

MEWSo – Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation
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ANNUAL REPORT

FY 2014-2015

Rebuilding Lives!

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To Our supporters

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our funders, donors, management committee members and our hardworking volunteers who made MEWSO to be an instrument of change for better life for displaced women in our communities.

The 2015 has been a successful year for MEWSO so far as we managed to secure further funding from Awards for All for new projects and workshops, one part-time staff from Comic Relief, One part time counsellor and Outreach worker from City Bridge, a range of wonderful and useful workshops and sessions regularly which has been supported by Awards for All, Mayor of London (FreeSport), one day advisory and advocacy from Cripplegate Foundation, a Befriending project supported by The Goldsmiths' Company and The Morris Charitable Trust.

We are proud to announce that more professional women have joined our organisation in various capacities such as advice, counselling, outreach working, health trainer and supervisory for counsellors.

We hope to continue our work into 2015-16 and beyond with stronger management committee and further fundraising and donation for our aims and objectives.

Halaleh Taheri

Founder & Practice Director





Background

MEWSO is a growing organisation set up in 2011 to address the needs of women in Middle Eastern communities in the absence of priority placed on their needs within the community organisations mainly run by male and elder members of the communities.

MEWSO started as a brain child of a group of Middle Eastern women who experienced prejudice, domestic violence, trauma, honour related violence in their families and witnessed many forced marriages and female genital mutilations within their communities. The founding committee analysed the support and assistance available to the victims of the above mentioned crimes and reached the conclusion that once the victim has received the basic support by mainstream providers and campaign groups, she is left on her own to rebuild her life amid underlying mental scars that are not addressed in long term plus coping with new situation that she is not familiar with culturally in the new social set-up.

Therefore MEWSO is offering its services to such individuals as a bridging support to gain stamina and strength in the journey towards the new way of living independently. To this end, MEWSO adopts the approach of bringing the women in similar situations to engage in activities such as therapeutic workshops, counselling sessions and networking events.

In addition to the above, MEWSO is also working with families and communities to raise awareness about women and children's rights, to reduce the stigma associated with mental health illnesses. MEWSO is aware of the fact that changing attitudes is a long term process and is using every possible opportunity to address the above issues.



Our Aims

- To develop women's knowledge of health, education and civil rights.
- To defend women from violence and discrimination both at home and in the wider community.
- To help women overcome barriers in Western society, to integrate and enjoy being part of the community.
- To direct women to relevant organisations when they need social or legal services or expert advice.
- To create unity and solidarity within the movement of Middle Eastern women against discrimination, patriarchy and poverty with view to achieving freedom and equality for all.
- To support women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), both emotionally and legally through networking and fundraising.
- To create networks to connect women and their families.
- To care for the wellbeing of women and their families.

We believe this approach empowers our female target group to help themselves and each other to find the support they need, a need that is becoming increasingly urgent in the ever-changing economic climate.



Activities and Support

During the last year, MEWSO offered a wide range of support to women who are finding the experience of integrating into the wider community very isolating and difficult. Isolation and the lack of contact with the wider community not only impacts on the mental and social well-being of displaced women but it also leads to their failure to access services and assistance that are available to them. Lack of confidence, self-esteem and the English language hampers the ability of women from the Middle Eastern communities to improve their own quality of life and health and that of their families. The following is a list of supports that our clients received during 2014- 2015:

| CORE ACTIVITIES |
|---|
| One-to-One and Group Counselling |
| Advice, Guidance, Advocacy and Outreach |
| Health-related Workshops and Sessions |
| Befriending |
| OTHER ACTIVITIES |
| Craft Sessions |
| Events |
| One-to-One English Learning |
| Awareness Raising for Women and Girls |

Core Activities

ONE-TO-ONE AND GROUP COUNSELLING

Most women from the Middle East are placed in this country due to civil wars, tribal conflicts, persecutions and regional disasters. We need to add cultural suppression, discrimination, domestic violence, forced marriage, honour related violence and female genital mutilation to the above list. Therefore, receiving counselling is one of the necessary treatments that would assist them to heal their scars and be able to move forward in their lives.

MEWSO offers one-to-one and group counselling to women. We receive referrals from GP's, social services, Police, community groups, individuals and self-referral.

Clients are referred to one-to-one or group counselling following the initial assessment by qualified advisers.

The first 10 one-to-one counselling sessions are free of charge for clients. They are required to pay a minimal fee following the free counselling sessions. All counsellors are qualified and receive supervision.

Group counselling is free for participants and is facilitated by a qualified therapist.

We ran 44 sessions of group counselling during the last year with an average of 9 women attending each session. The group sessions were instrumental for women to hear other women's stories and helped them to seek further and one-to-one counselling sessions. The group also helped them to form new networks of friend and take new initiatives such as monthly lunch meeting.

The women also encouraged to participate in other health related workshops such as swimming and exercise & dance sessions.

- **Case study for group counselling**

The counsellor who runs one of our group therapy reports: "The formation of the women's group by MEWSO was one of the best ideas that any healing centre might provide. The group started almost with no agenda or plan. It was decided that the group members would decide as what kind of the group they wanted. We had two weeks of consultation with 15 members who were very keen to attend. It became very clear from the onset that almost all of them wanted to have a safe and confidential place to talk about their displacement, emotions, losses and any other issues that they felt unable to reflect on if they were alone and isolated. The members wanted to come out of their isolation. This indeed was the main healing factor. They also wanted support and friendship from each other and a continuous contact with each other beyond the group."

Among the clients' feedbacks during the group sessions, F's words stand out as particularly representative: "Everyone in my family knows that Thursday is the day I take for myself to attend the group counselling which has become to me an important and necessary habit that I don't want to lose". L. said: "It was

thanks to the safe environment that I found in the group counselling that I felt at ease talking about my problems and thus gained confidence in expressing my opinions out loud in front of others".

MEWSO offered one-to-one counselling to 18 women for ten sessions each during 2014-15 with more than 20 women currently on our waiting list.

Clients are seen by two qualified counsellors and two trainee counsellors.

The issues covered range from domestic abuse, marital problems, child abduction and post-traumatic stress and depression. Clients receive counselling in their own language that makes it most effective. Languages offered currently in our centre are Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and Persian.

- **Case study for one-to-one counselling**

Mrs. A had to reconcile with her husband under pressure from the family and the peers in her community after ten years. However, she was not happy about living together. He was an addict in the past that led to their separation and she had to bring up her children on her own. The husband joined a rehab programme and managed to get clear after couple of years and joined a Christian group and became one of their devotees.

Once living together again, he refused to share the responsibilities in the house and also refused to contribute to the cost of his living with her. Mrs. A an independent woman for more than ten years, found it very difficult to cope with the new reunion. Plus that she found out that she did not love him anymore. So the relationship was more platonic rather than a couple.

When she came to see our counsellor, she was torn between shame and guilt. On one hand she needed to gather enough courage to tell him the truth that they have grown too far apart and have nothing left between the anymore and, she has made a mistake to agree to live together again. On the other hand she did not dare facing her community who were praising him for giving up addiction and look upon her as a selfish and cruel woman.

She received counselling to recognise her own feelings better and recognise them. The next stage was to believe in herself once again to be able live independently and shed away the fear of being lonely. Once she achieved the above, she also recognised that she did not fear the judgement of her family and community any more. At this stage she become assertive enough to open the dialogue with her husband and explain her feelings and wishes.

She wrote in her feedback form, "I never thought I would be able to face my family, children and the community if I broke up again with him, but the counselling I received made me believe in myself again and be in charge of my life".



ADVICE, GUIDANCE, ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH

MEWSO provide advice, guidance, advocacy and sign posting by appointments on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The Monday appointments are for Arabic speaking clients. Other languages are seen on the other appointment days.

We offer advice on welfare, housing, finding refuge, child custody, education & training and employment. We also offer advice on any other issue that affects our clients, however, in the areas outside our expertise, we do sign post and refer them to appropriate agencies.

We outreach our clients when they are not able to attend our offices. The outreach services is an extra support for our vulnerable individuals. The reasons range from having a baby, been immobile or new to the country.

Once the client is placed in a refuge in the cases of Domestic violence, we continue our support till the client is settled in the new refuge and she would be happy to see the refuge advisers.

More than 200 clients received our advisory service in person with more than 150 cases on telephone and email.

The issues range from housing, benefits, divorce, domestic violence, education and employment.

The cases include finding refuges, interpreting in courts, advocating on behalf of the client with different social services departments and Police. We had a number of homeless cases that we had to refer to homeless units and national organisations such as Shelter

- **Case study 1**

The client had to travel to the region to follow up the case of her only child with the authorities whose life was in danger of being executed.

She had informed the Job Centre in advance, however, she finds out that all her housing and independent living allowance have stopped by the JC.

She was assisted by the MEWSO adviser in writing to the JC and housing department to clarify her situation, apply for the independent living allowance and housing benefit again.



Her benefits are instated again and she is now able to attend her ESOL classes.

- **Case study 2**

Mrs S and her husband rented a flat privately in 2013. They had to move to an area near the hospital where her husband was receiving treatment for diminishing eye-sight.

The landlord who had received the deposit personally for the flat refused to give the deposit back claiming that the deposit was with the estate agent. They approached the estate agent to find out that the agency was closed down.

The MEWSO assisted them to find out a solicitor acting on their behalf on reduced rate.

HEALTH RELATED WORKSHOPS AND SESSIONS

Women from Middle East usually are in charge of big families and are over engaged in providing food and cooking. Most traditional Middle East food are suitable for a rural community with high demand of calories for manual works. This diet is not suitable for urban living and has an adverse effect on the women with extra weight gain. Therefore, organising health related workshops and sessions are one of MEWSO priorities.

Furthermore, running families with many Middle Eastern men still denying their cooperation as considering it a woman's job, has also a detrimental effect on women with many of them suffering from stress.

MEWSO was successful to offer exercise sessions and swimming for women to help them build up the habit of regular exercise.

- **Fitness** - The exercises were suitable for all ages especially people over 50's. The sessions included drills for upper body, legs, thighs and knees. Many women from Middle East suffer from knee problems and we hoped to provide examples that they could do them at home, too. The drill also included breathing techniques. Thirty five sessions of exercise were delivered with music to uplift the mood of women and make it more enjoyable in the last year. Participants formed a new group that meet once a month for lunch after the completion of the project.
- **Swimming** -The swimming sessions took place during the summer when the weather was more agreeable. More than 10 women attended swimming once a week for 13 weeks at the Tottenham Green Leisure Centre. There were swimming coaches available for those who did not know how to swim to learn the skill.
- **Gardening** – We arranged 7 gardening sessions during the summer 2014 at the Broadwater community garden in North London. Women joined us as far as West London. They helped with different tasks at the centre and learned new skills, socialised and enjoyed the good weather. They had group lunch together after gardening, made new networks and avoid isolation.
- **Healthy eating workshop** – We ran two workshops focused on healthy eating providing information on calories intake, healthy cooking and new ways of cooking traditional meals with less fat. The

workshop also covered information on vitamins and minerals required for women and foods containing them.

- **Pilates** - We had 10 sessions of Pilates including relaxation techniques with more than 11 women attending each session.



BEFRIENDING

MEWSO's befriending project aims to help women who are feeling vulnerable and isolated. Our befrienders help their clients develop a network of friends, ensure they know where to find the support they need, and build their confidence for adjusting to a new life.

MEWSO offered Befriending to 8 isolated women helping them to learn about way of life in Greater London, British cultural heritage and practice their conversation in English. Our Befrienders also helped them to register for certain services and provisions such as joining a library. They have reported back a considerable reduction of their isolation.



- **Case study**

I started Befriending with Mrs. X in October 2014.

She was unable to leave her home often as she had a small child and had no one else to look after the child. She felt very isolated without the chance of finding new friends.

She also wanted to improve her English so that she could reach a level where she could apply to go to university to study electronics in 3-year time when her child starts school.

She had a professional job in her home country but her qualifications were not sufficient for her to obtain employment here.

Unfortunately, there was no childcare available to her. Although she was married, her husband was unwell and so unable to help with childcare. We arranged to visit museums in London where we could take the child with us and other public places such as South Bank Centre.

She improved greatly following our weekly meetings and felt less lonely with more positive outlook for life.

Other Activities

CRAFT SESSIONS

MEWSO organised the following sessions for women to learn new skills and socialise with new women:

- **Arts** – painting including collage and abstract, 2 sessions-
- **Sewing** – learning to make bags, scarves and hats, 2 sessions-
- **Paper flower making** – to learn making presents for festive seasons, 2 sessions-
- **Clay workshop** – making small statues with clay as therapeutic exercise

More than 10 women attended each session.



EVENTS

We organised a picnic in summer 2014 in Highbury Fields, 5 dinner party for our volunteers, staff and management committee members to know each other better and share their experiences together. MEWSO also organised a big party to celebrate the International Women's day at Hornsey. More than 100 people from different communities in the Middle East attended the event. There were speakers, singers and musicians from the region. There also childcare available in the attached nursery for those parents wishing to leave their children there. The evening continued with hot Middle Eastern food and group dancing at the end.



The event sparked the idea of organising a social club for elderly that is in the process of formation.

ONE-TO-ONE ENGLISH LEARNING

MEWSO offers one-to-one English for women who are not ready to access the main ESOL classes because either they are newly arrived in this country or do not feel confident to participate in mixed aged groups. This is an innovative way of teaching English, prepare them to take part in main stream provisions and build up their self-confidence.

- **Case Study**

The aim of working with R. was to improve her English. However I soon realized that working with a vulnerable client made the task of teaching a lot harder. In order to improve her English it was important to build her confidence. She was very reluctant to complete an English question without step-by-step encouragement. For example when spelling a word she needs confirmation that each letter is correct before continuing even though the majority of the time she is right. This makes writing a painfully slow process but the speed in which she writes has improved due to practice and increased confidence in her own abilities.

I found that I am not only relied upon to improve R's English but also develop her Math's skills, help fill out medical, travel and financial forms and improve her ICT and texting skills. R is an incredibly lonely woman who has had a difficult and distressing life and I have provided some much needed companionship for her. I would say that R has improved in her English language skills since I have been teaching her. However most importantly her confidence has definitely grown. This enables her to use the English she already knows (which is actually quite substantial although not necessarily evident at first). I hope that her experience with me will give her the assurance to venture further out into society and become less isolated from it.

AWARENESS RAISING FOR WOMEN AND YOUNG GIRLS

We worked with campaigners from the Middle East to prepare workshops and training aimed at women and young girls at school and colleges to raise their awareness about women and children's rights in Britain. The sessions provided information about services available to women and how to approach them. The sessions also challenged the traditional treatment of women in more conservative families and communities. It also shed light on the dangers of fundamentalism affecting women in the region. We arranged an interview for the campaigners with Amnesty International representative at MEWSO centre in Finsbury Park area. We also arranged information sessions for professionals and volunteers about Honour related crimes and female genital mutilation in the region.

Financial Statement

| MEWSO FINANCIAL STATEMENT 2014 - 2015 | |
|--|-------------------|
| <u>INCOME</u> | |
| Awards for All | 9960.00 |
| Comic Relief(Brought forward from Feb 14) | 10000.00 |
| FreeSport 1 | 1470.00 |
| FreeSport 2 | 1500.00 |
| Morris Charitable trust | 2000.00 |
| City Bridge | 2,500.00 |
| Cripplegate | 4,800.00 |
| Local Initiative Fund Islington | 765.00 |
| Goldsmiths Company | 2,000.00 |
| Donations | 300.00 |
| Total Incomes | 35,295.00 |
| <u>EXPENDITURE</u> | |
| Vol expenses | 3096.25 |
| Venue hire/Rent | 3700.00 |
| Facilities | 1900.00 |
| Venue hire/ sessions | 3549.18 |
| Tran exp | 2,550.75 |
| Publicity | 826.13 |
| Insurance | 479.44 |
| Refreshments | 1,005.37 |
| Stationery | 685.87 |
| Phone | 812.51 |
| Post | 442.33 |
| Workshops | 1655.04 |
| 8th March exp., not Incl. Venue | 1055.00 |
| Equipment | 2449.91 |
| legal fee | 437.5 |
| AGM Expenses | 380.6 |
| Sessional Worker fee | 4161.00 |
| Facilitators fee | 3900.00 |
| Salary | 1629.2 |
| Childcare | 2000 |
| TOTAL EXPENDITURE | £35,061.08 |



BALANCE

£233.92



The decision I took 25 years ago to devote my life to helping refugee women from the Middle East, first in Sweden and now here in London, has borne fruit. As a woman born in the Middle East, I have gained many valuable experiences, witnessed honour killings in my extended family and hometown, suffered injustice against women on a daily basis and lost many loved ones in the civil wars. It was not easy but I have learned to adjust to new environments and learned from others what I don't know. The outcome of all these years of experience is MEWSO. This organization wants to play a role in helping women in their journey from their own country to a completely unknown reality, towards a new life.

I believe that rebuilding lives involves improving and taking care of each other and every aspect of the daily issues. Most refugees find support from several organisations in a condition of emergency: at the very beginning when they arrive in England completely lost or when they are very physically and mentally ill. It is however very hard for them to find support once they are in a stable condition and no longer need extreme measures of support. This is when isolation and loneliness overwhelm them and they feel stuck, unable to react and risk falling back into depression and worse.

My ambition is for MEWSO to fill the gap in the provision of daily life services that help women to live their new lives, not simply to survive. We thus aim to engage with the many problems that refugee women are oppressed by, personal and social, as well as the issues that hit the society in a wider sense and prevent women from fully engaging in and feeling part of it. I do believe that engaging in several interrelated causes, while certainly requiring more energy and resources at first, is more effective than focusing on only one cause at the time. This was the idea at the origin of MEWSO: providing women with any possible support and trying to improve every aspect of their lives. While it is now acting on a small basis, I envision the expanding of MEWSO, and its services, to the whole of London and to every refugee woman despite her social, political and cultural belonging.

Halaleh Taheri

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MIDDLE EASTERN **WOMEN AND SOCIETY**
ORGANISATION

Rebuilding Lives!



Building stronger society by overcoming isolation and fragmentation within Middle Eastern and displaced women.



Breaking the silence surrounding domestic violence in the above communities by raising awareness about the rights and provisions available for women in the UK.



Encouraging inclusion and integration into the wider community by advice, workshops & professional assistance.



MEWSO

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