

2004-2005 Progress Report¹

Introduction

Established in 2002, the virtual forum for Palestinian gay women (*Palgaywomen*) has become the first of its kind safe space for lesbian, bi-sexual, inter sex, transsexual transgender and queer women in the Palestinian community in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The first meeting of those who chose to expose their identity to each other took place on January 2003, a meeting which symbolized one of many steps towards breaking the circle of silence, shame, fear and isolation. The meetings, together with the virtual forum have become the cornerstone for the formation of ASWAT group and the place where the needs of Palestinian gay women were articulated and elaborated towards actions and eventually, programming. Counting already fourteen committed group members and over seventy members of the Palgay Forum, ASWAT sought and was granted on September 2003 the organizational platform and support from Kayan – the Arab Feminist Center since. This enabled ASWAT to develop its activities and gain public visibility and recognition while protecting the anonymity of its members.

The support we accepted from individuals, organizations and funds was another reaffirming milestone in our evolution. This is a good opportunity to extend our gratitude and appreciation to the partners who supported our work during 2004 and 2005: **Astraea Foundation, Funding Exchange, Global Fund for Women, Heinrich Boll Foundation, Mama Cash, Sparkplug Foundation and Private Donors.**

Empowerment and Support for Palestinian Gay Women

- **Support group meetings** – Performed on a monthly bases, the meetings were held in rotation in Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, in order to ease access for women from different parts of the country. Members were arriving from Israel, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. One of the striking features of the meetings were the possibility to express one owns thoughts and feelings in Arabic, and the developing of an alternative, material and symbolic, 'mother tongue', allowing us to express our gender, sexual identity and nationality in a language that usually does not tolerate nor does it consist of positive expressions of female sexuality or lesbianism.
- **Virtual forum** – Yahoo groups hosts ASWAT's virtual forum *Palgaywomen* which consist of over 70 participants. Most of them enter the forum and chat or post a message on a daily bases. The *Palgaywomen* provides us an additional platform for un-silencing and peer support. It is also an important tool for disseminating information on issues of importance to the forum's members.

Advocacy, Outreach and Education

- **Lectures and workshops** - ASWAT has developed a series of empowerment workshops on women's sexuality, sexual identity and 'otherness' for the Palestinian community. During the reported period, ASWAT held 30 workshops for participants from the community. The workshops, developed for the first time in Arabic rather than translated or adapted from Hebrew or English, aimed to raise the awareness regarding homosexuality and lesbianism in relation to and in the light of gender oppression and national oppression. In addition, lectures were given in academic conferences, NGOs and high schools.
- **International exposure**- ASWAT has gained international exposure by participating in conferences, panels and group meetings in the U.S.A, Canada, Spain, Germany and Bulgaria.
- **Educational Project for Service Providers** - who work with youth. This activity's target group consists of teachers, counselors, youth group leaders, community centers workers and many others. The aim of the activity was to increase these Service Providers' sensitivity and awareness and to deal with stereotypes regarding sexuality and sexual identity. Also, we aimed to stimulate an internal community debate regarding those silenced issues. During the reported period 40 workshops were held attended by approximately 300 participants.

¹ Should you prefer to accept ASWAT updates and activity reports via e-mail, kindly send us a mail to the following address: palgaywomen@yahoo.com with the subject "Join ASWAT reports list" and we will add you to our mailing list

- **Media Outreaching** - so far, ASWAT gave over 15 interviews in the international and local Media agencies (TV, Radio stations and Newspapers) both in Arabic, English and Hebrew.
- **Brochures and PR Materials** – produced in Arabic, Hebrew and English and disseminated in conferences, workshops and other interested individuals and groups.

Group's Capacity Building

- **Establishing ASWAT's Collective and Developing Group's Vision and Organizational Tools** – ASWAT group has sought organizational support from Shatil - Israel's leading capacity building center for social change organizations, in order to acquire the professional skills we need to successfully achieve our goals. The groups Collective, consist of group members, operates as a board with similar mandate as other NGOs' boards of directors.
- **Appointing the First Paid Staff Member** – recognizing the need to increase our activities and visibility in the community and our growing needs as a group, ASWAT's Collective appointed a paid programs coordinator in order to implement the goals and objectives articulated by ASWAT members.
- **Securing Funds** - for ASWAT's current and future activities. We have managed to affiliate with the above mentioned partners and other private donors. In addition, we have appointed a resource development coordinator in order to assure ongoing support for our activities.

Developing Prospective Projects

- **Publications Project** – most of the literary and theoretical materials existing today about lesbianism (including anthologies of coming out stories, queer theory etc.) are not translated and/or published in Arabic. The extensive lesbian/queer writing of the past thirty years has skipped those who cannot read western languages. The political, ideological and emotional awareness and self affirming experience of a cultural heritage that legitimize the illegitimate is thus prevented from many Palgaywomen who cannot read English or Hebrew. The publication Project aims to create, translate and write materials in Arabic on the issues of homosexuality, lesbianism, gender and nationality. The information will be disseminated both as hard copy and as web-page in ASWAT's website.
- **Information Project** – Information gathered by and for Palestinian gay women in Arabic is urgently needed, accessible also via our website which aims to combat distortion of information, censorship and ignorance created by cultural taboos regarding women's sexuality. The website aims to expand our services and visibility and make our information accessible to Palgaywomen, interested individuals and groups.
- **Support line Project** – as a result of our growing exposure in the community, many individuals and professionals are calling ASWAT line seeking support, guidance and information (approx. 60 calls a months). Following our belief in peer support and gender experiential knowledge, the group intends to establish the Support Line in 2006.