Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation

Annual Report
2018-19

mewso.org
Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation
is a registered charity in England and Wales
Charity Number 1150129
This year we are very pleased to say that MEWSo's income has over doubled in size! We have supported more women than ever before and expanded our services into other boroughs to reach even more vulnerable women. We have provided much needed support to women who often suffer in silence, to break down barriers and empower them to create a better life for themselves.

Over the last year MEWSo has had a number of key achievements such as expanding our service to the borough of Westminster and securing a desk space in Church Street Ward in order to support BME women on their doorstep. We completed the ‘Polygamy Pilot Project’ in partnership with the University of Greenwich, publishing a report on the impact of polygamy on women, which highlighted the lack of services that were adequately able to support women in polygamous relationships. We launched our ‘Polygamy Matters’ campaign, with the support of Rosa Foundation, to raise awareness of polygamy and bring about impactful change. In addition one of our most dedicated ex-service users won Voluntary Action Islington’s Volunteer of the Year Award in 2018, making it the second year running that we have won the award.

The intersection of poverty, race and gender means that public service cuts are leading to a dramatic fall in the standard of living of many BME women. This has led to an increase of BME women wanting to access our services, in particular our advice service and seeking support around issues such as Universal Credits and domestic violence.

Despite facing threats to our funding, most notably in relation to Brexit and the uncertain political climate, MEWSo is a dynamic charity which uses the skills, knowledge and passion of our staff, volunteers and service users to thrive.

On behalf of MEWSo, we would like to thank our funders, donors, supporters, volunteers and staff who make MEWSo’s life-saving work possible.
Our Story

We’re the Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation. Since 2010 we have been supporting displaced Middle Eastern, North African and Asian women in London to build a life free from gender based violence and discrimination.

We reject every form of discrimination, inequality and exclusion and aspire to a society where every woman lives in safety with equal opportunities. We hope for a society in which diversity is considered an element of strength and not of division. The Middle Eastern Women and Society organisation is built on the values of secularism, solidarity and social justice.

Our Impact

This year we have supported over 500 Middle Eastern, North African and Asian women in London.

98% of service users were very happy with our services and would recommend us to a friend or family member.
Our Work

Counselling
MEWSo provides one-to-one and group counselling in Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish and English.

English Lessons
We offer one-to-one English Language support to isolated women through our team of qualified volunteer English Language teachers.

Befriending
Our dedicated volunteer befrienders provide weekly one-to-one encouragement to help isolated women get out of the house and integrate into society.

Advice
MEWSo offers one-to-one advice by appointment or at drop-in sessions with trained Advice Workers in Arabic, Kurdish, Farsi, Turkish and English.

Exercise Classes
At MEWSo we recognise the importance of physical exercise and we run weekly exercise classes specifically tailored to women who have experienced gender based discrimination and/or violence in Arabic, Hebrew and English.

Mindfulness and Meditation Classes
MEWSo provides Mindfulness and Meditation Classes designed specifically for refugee communities in Arabic and English.

Art Therapy
MEWSo understands that for some women speaking about their issues is too difficult so we offer Art Therapy classes as a way for women to creatively express their emotions.

Social Clubs
MEWSo Social Clubs allow our clients to have their say in what they want to do and are a chance for women to take a leading role in shaping what activities the group do.

Training Workshops
Throughout the year MEWSo offers a variety of Training Workshops on issues such as domestic violence, housing, employment and health.

Help for Children in Need
We offer financial support to mothers’ of children living in poverty through helping buy Christmas gifts and paying for special kids days out.
Our Service Users

Age of Service Users

- 50-59: 21.7%
- 30-39: 27.2%
- 40-49: 29.9%
- 18-29: 10.2%
- 60+: 11%
- 18-29: 10.2%

Ethnicity of Service Users

- Middle Eastern: 60.9%
- South Asian: 12.8%
- East Asian: 1.1%
- North African: 11.7%
- African: 8.2%
- European: 4.3%

91% of our service users have experienced some form of domestic abuse in their life time.

30% of our service users are disabled.

74% of our service users are unemployed.
Afsana's Story

Afsana is originally from Afghanistan and entered into an arranged marriage at a young age with an Afghani man who lived in the UK. After the marriage she left her home, her family and her country for the first time to live with her husband in the UK. At the time she spoke no English and didn’t know anyone else in the UK. Soon after she arrived in the UK the beatings started. Afsana suffered the abusive relationship for some years in which time she had her son. After being hospitalised several times she eventually managed to find the courage to speak out and divorce her husband. Afsana and her son moved into two different secure housing but both times her ex-husband found their house. In addition her ex-husband also discovered her mobile number through links within their tight knit community and sent abusive messages to her. Afsana was referred to our services one year ago experiencing extreme stress and anxiety and we supported her through counselling then.

Later Afsana came back to our services seeking advice. She had received a letter from the family court saying that she must attend the court due to her ex-husband requesting to visit his son regularly. Afsana was very anxious and unhappy about this as she believed that he would use the opportunity to again abuse her and her son. In preparation our Farsi speaking advisor wrote a letter to the court advising against Afsana’s ex-husband being allowed to visit his son and explaining Afsana’s story of abuse. Our advisor also explained to Afsana what would happen in the court hearing and prepared her on what she would say at court.

Not only was the experience going to be scary and challenging for Afsana, there was a high risk that Afsana’s ex-husband would verbally and/or physically abuse her outside the court and potentially follow her home after. Therefore our advisor went with Afsana to court as her Mackenzie friend and interpreter. Our advisor was able to provide Afsana with the emotional support she needed in order to come face to face with her perpetrator. In the waiting room, at the court, our advisor insisted that Afsana was put in a private room while waiting for the court to commence to avoid being menacingly stared at by her ex-husband. Our advisor also requested that the court hold Afsana’s ex-husband after the court hearing so that Afsana and the advisor could safely leave the court without being abused or followed by Afsana’s ex-husband. The advisor spoke on behalf of Afsana in court for some of the time and encouraged her to say how she really felt about the situation without feeling intimidated.

Afsana had been extremely anxious about attending court and she admitted afterwards that she was planning to cancel the court hearing, using the excuse that she couldn’t find child care for her son, if our advisor had not gone with her to the court. Afsana trusts our services, knows that we are on her side and are an organisation that she can rely on again and again when she is in need. As a result of our support, in this matter, Afsana’s anxiety and stress has reduced and her confidence in facing her abuser has improved. After this experience she said that she felt empowered to stand up against her ex husband and not let him take her son away from her and into a potentially dangerous and negative environment.

Afsana continues to seek support from MEWS0 and is regularly engaged in other MEWS0 activities like our Olive club and social events. We provide Afsana with holistic support which will help her in all areas of her life and empower her to be a strong and independent woman and other. Afsana now has great confidence in our services and has introduced some of her friends to our services who are now also supported by our advice workers.
Polygamy Matters

The Middle Eastern Women and Society organisation and the University of Greenwich have partnered to run a project researching and raising awareness about polygamy in London. The project aims to bring polygamy to the attention of the public and government in order to uphold the existing ban on polygamy and promote women’s rights within the community. According to the Home Office there are approximately 25,000 women registered as second wives and the Polygamy Matters campaign aims to end the practice of polygamy in the UK and protect women and children.

Halaleh Taheri, Director of MEWSO and lead campaigner of Polygamy Matters, said in her speech: “Polygamy is unequal and against women’s rights and we should protect women and children because they deserve a better life. It’s important to work with politicians and decision makers to highlight the issue of polygamy to the wider society in order to change attitudes and stop the practise of polygamy. Education is an important tool for the campaign and all these changes will not happen without the support of the Government”.

The partnered organisations have so far run a pilot project speaking openly about polygamy with women trapped in these relationships. Elena Vacchelli, Greenwich University, who ran the workshops and women reported the abuse and domestic violence they suffered in such relationships as well as the emotional and financial sufferings of their children.

The Family Life Celebration marked the end of the pilot project and celebrated the lives of the women who were brave enough to speak out about life in a polygamous relationship. The event introduced the Polygamy Matters campaign to the public and gave the audience the opportunity to engage with and support the campaign. Many people gave their option and showed solidarity in tackling the issue. The next stage will be growing the campaign as well as reaching and changing the lives of more women affected by polygamy.
Polygamy Matters

Farhana's Story

Farhana married her husband through the nikah ceremony in Bangladesh. Her new husband brought her to the UK with their new baby. Unbeknown to her, the nikah marriage wasn't recognised under UK law. She moved into a large house and lived there happily for 2 years. However one day the housing association sent a letter, addressed to her husband. As her husband was away and the letter looked urgent she came to MEWSO to request support understanding the letter and what to do. Upon reading the letter the MEWSO advisor realised that Farhana's flat wasn't in her name but in the name of another woman connected to her husband. Farhana was really confused and didn't know who this person was. With the permission of Farhana, MEWSO contacted the housing association to find out more about the situation. Later MEWSO was informed that the woman in the letter was also the wife of Farhana's husband who had three children. This woman was living in a small studio flat in the husband's name.

Farhana was really upset and confronted her husband on his return and he became violent and abusive towards Farhana. She returned to MEWSO and asked for help and MEWSO supported her and her child to find and move to a refuge. MEWSO also emotionally supported her through counselling and she is now seeking a divorce with her husband as he entered into a polygamous marriage without her knowledge or consent.
Our Highlights

MEWSo moved to Westminster Permanently!

MEWSo has been supporting more and more BAMER women in Westminster. In June 2018 we secured a satellite office in Church Street Ward, Westminster. We have managed to support over 150 service users in the Westminster area over the last year thanks to the support and funding of Westminster Council and Westminster Adult Education Service. We hope to change the lives of many more BAMER women over the next year.

Women and Leadership Conference

The conference addressed some of the challenges that women face to progression and leadership. The conference presented some examples of women who have achieved their ambitions against all odds, among them the Founder and Director of MEWSo Halaleh Taheri. The conference also explored how employers can better support women in the workplace to achieve their full potential. The aim was to start the conversation with Islington’s voluntary and community sector and local stakeholders to drive change at all levels.
Our Highlights

MEWSo at London New Year's Day Parade 2019

Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES) won the borough bid for Westminster to be part of the London New Year’s Day Parade 2019. MEWSo was asked by WAES to represent the different nationalities and cultures that can be found in Westminster with the world in a suitcase theme.

Arab Cultural Forum

Halaleh Taheri, Founder and Director of MEWSo, was awarded a certificate of appreciation for her outstanding and excellent service in the community as well as awarded the Certificate of Excellence from the Arab-European Centre of Human Rights and International Law by the Arab Cultural Forum on International Women's Day - 8th March.
Our Highlights

Celebrating Women

Celebrating the Centenary of Women's Suffrage

On International Women's Day, Islington Giving hosted a Women's breakfast at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel in Islington. Islington Giving brought together women who had made an impact in the borough. Halaleh Taheri, Director of MEWSo, spoke about the impact that Islington Giving's funding has made to the lives of our service users.

MEWSo visits the Frida Exhibition

MEWSo is very grateful to the V&A for tickets to the, Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up Exhibition. We also receive support from the British Museum, the Tate and the Barbarian Centre, allowing our service users to experience exciting new exhibitions.

International Women’s Day

MEWSo celebrated International Women's Day with it's service users in Islington, which was brought together by the Finsbury Park Women’s Network, a combination of around ten organisations representing the diverse range of communities. Women of different ethnicities came together in traditional dress to celebrate women through singing, dancing and eating amazing home made food.
Our Highlights

MEWSo Volunteers

For the second year running MEWSo won the Voluntary Action Islington Volunteer of the Year Award in 2018. We nominated two of our most dedicated Islington resident volunteers, Fatima Zahra Habri and Salima Belhadi. Zahra won the award for her outstanding support of our organisation.

At MEWSo’s AGM in February 2019, Molouk Vakili won MEWSo’s Volunteer of the Year Award 2019 for her work teaching service users garment and sewing skills and exhibiting her clothes at events and workshops.

MEWSo Management Committee

MEWSo welcomes three new management committee members: Rejna Alaaldin, Sharon Leonardi and Salima Belhadi

MEWSo becomes a London Living Wage Employer

In March 2019 MEWSo became a London Living Wage Employer because not only is it the right thing to do but at MEWSo we believe in investing in our employees wellbeing.
Our Highlights

Events, Workshops and Training Days

Healthy Eating Workshop, Islington

Olive Club, Islington

Sewing and Garment Classes, Islington

Domestic Violence Training, Westminster

Olive Club, Haringey

Polygamy Matters Pilot Project, Haringey
Our Highlights

Events, Workshops and Training Days

Me and My Mind Project, Westminster

Silvine Law Partnership, Islington

Polygamy Pilot Project, Haringey

Art Therapy, Westminster

Halloween, Islington

Clore Leadership Group

New Years Day Parade, Westminster
Our Highlights

Events, Workshops and Training Days

Kew Gardens

Walk and Talk, Westminster

Olive Club, Enfield

Christmas at MEWSo, Haringey

Body Balance, Westminster

Activities with Children, Islington

Storytelling, Westminster
Our Thanks

Funders and Partnership Support

Board of Trustees

Cordelia Mayfield - Chair
Behnaz Fatherazi - Treasurer
Rejna Alaaldin
Sharon Leonardi
Salima Belhadi
Our Future

As we start another year of life-saving work we will continue meeting the needs of displaced, vulnerable women who are struggling to adjust to life in a new country while facing other challenges like domestic violence and discrimination.

The continuation of austerity measures and the governments preoccupation with Brexit mean that BME women are suffering more than ever. The intersection of poverty, race and gender means that public service cuts are leading to a dramatic fall in the standard of living of many BME women. This poses a great challenge for MEWSo as we struggle to fund our services that allow us to keep the door open to all BME women in need. MEWSo will continue to strive to do all it can to meet the demand and step up to fill the gap in the shortfall of services.

In the next year we will be applying for funding, in partnership with the University of Greenwich and other relevant organisations, to start our polygamy matters project to develop bespoke services to help women who are affected by polygamy.

We aim to strengthen MEWSo through more partnerships with other charities, organisations and corporate groups. We aim to raise further awareness of our services among our target communities but also in local services and other organisations. In the next year we want to increase awareness of domestic and gender based violence and in particular around polygamy through our polygamy matters campaign. We want to create real change by asking difficult questions to get polygamy laws enforced.

In the next year we will be applying for funding to start the Advice Quality Standard and to fund an Advice Supervisor to complete the standard and
manage our current two advice workers. In addition we will be applying for more funding to expand our advice service and increase the number our hours of advice delivered in both Islington and Westminster.

Although our counselling service has supported and helped BME women, we are only able to provide a small service supporting only a small number of women meaning that it is not time efficient. With larger and more experienced organisations such as Women’s Trust and Nafsiyat offering a robust counselling service in community languages, we believe that other organisations are best placed to offer this service. However we have found that group therapy works well with our service user and in the last year Mindfulness has been extremely popular. Therefore, in the next year, we want to continue to offer this service to reach more women in Islington as well as Westminster.

In the next year we hope to further increase our income, through new funding opportunities and emphasis on increasing public donations, in order to meet the needs of all our service users and increase our unrestricted funds to give more individual and personal support to our clients.

MEWSo is excited and positive about the future and the new opportunities to come in our mission to empower more BME women to rebuild their lives.
Our Income and Expenditure

Income

For the financial year 2018/19, total incoming resources grew by a remarkable 105% from £39,564 to £80,913!

The majority of our funding is secured through Trusts and Foundations, and, while we wish to continue this stream of funding, we want to lessen our dependency on it through opening up different streams of funding such as public donations, crowd fundraising and contracts.

The charity has also been successful in retaining its grants despite a difficult financial landscape. We will continue prioritise our fundraising to enable us to meet the needs of our service users in this challenging climate.

Expenditure

Growth through new activities has correspondingly increased our resources expended by 34% from £42,515 to £56,882. All incoming resources and resources expended are derived from continuing activities. In addition the staff needed to deliver these services has resulted in an increase in staff costs.
"If you provide people with the help they need, they can go on to help so many."

Halaleh Taheri
Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation

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