

MEWSO

Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation

ANNUAL REPORT

APRIL 2023 – MARCH 2024



Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation
**REBUILDING LIVES OF
VULNERABLE WOMEN**

www.mewso.org



Unity Amidst Adversity

This past year, has been filled with unprecedented cruelty towards women. Across the globe, violence against women has escalated, with a dramatic increase in femicide under the pretexts of 'honour' or 'Zina'. Systematic killings in regions such as Iran, Gaza, and Afghanistan further underscore the dire need for action.

This global crisis reverberates here in London, too, where rising poverty disproportionately affects women. It undermines their dignity and forces them into decisions and lifestyles detrimental to their health. It leads to behavioural challenges, strained relationships, destabilised families and places a burden on society that costs millions in resources.

The impact is evident in the women we serve. Through our advice services and workshops we've witnessed their struggles, where personal improvement is an uphill battle. Despite this, our dedicated team continues to provide hours of critical support to uplift these women, made possible only by the generosity of our funders, donors, and council grants. And, we are deeply grateful. Yet, it is clear, our current resources are not sufficient to meet growing demands.

A Call for Unity and Action

This year must be a year of unity – a coming together to support women and girls in need. We must pool resources, forge partnerships, and campaign for better living conditions for everyone in the country. Alone, our impact is limited; together, we can drive meaningful change.

We appeal to funders to increase their generosity, and call on partners and community members to join us in this vital mission. By working together, we can ensure that women and girls receive the support they need and deserve, fostering healthier families, stronger communities, and a better future for all.

Halaleh Taheri, **MEWSO** Founder & Executive Director

MEWSO is an organisation proudly run by and for women from across the Middle East, or of Middle Eastern backgrounds, all of whom bring their own lived experiences to their roles.

Our mission is to support and empower migrant women from Middle Eastern, North African, Asian, and other migrant communities, helping them grow into strong, independent individuals.

The lived experiences of our team mean they deeply understand the challenges faced by our service-users and they are uniquely positioned to provide accessible support, both linguistically and culturally.

As these women become increasingly self-reliant, use their own voices, speak their own truths and take control of their lives, their newly-found agency filters down to their children, their families and outward into their communities.

Many of our current facilitators were once service-users themselves. Now, having been empowered through **MEWSO**'s programmes, they are taking more of a lead in society, creating a cycle of strength, community and solidarity.

Issues Faced By Our Clients

- A lack of statutory support and services that meet the women's cultural needs.
- Structural inequalities and cultural barriers that can result in disadvantage, discrimination, abuse and even violence.
- Harmful cultural practices.
- Increased isolation and segregation.

Our Solutions To Their Problems

- Culturally-tailored advocacy and advice on abuse and welfare issues.
- Training professionals to be more culturally aware.
- Sharing knowledge within partnerships and coalitions.
- Campaigning to shift community attitudes and policy frameworks.
- Raising awareness of the rights of women and children.

The Results We Aim To Achieve

- Refugee-friendly VAWG policies.
- More community and directed statutory support.
- Early intervention.
- More respect for women within the community.
- Empowering women to advocate for themselves.
- Provide women with the skills and resources to live independent lives.

Desired Long Term Impact

- Women from our communities being safe, independent and having a share in equal opportunities.



Halaleh Taheri
Founder & Executive Director



Ellie Adams
FUNDRAISING & PROJECTS
MANAGER



Susie Samadi
ADVICE MANAGER
& Senior Advisor on Domestic
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Aman Zanoon
CAMPAIGNS MANAGER



Zahra Habri
SENIOR ADVISOR on
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Sodabeh Gashtasebi
SENIOR ADVISOR on Welfare &
LGBTQ+ Project Coordinator



Nabila Bouali
COMMUNITY OUTREACH
Coordinator



Audrey Thompson
COMMUNICATIONS Coordinator

MEET THE TEAM

300 women received individual advice, advocacy or counselling in a number of community languages

260 Refugees & Asylum Seekers

260 Required Housing Support

225 Required Welfare Support

181 Received Advice on Domestic Abuse

145 Had No Recourse to Public Funds

20 Identified as LGBTQ+

20 Additional Complex Family Issues
eg: polygamy, virginity issues, FGM

3 Number of Advisors,
All of Whom Work Part-Time

2 Number of Volunteers
Working With Advisors on Data Entry & Admin



English Conversation Classes

Every week, **MEWSO** held English Conversation classes for beginners and intermediate English speakers at Church Street Library. Each class regularly attracted 10-12 women a week who worked hard to improve their language skills that will ultimately help them integrate.

Cook & Eat Sessions

With the help of a professional cook, 25+ women came to learn how to continue to enjoy their traditional foods but using healthier ingredients and cooking methods, in this Community Healthy Cooking project.



Women's Circle

This social and wellness club provided fun activities that helped improve women's mood and emotional wellbeing, increase their social connections and their sense of community.

Throughout the year the women visited attractions such as Kew Gardens, the British Museum, the V&A, the Sky Garden, and they travelled on the Uber Thames Clipper to Greenwich.

When not out-and-about, they discussed issues of wellbeing, such as better hydration, healthy lifestyle habits, nutrition, natural therapies and relaxation techniques.



Managing Your Money

MEWSO held workshops teaching service-users budgeting skills they will use in everyday life.

The sessions looked at managing a bank account, how to understand utility and council tax bills, how the benefits system works and how to apply for Universal credit, disability and other benefits.



Walk, Talk ... and Picnic!

Our Walk & Talk sessions saw 18-20 women regularly meet up to walk in a number of London's royal parks, talk about issues that concerned them, finishing with a nice picnic and a sit down.



Kurdish Women's Advice Project

MEWSO held a number of events aimed at encouraging Kurdish women to integrate. Particularly Feyli women, a group within the Kurdish community, who rarely engage with statutory services.

The events included music and dance, cultural foods, manicures and massages, along with whatever advice and information they needed addressed.



English Conversation Classes

Two classes, one for beginners and one for intermediate English speakers to improve their English language skills in a fun and practical way, with women from similar backgrounds.



Yoga Workouts

Service-users took part in regular weekly classes to help build strength and flexibility, improving their body, mental health and their overall well-being.

Olive Club

The women decided where to meet, such as various local cafes or coffee shops, and what activities to do. They got advice on all kinds of subjects, such as education, welfare, beauty and health, and enjoyed a coffee and snacks. The socialising helped cement friendships and build community connections.



Food for Thought

Four targeted sessions, sponsored by Islington Council, as a way of informing women of their rights and what benefits were available to them, all while enjoying delicious Middle Eastern foods.

They encouraged local women-in-need to socialise, eat good food, and learn how the welfare system can work for them.

20 women identified as being a member of the LGBTQ+ community

14 were Asylum Seekers but now have indefinite leave to remain

3 were Asylum Seekers whose residency was still being processed

3 were British Citizens from Middle East, North African communities

1 part-time LGBTQ+ Advisor

MEWSO held a flourishing LGBTQ+ group, with a regular 12+ women coming together for a number of fun days out, events, and protests.

The group helped build friendships and connections within communities not always understanding or sympathetic to these women.

Several of the women joined **MEWSO** at Pride, and protested against the treatment of LGBTQ+ people, their friends and family, in Iran and other countries in the Middle East.

LGBTQ+ Hate Crime

MEWSO held an LGBTQ+ Hate Crime awareness event and invited Islington Council's Hate Crime officer to explain what exactly makes a crime a hate crime, the subtle forms it can take, and how to report it.

Many of the women shared their personal experiences and the differing reactions they received from the authorities and the public, good and bad.

From Beatings & Sexploitation to Safety

Nadia, from North Africa, had suffered many beatings from her mother and uncles, several so severe she was frequently admitted to hospital. At 19 she was married off to a man more than twice her age. He, too, abused her so she ran away and divorced him.

Sexploitation

Living on the streets, she was groomed by criminal gangs and sexually exploited. She fled again, travelled to Germany where she met the father of her child who also abused and beat her.

Asylum

When her son was two she managed to escape again, arrived in the UK and claimed asylum. She was desperate to stay and escape her old life, and that's when she found **MEWSO**.

We helped her write her statement to the Home Office detailing her life of abuse, violence, trafficking and sexploitation. And, eventually she was granted leave to remain. She still uses **MEWSO** services and activities for emotional support and help to integrate.

When Family Honour Becomes A Threat

Bahija sought asylum in London because her father threatened to kill her for the family 'honour'.

Her father had always been controlling, subjecting her to regular virginity tests to check her chastity. But when she fell in love with Sarim, he refused to allow them to marry. Then, she came to England to study. Sarim followed and they got married. When her father found out he threatened to kill them both.

For 13 years (six of them with **MEWSO**) Bahija applied for the right to stay because it was too dangerous for her to return home. Her mental health deteriorated and she was put on heavy medication.

Emergency Conference

Finally, we arranged to talk to the father and recorded the conversation. He screamed: "She destroyed my honour, in front of my brothers and my family. If she ever steps foot in this country again I will kill her and I will kill her bastard husband, too." It was clear proof that Bahija remained in serious danger.

With the new evidence, the Home Office granted Bahija and Sarim indefinite leave to remain, and we continue to support her, via our classes and activities, to help rebuild her life.

Asylum Must Be A Safe Place For Everyone

Khaila claimed asylum as a Trans woman escaping her home in the Middle East. She was placed in a hotel room-share with another woman, not with her life partner who was placed elsewhere.

Unfortunately, her room-mate came from a country and a culture that, similar to her own, is extremely prejudiced against gay and Trans people. When the room-mate discovered Khaila was Trans she became rude, aggressive, threatening and openly kept a large knife under her bed, in the mistaken belief that she was the one who needed protection.

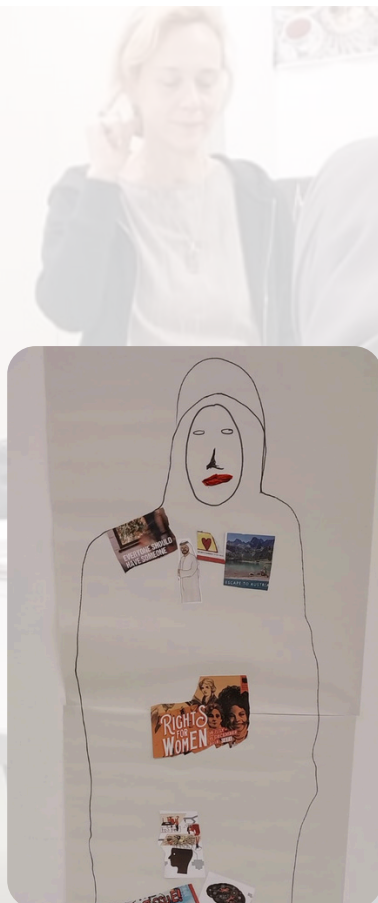
Khaila came to **MEWSO** for help and we petitioned the Home Office to get her moved, immediately. To prove the urgency of the situation, Khaila secretly took photographs of the knife in its hiding place and showed it to hotel staff.

Within days Khaila was re-housed to a safe hotel outside of London, and this time, happily, she was allowed to share it with her long-term partner, whom she had escaped the Middle East with.

POLYGAMY

97 women have been positively impacted by **MEWSO's** innovative three-year project into the practice of polygamy.

38 responded to our unique questionnaire.



Most of the women were victims of being lied to, or pressured into, a cultural practice that is illegal in the UK.

A supremely difficult to engage selection of women, **MEWSO's** outreach connections encouraged interaction through word of mouth, and offering bespoke services to fit their complex, multi-faceted needs.

Support

Developed in partnership with Greenwich University, **MEWSO** organised ice-breaker workshops and one-to-one interviews with the women. We provided emotional support, counselling and befriending services, and practical advice. Our holistic approach spanned the cultural, religious and socio-economic factors of being in a polygamous relationship. We also gathered important data to more fully understand the issue.

POLYGAMY

Right to Speak

The women came from several different countries: Iran, Algeria, Congo, Sudan, Libya, Morocco, Bulgaria and Tanzania, and taking part in the project they reported feeling trusted and secure for the first time. Slowly they recognised their right to speak, opened up about their experiences and acknowledged polygamy's impact on their emotions, their children and the dynamics within the family.

Transformation

We witnessed a significant increase in independence among the women, some found the courage to end relationships they felt trapped in, others discovered crucial support services. For many, their newfound knowledge and confidence was transformative.



Virginity Tests



In 2022, **MEWSO**, along with a coalition of sister organisations, was successful in getting virginity tests and hymenoplasty (the reconstruction of the hymen to fake virginity) made illegal.

In 2023, unfortunately, we continued to hear that the practice is still widely used and see girls and young women who are at risk. So, our campaign to stamp out the practice, within those communities where it is most prevalent, continues.

Raising Awareness Among Professionals

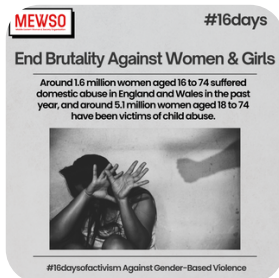
However, as well as giving advice to individual victims, we also created training packages about harmful culture practices to keep professionals up to speed. The packages explain the background to the customs, how to spot the signs that a girl or young woman may be at risk, and to be ready to protect her.

For example, we ran workshops, in person and online, on the trouble with the virginity industry, and dissected the myths that surround virginity tests, the huge pressure some parents place on girls and young women, with threats of abuse or worse, and the trauma they suffer as a result.

We also successfully created a network of women's organisations connected through our awareness training. The network, still small but important, not only helps identify new cases but positions **MEWSO** as an expert resource in communities.

These organisations now feel empowered to contact us when they encounter polygamy or virginity cases, ensuring a more comprehensive and supportive approach to addressing these issues.



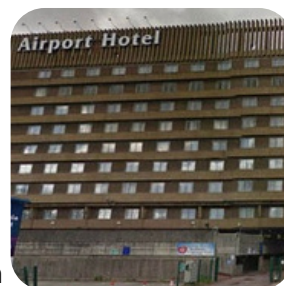


Every year, **MEWSO** holds workshops, posts and re-posts content on our social media channels and writes articles in our newsletter, championing the global **End Violence Against Women & Girls** (EVAWG) campaign.

We sign Open Letters and demonstrate in solidarity with those women's causes that directly impact our service-users, whether the issues affecting them are at home or abroad.

Refugees in London Hotels

In December 2023, **MEWSO** wrote an Open Letter to the Government to draw attention to the appalling conditions many refugees are being forced to live in in Heathrow Hotels. Many have been living in such conditions for several years.



Our outreach visits revealed women and children enduring prolonged neglect, trauma, and inadequate access to essential services; the erratic placement of minors, many of whom are now adults; cancer patients lacking medication; victims of domestic abuse with no help of protection, and little legal support to follow up their cases for residency.

MEWSO delivered several tranches of **Hardship Funds** on behalf of the London Boroughs of Hackney and Haringey. We gave over 40 one-off payments, of between £100 and £250, to undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who had No Recourse to Public Funds, lived in Hackney or Haringey, and were in desperate need.



In partnership with the BME Health Forum, we asked our service-users how they feel they are coping in an **'On The Breadline'** survey. Over the next two years we will continue to monitor their overall wellbeing.



We also held **Cancer Awareness** sessions for our service-users in partnership with RM Partners: West London Cancer Alliance, BME Health Forum and the NHS.

30 volunteers were actively on **MEWSO's** books. Many on standby helped out with events. Others supported our English Conversation classes as teaching assistants, supported advisors with data entry, acted as translators between clients and advisors and assisted the Executive Director with in several administrative tasks.

Awards Success



"My time at **MEWSO** was extremely rewarding. From supporting advisors in their highly-sensitive case work to preparing for events and running English Conversation classes. Every moment has been a growth-learning experience.

"My volunteering experiences and commitment to **MEWSO** enabled me to win 'Young Volunteer of the Year' at the Islington Volunteer of the Year Awards, 2023.

"I have now completed my English degree, and, with a positive statement from **MEWSO**, become a trainee primary school teacher, pursuing a PGC in Education."

Maryam

Zoe Coventry volunteered with **MEWSO** helping our service-users access the services of the three other charities she volunteered with. She collected food, clothing, bedding and children's toys and distributed them to our vulnerable women and asylum seekers. She described what she does as a "seven-days-a week commitment" that often sees her working "from 6am to 11pm". She said the situation facing many asylum seekers is "shocking". "Every day unfortunately, my eyes are opened to yet another family in crisis."

Zoe, too, was recognised at the Islington Volunteer of the Year Awards 2023, winning 'Volunteer of the Year'.

Quotes courtesy of the *Islington Tribune*, Friday 10 November, 2023



Our Volunteers Deserve All Our Thanks

"As a small organisation with limited resources, we deeply rely on the support of our incredible volunteers. Their passion for helping women in need is unmatched, and their dedication allows them to learn, grow, and refine their skills while making a meaningful impact.

"Our volunteers are the extended arms of our team, stepping in whenever we face an overwhelming number of requests. Their presence ensures that women seeking support do not have to wait long. They also get the opportunity to connect with other talented women in the community from whom they can learn and grow.

"Without our volunteers, managing the extensive work we do throughout the year would be nearly impossible. I sincerely thank each and every one of them for their tireless commitment. I know they enjoy being part of our team and find fulfilment in the work they do for the women we serve.

"Together, we are like a big family, helping one another and lifting each other up. Thank you for being an integral part of this journey."

Halaleh Taheri, Executive Director

"Our volunteers are active and dedicated and it's been great to see them blossom and go on to fulfil their ambitions. Five have found full time positions in further education or jobs where we provided them with statements about their volunteering. And our rewards system allowed them to enjoy various leisure activities for free as a bonus for the hours they put in volunteering with us."

Zahra, Habri, Senior Advisor and Volunteers Coordinator



MEWSO was awarded a Certificate of Achievement from Westminster Council's Communities Priorities Programme, 2023, celebrating meaningful community-led impact.



MEWSO won the London & South East England Prestige Award 2023 for Domestic Abuse Support NPO (nonprofit organisation) of the Year.

The judging panel based their decision on service excellence, innovative practices, value and ethical ways of working, and consistency of performance.

Shubbak Festival, the UK's largest festival of contemporary Arab culture, kindly offered 35 free tickets to our clients, staff and volunteers, to attend a variety of performances and concerts. Thank you.



Thank you to **Trieu Nails London** for offering a FREE three-hour Masterclass to seven of our clients. The Masterclass usually costs £1,155. The women learnt new skills for giving professional manicures and pedicures, and had a lesson in how to create their own business offering these services.

Thank You **Kew Gardens** for awarding us the prize of several tickets for our service-users to go visit its Christmas lights and botany displays. We were one of the prize draw winners in Kew's Community Access Scheme's annual feedback survey.



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City of Westminster



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