people are white. That's why some Asian women feel quite afraid of gay bars.... There are so many gay bars in London now and you could argue that there's more choice, but because they're mostly white you could also argue that we don't really have much choice. (Rekha)

I've experienced a lot of racial stereotyping on the London gay scene. People often point out that I am Asian, more than people outside of the scene. White lesbians come up to me and say things like 'It must've been so difficult growing up in such a strict family and it must've been really awful coming out to your parents, how did you do it?' I went to a lesbian dance group once and we were doing ballroom dancing and the women would say things like 'You dance so beautifully, you're so exotic, you must've done Indian dance?'. I had performed contemporary dance in public before but I'd never done Indian dance, and it's these little comments and questions about whether my parents are going to arrange my

marriage that I get from white lesbians. It's not overt racist stuff like 'Fuck off Paki', it's quite subtle which makes it difficult to challenge. (Sujata)

CONCLUSION

Issues around 'race', ethnicity and religion, feeling different to/excluded from minority ethnic communities, and feeling different to/excluded from the predominantly white LGBT community in London, are factors that motivate KISS members like us to socialise and support each other at KISS. KISS is a group to escape to from some of these issues, and sometimes resolve them. This is only possible because of the input from KISS members. In the next part of this booklet we highlight our different experiences of visiting KISS for the first time; the value of being a KISS member and how the group has impacted on our lives; and the 5th birthday celebrations we held in April 2004.

You Make Me...

You make me feel all silly,
You make me go weak at the knees.
You make my heart go bumpety-bump,
Can I KISS you please?

Sad No More

There was a sad girl from Lahore,
Who found KISSing boys such a bore.
She felt like a dyke,
So KISSed girls she liked,
And now she's not sad anymore.

PART 3

EXPERIENCES OF KISS

INTRODUCTION

This final part of the booklet contains our comments and testimonies about the first time we visited KISS and how KISS has changed our lives. It will become clear that although similar experiences, needs and expectations have brought us together we are also different from each other and have some different needs and expectations. The group tries to be flexible enough to welcome us all on equal terms and ultimately what we members get out of the group is a reflection of what we all put in. We finish with a celebratory note about our 5th birthday party.

FIRST KISS

We all found out about KISS in different ways, either from friends, advertisements, or being approached by other KISS members whilst socialising on the London LGBT scene. We had many reasons for visiting the group for the first time and our expectations and experiences of KISS differ. While some members found answers to their questions, others found new questions that needed answers. Some new members took their time getting used to the group by attending irregularly or for a short time each month, but others jumped straight in with both feet and never looked back. Here are some of our experiences

when we first visited the group:

There were about 15 women at the first meeting I went to. There were lots of people who knew each other already and were friends and that really freaked me out because I hardly knew any of them. I went to KISS again a month or two after that and I was still absolutely terrified of meeting all these other Asian lesbian and bisexual women because I'd never met any before. Initially I was really freaked out, I felt really nervous. So going to KISS was initially really upsetting because I just found myself with all these other Asian women who not only knew each other already but they all seemed so sorted. I know now they are not all sorted, some were no more sorted than I was at the time but I didn't know that so I just didn't wanna go there and be surrounded by all these Asian women who just seemed really strong and together. I was worried about what they'd think about me and whether they'd judge me and I began to ask myself what it meant to be Asian. I felt I had to question the Asian part of myself and I wondered 'How Asian do you have to be for people to believe that you're Asian?'. I wasn't sure of myself around Asian gay women for a long time and I didn't go back to KISS for months. (Amina)

Initially I did feel a bit isolated at KISS, especially as I didn't know anyone. I was too scared to say anything and I didn't really talk to many women. But I enjoyed it, being in a room full of Asian gay women. I looked around and there were so many women I could relate to. I knew that

some of us were feeling the same way, that we were going through the same things, and I learned a hell of a lot at KISS. I learned about what I could expect in future, what might happen, even though no-one can predict the future but I found out what other people had done and how they dealt with things. I was really nervous the first time I went to KISS, I didn't know how to start a conversation with anyone. Usually, I can just talk and talk and talk but there were so many women there and I didn't know what to say. (Surinder)

I did feel very intimidated at KISS the first time even though I might not have shown it. I sat with my friends that I'd met at a club and chatted to them and I had the same sort of feeling as when I first started coming out on the scene of misinterpreting people or people's looks and the way people behave. It's really weird, it was that feeling of initially being more intimidated by your own people. You know initially I was more intimidated by being in a GAY space, and at KISS initially I was more intimidated in Asian space because its like they're closer to home and can judge you better. I thought 'OK they're gonna judge me on my Asianness' and you can't bluff your own people.... I did initially feel insecure. But now I am much more confident and that makes it easier to talk to people and I don't care how people react anymore. Before that I desperately wanted people to like me but now I can just go up to anyone at KISS and talk to them. (Najma)

I was referred to KISS by my counsellor who realised that I needed to meet other Muslim lesbians from my community. I am North African and although I only met a couple of other women from my community at KISS I found the experience very positive. It was scary but I am glad I went. Because of my immigration status and dispersal I am now living outside of London so I can't go to the meetings anymore but I still receive the newsletter every month which is a really good way of keeping in touch. (Halima)

I remember attending the first meeting in 1999. I'd never knowingly met a South Asian lesbian before so I was nervous, curious and excited when I arrived at the Glass Bar. I sat down and my habit of 'South Asian Dyke Spotting' began instantly, and before I knew it this gorgeous South Asian woman walked in. She had short hair, wore blue jeans and dark boots, a black T shirt and a black leather jacket. I watched her as she bought a bottled beer from the bar and then glanced around the room in search of the KISS group. She looked so amazing and cool, my eyes were hooked on her. But I wasn't filled with admiration or desire. In fact, I was rather confused. I thought to myself 'Who does she think she is? Me?' I didn't speak to her and to this day I have no idea who she was. But more importantly, it was at that moment that I realised I wasn't the only South Asian lesbian. Hoorah! (Rani)

It took me six months to join the KISS group. I knew

about it, and the owner of the Glass Bar kept telling me it's a great group and I should get myself over there, but still I was very reluctant. I can't tell you exactly why I felt that way, I think it was a mixture of things. I felt shy about approaching a well established group of individuals, I didn't know what to expect, I lacked the confidence to make myself known to strangers. Would I be accepted? What were these people like? What did they talk about? Would I be too embarrassed to contribute meaningfully to any discussions? Did I even need to be part of a group? Question, questions, questions! But when I did finally make the step, it was amazing to see so many lesbian/bisexual Asian women in one room! Wow, where did all these lovely ladies come from? It was the most uplifting and positive experience. (Nanda)

In early 2002, I made a concerted effort to change things by moving to London. I began to go out on the scene, volunteered for the organisation London Friend and made a number of LGBT friends. I knew two Asian gay men but no Asian lesbians, and did feel I was "the only one". A friend showed me an article (in the Observer I think) that mentioned the KISS group, but I did not feel confident enough to attend a meeting. In the autumn of 2002, I stumbled across the details of the group again in the listings in Diva magazine, and resolved to go to the next meeting. I was terribly nervous entering the Glass Bar and walking up those stairs for the first time. There was only one other KISS member there when I

arrived, but she made me feel welcome and introduced me to others. As the room filled up, I felt incredibly exhilarated - of course I wasn't the only one! After the discussion, a number of people came up to me to chat. It was such a positive and empowering experience I went back again the following month, and again and again... (Daisy)

Going to my first KISS meeting on Thursday 26th February 2004 seems so long ago. Did I exist before then? Did I not know a single Asian lesbian or bisexual women before then? Did I actually think I was the only one the Lord had chosen to cross hurdles that I deemed next to impossible to cross? It was just something that I felt needed to be done. A pill that I ought to take for my own well-being. Especially since now having discovered it, how could I possibly deny its existence? I suppose I thought I'd go once, decide I didn't like it, I wasn't like one of them and that would be the end of that. I expected a handful. There were bucket loads. I expected identifiable traits, I tried to seek some kind of uniformity, but unless one's eyes refuse to see those expectations withered away. I expected each and every one of them to reveal to me that all this was a farce and the joke was on me. If that's the case I am still waiting for the punch line. The more I allowed myself to be 'exposed' to these human beings the less I saw them as lesbians, bisexuals etc and more as valuable human beings: all the more valuable for the shared empathy resulting from similar struggles. How could I not make connections

to these people? The words that emerged from their mouths could so easily be mine. For the first time in my life I felt I was not alone. However hard I tried to refuse the reality of this statement, the more it imprinted upon me. It continues to do so. And consequently the strength within continues to grow. It is getting regular watering. KISS to me is a container, a bag with lots of different sweets. The bag holds the sweets, keeps them safe, when they need it to be. It is consistently present for wandering sweets to return. It could so easily be a soft, warm, mothering bosom. Thursday 26th February was not a bitter medicine, but a waterfall of nectar, from which I could drink till my hearts content. I am still drinking.
(Priya)

THE VALUE OF KISS

It is apparent from the above that visiting KISS for the first time feels different to different women. Some of us found our first visit unpleasant while others thoroughly enjoyed it. In this section, it will become clear that whatever our initial experiences of KISS, the group offers us a space to meet, support and celebrate each other's growth and development. We have different sexualities, ethnicities and religious beliefs but there is much that brings us together. These include similar experiences of living in Britain as South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African, not being heterosexual, feeling excluded in white spaces on the London LGBT social scene and experiencing

racism, sexism and homophobia or biphobia. We are often confused by white people as being ethnically the same and so differences amongst us are rarely recognised or understood. Also, because of our 'race' and ethnicities our sexualities are not always visible or accepted. The value of KISS lies in these similar experiences drawing us together for mutual support:

If there had been stronger Asian and Black role models when I was growing up I wouldn't have had so many problems coming out to myself. There still would have been problems in terms of coming out to my family but maybe I'd have felt happier about myself. KISS wasn't around then and that's why the KISS group is so important for Asian and Middle Eastern women who are questioning their sexuality or coming out now. (Amina)

I like KISS because it's for Asian women, and when you walk in to the room you can see that all those stereotypes, even the ones we build up in our own heads, all the internalised homophobia that you have, breaks down. You can see that Asian GAY women can be successful, they can be happy, they can be happy being lesbian. There are always intelligent and unintelligent conversation goings on at KISS, and I like the idea of having our own food like somosas and pakora.... The idea of the discussion is really good too and its safe enough to talk about the sort of things Asian lesbians want to talk about without being judged. Its an Asian space and its advertised as an Asian space and I feel quite

protective over it. Asian women go to the meetings to discuss things specific to being Asian and lesbian, the questions we ask are things like 'What does it mean to be gay and Asian?' or we will think about these things from an Asian perspective and there will be things said that other people might think are controversial but we need to talk about them. Some women don't like the discussion and just go to the meetings to meet up with each other, some people have been out for much longer than others and are quite formed in a lot of ways, they've formed their careers, they've got their girlfriend, they've got their house, they've got everything sorted out and they just want to meet up and have a laugh. But some women are just coming out and want to hear about certain issues, want to find out about what's going on, and want information and that's why they go to KISS. Different women in different situations go to KISS for different reasons. (Najma)

I've missed a few meetings because of university but I still go to some because they are so informative. They let you know what's going on in town at the time and any functions that you might find useful or enjoyable. And the organisation is really excellent, even though I can't go to all the meetings they still send me the newsletter so I know what's going on and I still speak to everybody there. I still feel quite involved with KISS and I can always go back and I wouldn't feel like 'Oh I've been away for so long I can't go back'. It's not like that at all. It's nice to meet everybody and chat and have really good

discussions, and it's also nice to just sit and lounge around with drinks and talk to people after the meeting that you haven't met before, so it's a really good way of meeting new people. I've had some really funny encounters at KISS like I bumped into somebody who was from the same mosque as me and neither of us had known the other one was gay until we saw each other at there!...Neither of us said anything to our families because neither of us are out to them....It was shocking but it was also nice to see someone at KISS who I already knew....Its been cool to meet someone at KISS who I've known for so long in the Muslim community but didn't know was gay. KISS is the only group I go to, I don't really have much need to go anywhere else at the moment.... I connect better with Asian people because I keep to my culture very tightly, so it's important to me to go to an Asian gay group.
(Mumtaz)

I had been out for 12 years, had girlfriends, and been on the scene. But I'd never known any Asian LGBTs and there always seemed to be something missing. I always felt like the odd one out among Asian people and the odd one out among white gay people. When KISS welcomed me to my first KISS meeting and introduced me to other South Asian lesbian and bisexual women, that was when I felt I really came out and after 12 years I had found that missing something. Five years on and I'm still very much involved with the group, its great. (Rani)

I don't feel like I'm part of the wider London LGBT

community but I do feel like I'm part of the KISS group because I regularly attend the meetings. KISS is a place to look and gawp at beautiful Asian women! And it's a good group, it's a social thing and we air quite a lot of views, so it's definitely important to go to KISS regularly. I go to meet my friends, we have great chats, a really good laugh and some fun, a bit of socialising and counselling, and a bit of time to meet other women. I go there for security and privacy to talk to my friends openly about things as my life becomes more and more immersed around being in a gay culture. Having been a member of KISS since 1999 I actually have found it tremendously useful to share in the Asian perspective, reinforcing that perspective, and meeting younger women than myself and women who have gone through similar situations. Its been fantastic meeting women, reinforcing the identity that you're not the only one who speaks only English and doesn't speak another language, doesn't do this, you're not the only one when she was younger was not allowed out, you're not the only one who was only discovering sexuality in your mid 20s. It's really, really good from that point of view. But it's also important in recognising that there are lots of lesbian and bisexual Asian women out there who want and demand the support of lots of Asians and feel quite culturally that they need that... When I'm at KISS I feel completely free to be me. I'm now very happy with my sexuality, very happy with who I am, very happy with my identity being Asian as well. For years people treated my like a child in some respects and constantly asked me 'Have you met anybody yet?' and I didn't know how to say

'Well actually I have but she's a woman'. Now I prefer to tell people and let them make their own minds up and make their own judgments about it. I don't tell them in an apologetic or uncertain way or seek their approval. I tell them about my lesbian relationship and I tell them that I'm very excited about it. Also, lots of my friends at KISS are opening up about their sexuality. I've met so many women at KISS and a large number of my lesbian friends are from KISS, and it's increased my circle of Asian friends so it's of paramount importance to me.
(Rekha)

Now I've met other Asian women like myself or who are in a similar situation as me I have people to talk to again in my own language and its a nice feeling when we talk, its friendly in a special kind of way. At KISS you know you're going to see the same faces. Sometimes you can't put a name to a familiar face, but it's a great feeling when people come over and talk to you or ask you to join them because they remember you. It's nice because that makes you feel more relaxed and part of that group, that you're no longer an outsider looking in. (Surinder)

I had gone to the KISS group because I wanted to be around more Asian women. I'd been to quite a few women's groups but being Asian I found it difficult to come out, even at women's groups! So I thought I'd go to the KISS group and be myself and it meant that I could make friends with a lot of Asian lesbians. Often, if you go to a club you might see one or two but you can't

just go up to them and say 'Hi, I'm an Asian lesbian too, do you wanna talk to me?'. All my lesbian friends were white and I wanted to meet Asian lesbians and going to the KISS group has helped me meet loads and it's been great. Now I have a circle of Asian lesbian friends who I feel comfortable with and can go out with. I also met my girlfriend of over 4 years at KISS and we're very happy. (Sujata)

It took me six months before I could say anything at a KISS meeting (I know anyone who knows me finds this difficult to believe because you can't shut me up now!). I do feel totally at ease in the group and, genuinely, it is one of the best things I have in my life. The support is really unique because it extends way past the monthly meetings and the friendships I have developed with individuals in the group are very dear to me. I have no doubt that if ever I needed to talk to one of these individuals I could do so without hesitation and I would be listened to with love, tolerance, compassion and understanding. Sure I was nervous and apprehensive about joining, but I realised in hindsight, that everyone in that room had done exactly what I had to do. They too had had to make that move, and go to their first meeting, and had stood exactly where I had stood. Was it worth it? Yes, a million times over. (Nanda)

In the period before KISS many of us as Asian lesbian/bi women had developed a sense of community in London, had grown in our friendships, had savoured the recognition we

gave each other. We all knew how lucky we were. KISS harnessed these assets, formalised them, and perhaps most importantly, made them accessible to everyone who could benefit. I pay deep respect to Parminder and Sharada for working to make such a vision materialise. The group's evolution has been a colourful one. People have come and gone. The mood had changed its hue. The focus has changed direction. There have been rows, relationships, friendships, make ups, break ups. New women come and I am glad that KISS is there for them at such an early stage of their journey.

Three KISS events have so far marked me forever.

1) Pride March, July 2000. I can remember approaching the vibrant line of women behind a huge KISS banner with excitement. We had such a joy about us. Some of were dressed in Asian clothes, (of note was P in her yellow sari). And we danced to the dhol drummers the entire march. It was a magical dream of celebration and belonging.

2) Blind Date, February 2004. I met my star-crossed lover. I feel like I had an arranged marriage, where my community who know me so well chose my date and blessed us! I think everyone was overwhelmed how perfect it seemed. And that was just the beginning!

3) KISS 5th Birthday, April 2004. It is difficult to put into words how proud I felt. Such talent. Such energy. Such celebration. It was an event which reflected what

KISS had become, the strength and the extraordinary beauty it has cultivated.

KISS is an anchor in my life. It has allowed me to develop precious friendships. It has allowed me to share my own strength and experiences with others. It has encouraged me to learn about the diversity within our own community. It has taught me to temper my expectations. It has helped me heal my relationship with my family and embrace my culture. It has challenged me, enriched me and altered me. I evolve from a binary concept of myself of Asian/Lesbian and realise that we are fluid beings, multi-faceted and ever changing. KISS has made me feel whole. (Supriya)

Over the past two years, I have enjoyed being part of KISS immensely - I have gained strength from being with others "just like me". I find the meetings friendly and warm, the discussions interesting and informative and it is a great opportunity to socialise and meet others. I have made a number of friends and acquaintances, who I feel it is a joy and privilege to know. I went on the KISS residential to Sitges last year and had a great time. I now also help out with the running of the website, and somehow got roped into co-facilitating a meeting! For me, it is incredibly important that we have an arena to share thoughts and ideas and to support each other. Being both Asian and gay means you might experience alienation from the very communities you expect to feel part of. KISS is a welcome space where I can feel comfortable with both these aspects of my life. KISS members have a certain amount of similarity of experience, from the fact that

we're all from particular cultural backgrounds, and it's wonderful to be able to come together and celebrate that. It has also been enriching for me to be part of a diverse group of women, with varying interests and passions - I feel inspired being in the presence of women who live their lives as they choose, and who have not let their differences from "mainstream" society hinder their lives. Coming to KISS has occurred at a time in my life where I am feeling more confident and happier, and more at ease with who I am. Being part of KISS has definitely contributed to that. I am grateful that the group exists and appreciate all the benefits I have had because of it.
(Daisy)

5 YEARS ON

Each year we celebrate the KISS group's birthday and each birthday party is a special occasion when we can mark the end of a challenging and successful year and look forward to beginning a new one. In April 2004 - with support from DJ Ritu at the Oak Bar in London - we had an extra special party to celebrate our 5th birthday. The party was organised by the KISS Steering Committee and was a wonderful success. There was a fantastic turnout of KISS members and it was fabulous to meet women who cannot make it to KISS meetings regularly or had not yet been to their first KISS meeting. Banners, balloons and bhajia awaited the party goers as did the performers for the evening.

We were given a real treat with performances from numerous KISS members, some of whom are professional entertainers. We had poetry reading, singing, dancing, and comedy sketches.

KISS members also provided their DJ and compeering skills to ensure that the party ran smoothly and that the audience was thoroughly entertained throughout the evening. It was a perfect opportunity for performers to share their skills and expertise with other KISS members in return for their recognition, support and acceptance. The stage offered visibility and empowerment to both the performers and audience members and encouraged a sense of cohesion and community among all those present. Without the input from KISS women as organisers, performers and audience members the celebration would not have been the success it was.

Performing a piece from the Vagina Monologues at the KISS birthday was FAB! Why? Because I got to do triple orgasms in front of a club full of lesbians. Need I say more?! (Ria)

Party goers were treated to birthday cake generously donated by Patisserie Valerie, and we raised money for KISS with a raffle with prizes including vouchers, a champagne hamper, exhibition tickets and the top prize was a DVD player. We shared the money we raised from the raffle with our sister group LABIA in India. Here is

the thank you message we received from them:

Our LABIA thanks your KISS.

The women of Bombay thank you wonderful women in London for your fundraising efforts! The £101.00 you have contributed will go towards supporting a retreat we are organizing in July 2004 for lesbian women from rural/small town, non-English speaking backgrounds.

These women have been completely isolated from city-based gay and lesbian networks. Despite this, and despite the homophobic environments they live in, some of them have had the tremendous courage to marry each other, and live openly together. For others, finding partners and even jobs is often a painful struggle. We hope creating this retreat space will provide an opportunity for these women to meet other lesbians, share their experiences and connect to the movement. Since most of these women are working class or poor and are unable to finance their own costs at the retreat, we have undertaken this fundraising effort. We recently had a fundraiser - our "April Jollies", and are planning on doing some more local and international canvassing to raise our required amount of £1,000.00. Contributions are still welcome!

A BIG THANK YOU again.

Love from LABIA

CONCLUSION

The KISS group has been gaining strength since it began

in 1999. It is one of the few opportunities on and off the London LGBT social scene for lesbian, bisexual and questioning women of South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African origin to meet and socialise together on a regular basis. KISS gives us permission to talk, drink, eat, and laugh together, and to build friendships and relationships. KISS enables us to develop a sense of ownership of the spaces we create, to feel empowered and to define, affirm, challenge and celebrate our many identities. These are important to us because they are rarely possible in other places in other parts of our lives. This booklet is in celebration of our phenomenal achievements.

We end this booklet by encouraging all KISS members to continue supporting each other and to continue KISSing for many years to come!

We encourage women who want to start up their own social and support group to go for it! Its hard work but with commitment, motivation and enthusiasm you too could be celebrating your group's 5th birthday.

We encourage women who want to visit KISS for the first time to check out our website (www.planetkiss.org.uk) or contact NPL for some initial support. You will be able to meet the meeting facilitator prior to your first meeting and be introduced to some KISS members. Otherwise, simply turn up and introduce yourself to the facilitator. We look forward to welcoming you!

If you run a support group for South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African women, or a support group for LGBTs, we encourage you to display this booklet and offer a copy to women who are in need of this information.

CONTRIBUTORS' PROFILES

The contributors to this booklet identify themselves as follows:

Amina: Pakistani, lesbian, late 20s, non-practicing Muslim.

Daisy: Indian, lesbian, late 20s, Sikh.

Halima: North African, lesbian, early 30s, Muslim.

Laila: Asian, early 20s, lesbian, non-religious

Mumtaz: Ismali, gay, late teens, Muslim.

Najma: Pakistani, lesbian, early 20s, non-practicing Muslim.

Nanda: Indian, lesbian, early 20s, Sikh.

Priya: Indian, lesbian, mid-20s, Hindu.

Rani: Indian, lesbian, early 30s, Hindu.

Rekha: Asian, lesbian, late 20s, non-practicing Hindu.

Ria: Asian, lesbian, early 30s, non-practicing Hindu.

Sharada: Asian, lesbian, late 20s, non-practicing Hindu.

Sujata: Indian origin, mid 20s, lesbian, non-religious.

Supriya: Indian, lesbian, early 30s, Hindu.

Surinder: Asian, gay/bisexual, early 20s, Sikh.

RESOURCES

London

Bisexual Women's Group, Glass Bar, Wednesday
7.00pm-9.00pm, <http://lbiwomen.bi.org>

BME Women's Network, group for LBT Black/Asian ethnic
minority women, Glass Bar, 2nd and 4th Monday monthly,
tel: 07958 072 452.

Broken Rainbow, LGBT Domestic Violence Service,
<http://www.lgbt-dv.org>

FFLAG, Families and Friends of L&G, EX4, tel: 01454 852
418 / 01392 279 5456, www.fflag.org.uk
Galop, help with homophobic violence, N1, tel: 020 7704
2040.

GEMMA, L&B women with/without disability, BM Box 7500,
LONDON WC1N 3XX.

KISS, Asian/Middle Eastern/North African Women's
Group, last Thursday monthly, Glass Bar, tel: 020 8741
1879, www.planetkiss.org.uk

Lesbian Discussion Group, every Wednesday, 8pm at Gay's
The Word, 66 Marchmont Street, www.gaystheword.co.uk

London Friend, Individual and group counselling, N1,
tel: 020 77837 3337.

L&G Switchboard, tel: 020 7837 7324, www.llgs.org.uk

Metro Centre, Unit 401, 49 Greenwich High Road,
Greenwich, SE10 8JL, tel: 020 8265 3311.

Open Door, For L&B women and questioning, aged 15-25
years, Lewisham Young Women's Resource Project, SE6,
tel: 020 8698 9453.

Orange Clinic, West London Centre for Sexual Health,
Charing Cross Hospital, Fulham Palace Road, W6 8RF, tel:
020 8846 1567.

Safra Project, Resource for LBT women who identify as
Muslim religiously and/or culturally, tel: 07941 659 320,
www.safraproject.org

Stonewall Housing Advice, tel: 020 77359 5767.

PACE, counselling and therapy groups, N7, tel: 020 7700
1323.

Bedford

Women's Group, informal social group, alternate weeks. tel:
01234 401 687.

Birmingham

Helpline - Friend West Midlands, tel: 0121 622 7351,
7.30pm-9.30pm.

Bristol

Black L&G Group SAFAR, Box 43, 82 Colston Street, BS1 5BB.

Lesbian Line, tel: 0117 907 7567, Thursday 7.30pm-10.00pm.

Bristol L&G Switchboard, tel: 0117 942 0842. Also covers Somerset and Bath.

Young Lesbian and Bi group Weekly drop-in, tel: 0117 941 2989.

Coventry

Friend, PO Box 8, Coventry CV1 3ZT, tel: 024 7671 4199, Mon-Fri 7.30pm-9.30pm.

L&B Women's Group THT Midlands, 10 Manor Road, Coventry CV1 2LH, tel: 024 7622 9292.

Leicester

LGB Centre, 15 Wellington Street, Leicester LE1 6HH, tel: 0116 255 0667.

Manchester

Lesbian Community Project, 49-51 Sidney Street, Manchester M1 7HB, tel: 0161 273 7128, mail@manchesterlcp.org.uk

Milton Keynes

Happy Tuesdays, Social/support group for women under 26, Monday 7pm-10pm, Freedom Centre, Milton Keynes, tel: 01908 309 911.

Newcastle

Lesbian Line, tel: 0191 261 2277.

Women 4 Women Support group for L&B women, 18+ years, 1st and 3rd Friday monthly, 7.30pm-9.30pm, tel: 0771 941 2849.

Northampton

Wellingborough G&L Line, tel: 01993 271 1874 / 01604 628 986, Thursday 7.30pm-10.00pm.

Nottingham

Bi-Women's Group, tel: 0115 956 8810.

L&G Swichboard tel: 0115 934 8485.

Oxford

Friend Helpline, tel: 01865 726 893, Tue/Wed/Fri, 7.00pm-9.00pm.

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