



TEN YEARS
REBUILDING LIVES

IMPACT
REPORT
2020



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A message from our Director



I established MEWSO in 2010 because I was (and still am) passionate to see women from my community thriving. Throughout the past ten year, I've met women who had survived - or were still experiencing - different forms of domestic violence – from emotional and financial abuse to physical and sexual violence. Women turned to MEWSO for support with issues around forced marriages, forced virginity testing or even hymenoplasty and virginity repair. We managed to enhance our support for women who had found themselves in polygamous relationships and also supported women threatened by family members with honour killing, or excluded by their communities because of their sexual orientation.

We mobilized community leaders to take action and raise awareness on the realities of polygamous relationships. We initiated a discussion with funders on designing a sustainable programme of support for women in risk or already in polygamous relationships. We shared our expertise with media outlets who were becoming increasingly interested in covering virginity testing and vagina reconstruction. We continued to raise the voice of migrant women experiencing domestic violence as part of the Step Up Migrant Women UK Campaign. Furthermore, we expanded our welfare and financial advice support services and established legal surgeries for advice in community languages. Being a grassroot group, we continued to promote art therapy and mindfulness as alternatives to mainstream mental health services.

The women we support are often invisible to policy-makers and society, but their cases are complex and require institutional, legal, practical and emotional support. MEWSO will continue to fight for and protect these women to the best of our abilities by providing tailored services to meet their needs and enable them to thrive in London.

Halaleh Teheri,

Founder and Executive Director of MEWSO

A message from our Chair



As we celebrate our tenth anniversary this year, we are proud to acknowledge that in the last year we remained true to our mission to assist women from various ethnic backgrounds facing multiple disadvantages. We are pleased to announce that the tenth year of our existence brought us new opportunities enabling us progress in our quest to become provider of awareness and support on culture-sensitive taboo issues that are prominent amongst Middle Eastern communities in London - polygamy, hymenoplasty and domestic violence, among others.

Reflecting on where we have been,

let me say how proud I am of the fact that MEWSO has reached its current position. Voluntary sector organizations, social services, and most importantly – past and present participants – keep on referring women for support. Not only we have sustained our activities, but managed to adapt and expand in the current challenging funding landscape.

Looking forward to where we are going,

I am sure the relentless efforts of Halaleh Teheri and the team mean that MEWSO will grow and establish itself as the lead provider of specialist support for Middle Eastern women across Islington and Westminster and beyond.

***Cordelia Mayfield,
Chair of the Board of Trustees***

We are MEWSo

We bring women in similar situations to support each other

Our Vision

A society where every woman lives in safety with equal rights and equal opportunities and in which diversity is considered an element of strength and not of division.



Our Mission

MEWSo's mission is to support and empower BAME women in London to rebuild their lives. We work to prevent and end violence and abuse against women, and support their emotional, financial and social needs. Our work is holistic and empowering, working alongside survivors to achieve independent lives free from abuse. Through our work we promote and facilitate equality, integration, community cohesion and cross-cultural understanding.



Our Values

Solidarity

We stand in unity with all women to defend women from discrimination, inequality and exclusion.



Equality and diversity

We value individual human rights and we do not tolerate any form of discrimination.

Social Justice

We fight for fair and just relations between the individual and society.

Collaboration

We work in collaboration with other organisations to develop a community wide response to depend women's rights.

Secularism

We act in separation to any religious views or beliefs.

10 Key Activities

1

Advice

We offer one-to-one advice on welfare and domestic violence by appointment, over the phone or online, with qualified and experienced advisors who speak Arabic, Kurdish, Farsi, Turkish and English.

2

Legal advice

We partner with solicitor firms to provide qualified advice for women on immigration status, asylum, sexual violence, divorce and relationship breakdown.

3

Raising awareness and training

We provide training and organize awareness events for women and community organizations on domestic violence, polygamy, virginity testing, hymenoplasty and LGBTQ+ rights, among others.

5

English lessons

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

4

Cooking and social clubs

We gather at community venues for workshops and classes, or to share recipes and prepare tasty and healthy lunches and celebrate diversity and community spirit.

10 Key Activities

10

Befriending

Our dedicated volunteer befrienders provide weekly one-to-one encouragement to help isolated women stay connected with their community and support women become empowered to live the life they want.

6

Integration and connection

We gather for coffee and cake, quizzes and thematic walks to explore and learn new amazing facts about our neighbourhoods.

7

Mindfulness and Meditation

We provide mindfulness, breathe work and meditation classes, open to all women from all backgrounds, in English with Arabic and Farsi translations if needed.

8

Art Therapy

We understand that for some women talking about their issues is too difficult, so we offer art therapy classes as a way to self-express and process feelings.

Exercise Classes

We recognise the importance of physical exercise and run weekly dance classes, with some yoga influences, in English with Arabic, Farsi and Hebrew translations if needed. It is especially tailored to women who have experienced gender-based discrimination and/or violence.

10 Years in Brief

Befrienders for all women in our society

Halaleh, a social worker at the time, felt the need to address the social isolation women she supported faced. *"Once the issues of welfare entitlements, safe shelter and leave to remain were solved, I had to disengage and move on to another case. But the language barriers and cultural differences prevented these women from meaningful involvement in communities"* - says Halaleh. That's how in the summer of 2010 MEWSO was born – to offer befriending to women once their immediate needs were met.

2010



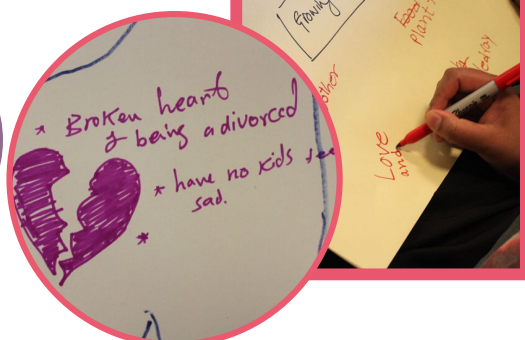
Settling in

We rented our first office space at Durham Road Resource Centre. We received support from Cripplegate Foundation, National Community Lottery Fund, Voluntary Action Islington and SOAS.

Introducing advice services

As structural poverty was a reoccurring issue for the women we supported, we expanded our services to provide welfare and benefits advice.

2012



Mental Health Matters

Domestic violence, isolation, poverty – they all affect our emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. Therefore, we piloted counselling and mental health support for women survivors of domestic abuse.

Looking after your health

In this year, we looked at ways to improve the health and physical wellbeing of the women we supported. We introduced pilates, swimming, fitness and gardening classes, organized workshops on healthy eating and new ways of cooking traditional meals in a healthier way.

2014



English classes

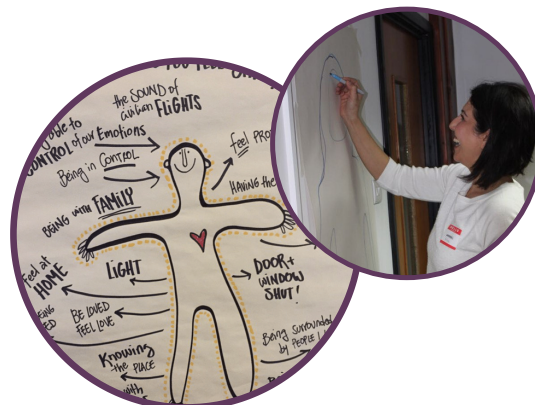
2015

As we noticed that many participants did not feel ready to access mainstream ESOL classes or even attend job interviews, we piloted our one-to-one English teaching method. We have supported many women to build up self-confidence, knowledge and skills so they can improve their life situation.



Don't suffer in silence: Domestic Violence support

2016

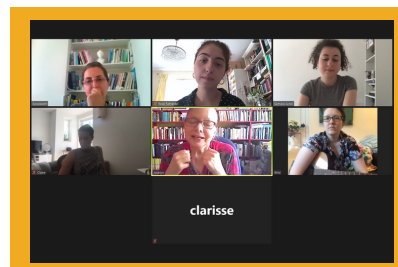


2017

Step Up Migrant Women



**Step Up
Migrant
Women
UK**



2019

Ban Virginty Testing



10 Reasons I Recommend MEWSo

1

"I met with the founder of MEWSo 10 years ago, at the start of this organization. Halaleh showed me great passion and drive to develop MEWSo in order to help the women and families in need. Halaleh always followed through on suggested actions for MEWSo's development, and within a short space of time the organization became successful in fundraising and subsequently delivering excellent projects for the local community. Since then MEWSo has continuously grown from strength to strength and long may it continue to do so well into the future."

Yvette Elis

Development Officer, Voluntary Action Islington

2

"MEWSo is an inspirational grassroots organisation, run by the community for the community, supporting BME women to live happier, healthier and more empowered lives".

Kate Oboussier

Social Regeneration Project Manager - WCC
and former MEWSo's officer

3

"Empowering and supporting women at MEWSo, it's not just a slogan or a value, it's a fact! This approach is strongly embedded in their operations, work culture and interaction with beneficiaries, and that's what makes MEWSo such a special and competent charity."

Loris Kneizeh

MEWSo Board member

4

"I like that they address the social and cultural norms that underlie the acceptance of violence in Middle Eastern societies".

MEWSo legal advisor

5

"I like to see when we manage to bring a positive change in women's self-confidence and boost their ability to carry on".

Yasmine Lahreche

Volunteer

10 Reasons I Recommend MEWSo

6

"MEWSo has given me a voice to help vulnerable women. Thank you, Halaleh, for creating this amazing organization. I am proud to be part of it".

Zahra Habri
MEWSo Senior Domestic Violence Advisor

7

"I admire MEWSo's tenacity to reach out to the most isolated women and give voice to the unheard/invisible".

Sharon Leonardi
MEWSo Board member

8

"I met Halaleh 10 years ago when she told me she wanted to establish MEWSo and asked me if I could help. Once she described her vision to me, I knew I wanted to be part of it. I've seen MEWSo doing incredible work, from lifting and empowering women within our communities to campaigning for women rights everywhere. I am grateful to have met Halaleh all those years ago and I look forward to seeing all the wonderful things MEWSo will do in future".

Behnaz Fatherazi
MEWSo's Treasurer

9

"I like that they bring us together and encourage us to be active and proactive".

Salva, an Egyptian lady
participating in Arabic Zumba classes

10

"I feel it is an honour and a privilege to work with such dedicated colleagues helping women overcome their welfare and self-esteem issues".

Sodabeh Gashtasebi
Senior Welfare Advisor and Art Therapy Facilitator

10 Highlights of Success

Poligamy Matters

"I am in a polygamous relationship but I don't talk about it with anyone. Someone told me about the poligamy workshop that MEWSo were doing and I wanted to go but I was scared. My friend had used MEWSo services before and she persuaded me to go. I met other women like me with similar issues. It made me realise that I am not alone and this gives me hope" - Hamia, 57, originally from Algeria

Olive Club

Our Olive Club is a self-steering and self-leading group for Middle Eastern women from Islington who meet every week for fun activities, walks, workshops and talks. Olive Club is one of our big success stories – women got closer over time and formed lasting friendships.

"I am finally able to accept myself"

"I flew Iran five years ago. Back home, I felt oppressed for being forced to hide my sexuality and not being able to express myself. I thought I was doing fine in the UK until Home Office rejected my case for asylum. It was at that time when I heard about MEWSo from the Iranian community. Their advisor supported my asylum case and linked me to pro bono legal service. She introduced me to LGBTQ+ organizations in London and came with me to some support groups at first. I am now settled in the UK and enjoy a network of like-minded people" - Zareen, 28, originally from Iran



Happy Children

In 2018 we brought together children from disadvantaged background and their single mothers to celebrate family bonds and spend quality time together. For the first time in their lives, children had the opportunity to visit dream spots like Legoland, Kew Gardens, London Zoo and the seaside. The trips created opportunities for their mothers to engage with each other who now enjoy a network of local support.

"I no longer sleep on a wet pillow"

"I slept night after night on a wet pillow crying away my pain and embarrassment. I didn't know how to help myself out of the hell I was living in. He showed me no respect, humiliated me in front of family members and threatened to take away the children. I stayed for the sake of children and my family's honour. One day I got a phone call from MEWSo's Domestic Violence Advisor – Zahra, who said she could help. It was a long process and I am still healing. But I have my children, a safe house, benefits and part-time job, and I feel fulfilled. Thank you, Zahra" - Layla, 43, originally from Morocco

10 Highlights of Success

Me and My Mind, My and My Health

Me and My Mind and **Me and My Health** projects offer peer-facilitated mindfulness sessions, relaxation techniques, health and wellbeing workshops to introduce self-care practices, establish better nutrition habits and improve the health and wellbeing of participants.



Art and Exercises

We offered an amazing opportunity for women from Church Street, Westminster to participate in weekly physical activity and art therapy classes.

Women Breaking Barriers

Several projects like **Women Breaking Barriers** and **Rebuilding Lives** projects provided welfare support and advice to build up knowledge around household budgeting and benefits entitlement. In this way women who bare any form of domestic abuse are more confident to move forward and rebuild their lives.



Hymenoplasty is real and is happening in London

"I first came to MEWSo for counselling. I was withdrawn and blamed myself for making wrong choices. As I got closer to my support worker and started sharing how I have volunteer had hymen restoration to preserve my dignity in front of my husband to be, the cheater, from whom I was gasping to separate. My advisor showed me a whole new world of opportunities and supported my choices. I now live independently and am proud of who I am. Soon I will have my diploma in accountancy. The next step will be to find the right man – a man who will accept and respect me of who I am" -
Fariba, 35, originally from Iran



"He said I was worthless, but look at me now"

"My husband got a work contract in the UK and I followed him. Here I found myself financially dependent, lonely and looking after children in an educational system so different that the one home. The work stress proved too much for him and his abusive behaviour was escalating by the day. I got to know MEWSo when I called Citizen Advice Bureau after becoming homeless. They gave me the emotional support I needed and supported my case with Home Office. Halaleh and the team helped me believe in my talent and supported my passion for applied art and crafts. I am now settled in the UK and a regular facilitator for MEWSo's creative workshops and interpreter for MEWSo's Kurdish speaking clients" -
Nasreen, 45, originally from Kurdistan

Our Campaigns

Polygamy Matters

Polygamy is illegal in the UK, but some Muslim women might find themselves entering polygamous marriages through religious ceremonies called a 'Nikah'. This usually goes on in Muslim communities and is not registered nor recognised by the state. While MEWSO does not judge or discriminate against these women, they can bear harmful consequences as a result. Mainly, that in the event of a marriage break down they have no legal protection.

MEWSO aims to enforce the existing law so women and girls enjoy full protection by the state. Awareness and prevention services must be available for women and girls so they are aware of the consequences of entering a polygamous relationship. Advice and support services must be existing and accessible for women and girls so they can reach for support when they feel unsafe.

We also want the educational institutions to recognise the matter as human rights violation so children are aware of the practice.

Our campaign, we hope, will improve the lives of women and mothers caught in polygamous relationships. Our research shows our work is already having a lasting impact on those we have been able to help.



AIMS of the campaign

- **Raise awareness** on women's and children's rights and the consequences of entering polygamous arrangements.
- Develop **prevention and support** services so women and girls are protected from harm caused by polygamous arrangements.
- Integrate as part of the study curriculum **education about harmful customs** and practices.
- Gain attention of the government so the existing **legislations are enforced**.

Our Campaigns

Ban virginity testing

The consequences of a woman not being a virgin and not married in Muslim societies are very serious. At best, she risks humiliation and embarrassment from her family, her husband or fiancé and his family, as well as the wider community. At worst, this is a cause for the breakdown of a marriage or engagement, being sent back to her family in disgrace, being disowned and casted out, or becoming the victim of an honour killing by her father, brothers and uncles.

We believe that UK laws and regulations should be implemented on all communities in the UK, with an emphasis on protecting Middle Eastern women, who are the most vulnerable in our society, instead of leaving them in the hands of community faith leaders and their barbaric customs.

Although we would like to eventually ban hymenoplasty, banning it without proper education will do more harm than good. Banning these practices without adequate education will only force women and girls to resort to clandestine practices which will expose them to even greater risks in terms of hygiene and unsafe medical practices.

We at MEWSO want to challenge the systematic belief that pressures women to go for these surgeries and hopefully live in a society which does not equate a woman's worth to her virginity.

AIMS of the campaign

- Provide **prevention and support** services for girls
- **Raise awareness** on women and children's rights in communities to tackle backward attitude behaviours of customs and cultures harming women and girls.
- **Enforce the law of 'Ban Virginity Test'** and investigate cases as still families and communities practising it in the UK.
- We want the Department of education to **make sexual education a mandatory part** of the school curriculum to eradicate these archaic notions of virginity in future generations.



Our Campaigns

LBTQ+ Matters

In Islam, alternative sexuality is seen as an illness. Those women cannot express themselves and feel isolation and loneliness, leading to poor mental health. The reactions of family, friends and colleagues means coming out as a Muslim can be near impossible. While some women do partly come out, some are forced to present intimate partners as best friends, others are teased about the way they dress or their "masculine" behaviour. The pressures to marry someone of the opposite sex can be enormous and marriage generally is often considered a family responsibility.

Human equality is at the heart of MEWSO. We stand in the frontline in the fight against discrimination and inequality. All cases of discrimination against LBTQ+ by any individual, authority or institution, state or private, should come under criminal investigation.

Our campaign intends is to step up for the rights of Middle Eastern women who self-identify as lesbians, bisexuals, trans or queers. We want to gather support from other like-minded charities, community and national organisations, connect with decision-makers, schools and community groups and build on the expertise of others.



AIMS of the campaign

In the short term, we want to provide **urgent and preventative services** for the most vulnerable women and girls who might be in serious danger in our communities.

In the long term, we will develop and challenge and **change the attitude of community** to accept and tolerate others' views and choices on sexual life by raising awareness and educate adults of our community.



Our Campaigns

Step Up Migrant Women

At present, 60% of police forces routinely share victims' immigration details with the Home Office. This is because there are no guidelines as to how police officers should deal with victims of crime who are also migrants. The result is that victims do not trust the police and abusers can threaten them with deportation if they try to get help. Migrant women are even barred from refuges or getting a safe place to sleep because they have no rights to any benefits.

This situation is allowed to exist because it is seen as being tough on immigration. The hostility towards immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers, particularly if they are from a BAME community, takes priority over victims of violence and exploitation. Rights that are part of the Human Rights Act, which guarantee the same fundamental rights to everyone regardless of nationality, background or immigration status, are being routinely ignored and so leaves victims with no way to escape.



MEWSO wants all women with unsettled migration status suffering abuse and domestic violence to be able to report their abuser/s to the police without fear of being detained, deported, made destitute or losing custody of her children.

MEWSO wants migrant women to be the responsibility of the Government. We believe that all women who step foot on British soil, regardless of where she is from originally, belongs to, and should be the responsibility of the UK Government.

"If a migrant woman's paperwork is not the same as mine, it is not her fault, and denying her the right to exist in this country does the same amount of damage as the government in her home country", says our Director, Halaleh.

We @MEWSo



HALALEH TEHERI

Executive Director

After years in Iran, Iraq and Sweden, Halaleh moved to London in 2005, where she founded MEWSo. As a woman born in the Middle East, she has witnessed honour-related violence and gender-based injustices that she decided to tackle through establishing an organisation that helps women in their journey of adjustment towards a new life. Halaleh is Registered qualified Social Worker and worked in Lambeth Council for 4 years before she set up MEWSo.



ZAHRA HABRI

Senior Domestic Violence Advisor

Zahra was actively volunteering with MEWSo until 2015 when she became a domestic violence advisor. She has a Diploma in Health and Social Care and an Advice and Guidance degree with the Open University. Zahra deals with women who find themselves trapped in harmful and dangerous situations. Women who for whatever reason are unable to find the help they need within mainstream services.



SODABEH GASHTASEBI

Senior Welfare Advisor and Art Therapy Facilitator

Sodabeh qualified as a welfare advisor after completing courses in Advice & Guidance, and Health and Social Care for Adults. She became an advisor with MEWSo in 2014 and helps women apply for benefits and tackle issues that apply to schools, GP services, council tax, grants and loans. Sodabeh is also a professional artist who facilitates our art classes that help women open up, unlock their love of art, and learn new skills.



ROSE FATHERAZI

Project and Service Coordinator

Rose comes from a Middle Eastern background where women's rights are an ongoing issue. Rose has been involved in MEWSo's events since 2013 and after completing her education, joined the staff team in 2019. She manages the majority of MEWSo's projects and delegates cases to our two advisors



AUDREY THOMPSON

Communications Coordinator

Starting as a cub reporter on a London newspaper and a BBC Radio 4 producer, Audrey moved into writing about health and social care for a variety of magazines, before joining London Government. She then became a press officer and a web content editor for a number of London councils before deciding to join MEWSo.



ELLIE ANGUS

Fundraising Manager

Ellie has worked in both fundraising and programme management roles for a range of humanitarian and development organisations, and as such is passionate about bottom-up approaches, accountability to the affected populations and beneficiary involvement in project management.

10 Pledges for the New Decade

WE WILL:

Gender equality is everyone's struggle – but also everyone's gain

Advocate for mental health awareness

among Middle Eastern communities and support participants to look after their emotional wellbeing and mental health

Challenge harmful attitudes

towards women with different sexual orientation and tackle sexual discrimination

Educate communities

about the harmful consequences of entering polygamy

Guarantee the fundamental rights of **safety and security** to all women with unsettled migration status trapped in domestic abuse

Promote healthy attitudes

towards eating and exercising among women from Middle Eastern communities

Work towards **improving the welfare and housing status** of women so they are safe from perpetrators

Empower women to live **independent lives** and take their own decisions

Support women to **integrate and feel included** into the society

Challenge the cultural beliefs that equate a woman's worth to her virginity.

Work in **partnership** with community organizations to maximise the positive impact for women



Women's Rights are Human Rights



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