

**REBUILDING LIVES**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

APRIL 2022 – MARCH 2023



# **MEWSO**

**Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation**

Registered Charity Number:  
1150129

## MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER



The last year has brought many challenges to all of us. The cost-of-living crisis has affected women from our communities tremendously. Many found themselves experiencing food poverty and were increasingly exposed to domestic abuse in its various forms.

At **MEWS**o, we tried to do our best to support women and their families who were facing hardship and inequalities. We worked with funders and policy makers to influence change and bring positive outcomes for those most in need. Together, we continued to fight for justice and equality in order to improve the standards of living for women from ethnic minority communities.

This report highlights some of our activities throughout the year and demonstrate the impact of the relentless work of our team.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'H' followed by a series of loops and a horizontal line.

**Halaleh Taheri,**  
**Founder and Executive Director**

## ABOUT US

**MEWS**o supports Middle Eastern, North African and Asian migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women to rebuild their lives.

Our activities help women to reduce their dependency on families, spouses and partners, and empower them to take control for themselves. We offer domestic violence advocacy, welfare advice, wellbeing workshops and socialising activities. We campaign against inequalities and harmful practices and raise awareness on LGBTQ+ rights across our communities.

### The long-term impact

Women from our communities enjoy safety and equal opportunities and are able to take their own decisions

### The issues we tackle and the barriers to change

Lack of statutory support

Services don't meet women's needs

Structural inequalities leading to violence and abuse due to various barriers

Harmful cultural practices

Patriarchal society

### The results we aim to achieve

Migrant friendly VAGW policies

Women have resources to live independent lives and make their own decisions

Adequate statutory and community support is in place

Empowered women with knowledge and support systems to advocate for themselves

Early interventions to prevent problems escalating are available

Community attitudes are shifted to respect women and their rights

### Our solutions

Domestic abuse and welfare advice and advocacy

Strategic input and sharing knowledge across partnerships and coalitions

Community awareness and training for professionals about harmful practices

Campaigning for a shift of community attitudes and policy changes

## OUR TEAM

# MEWSO

Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation



**ZAHRA HABRI**  
*Senior Domestic  
Abuse Advisor*



**HALALEH TAHERI**  
*Founder and Executive  
Director*



**AMAN ZANOON**  
*Campaign Coordinator*



**AUDREY THOMPSON**  
*Communications Coordinator*



**LORIS KONAIZEH**  
*Volunteer Engagement &  
Programme Manager*



**NABILA BOUALI**  
*Community Outreach Coordinator*



**SODABEH GASHTASEBI**  
*Senior Welfare Advisor*



**SUSIE ARA**  
*Advice Manager*



**ELLIE ADAMS**  
*Fundraising & Project Manager*



## VOLUNTEERS



I love the fact that women can reach out for support without having to use interpreters. Having met the staff and other volunteers, I feel secure in the knowledge that they are in safe hands and will receive a high quality and professional service. I am also impressed by their influence and campaigning. They take the lived experiences of women from the Middle East, and tell their truth to those in power.

*Maria, Trustee*

volunteers supported MEWSo through teaching English, befriending, support with social media, administration, logo design, organising and facilitating events, research, translations and assisting our advisors.

# 29



To anyone thinking of volunteering with MEWSo – just go for it! Everyone is so lovely and sweet; you can communicate your preferred time and participation commitment so that you can be placed in the role that best suits your situation. MEWSo is a wonderful community to be a part of and the whole process since day one has gone smoothly.

*Yara, Social Media Volunteer*

I really cherish MEWSo's core objective of fighting for women's rights. As a woman with a South Asian background myself, I relate to the issues faced by Asian women and am glad to be able to help at a charity where my work makes a difference.

*Sanya, English Teacher Volunteer*



# 270

hours contributed in total by our volunteers

ADVICE

# 579

women received  
individual advice,  
advocacy and  
counselling in  
community languages



9 were survivors of FGM

55 were living in polygamous relationships



138 required support with housing

82 were seeking asylum

82 women had no recourse to public funds



242 needed welfare support

## ISLINGTON ACTIVITIES

### Olive Club

Our Advisor Zahra gathers women together on a regular basis for a range of activities that they decide on for themselves – from cooking and eating together to health and wellbeing sessions. All local women are welcome to join the fun. Our olive Club is also the place where women improve their knowledge about health and social services, how to do their weekly shopping on a limited budget, how to communicate efficiently with statutory services and business providers, make complaints, challenge decisions, and more.

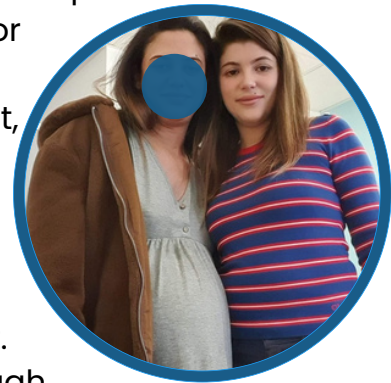
### Conversational English classes

Tailored to the needs of our clients, our Islington English classes are a fun and easy way to improve your spoken English.



### Samira: From Zero to Hero

Samira heard about **MEWS** through google search. When she spoke to our Senior Advisor Zahra for the first time, she was eight months pregnant, with no recourse to public funds and homeless after her partner left her when she became pregnant. She was married through Islamic law and her marriage was not recognised by the state. Zahra supported Samira to obtain shelter and later permanent accommodation. Through her relentless efforts, Samira was able to obtain several hardship grants to support herself and her newborn. A DNA test was done to prove he ex-partner was the father, a passport for the child was issued and now Samira is living in a one bedroomed-flat with her son, who is at nursery.





## WESTMINSTER ACTIVITIES

### Hot Meals

**MEWS**o was supported by Westminster Council to organise weekly hot and nutritious meals for women and children from Derry Hall. The sessions helped families to alleviate the stress from the cost-of-living crisis and gather for some fun time.



### Conversational English classes

Every Thursday migrant women gather at Derry Hall to practise their spoken English in a safe space.



### Outings and Wellbeing sessions

From trips to Kew Gardens, mindfulness and relaxation techniques, our regular classes support women's wellbeing and mental health.



### Financial Literacy classes

These classes supported women to gain new skills around household budgeting, welfare entitlements and more.



***"I joined MEWS*o this year because I love helping women.**

***To see women smiling, this is my reward."***

***Nabila, Westminster Outreach Coordinator***





## REBUILDING THE LIVES OF DISPLACED WOMEN

### Outreach in Hotels

Since April we have had an active presence in the Premier Inn hotel at Heathrow. We have so far met over 80 asylum seekers in urgent need of support. Next to the extreme financial hardship they face, they need legal advice (family advice around abuse and separation, immigration advice), translation, psychological support, social activities, and so on.

The needs of these women and their families are overwhelming and we are in the process of gathering a coalition of like-minded organisations to provide outreach help and support.

***"I really enjoy my work at MEWSo and feel really proud to work as one of the Senior Advisors as I can see the impact that the support makes to women's lives. It is even more inspirational to see women from marginalised communities, who are new to the country, establish themselves in the community and become more independent. I especially enjoy the journey each woman goes through from the minute she accesses our services right until she finishes, and how much hope MEWSo has given women."*** – Susie, Advice Manager



### Jamila: A Migrant's Story

Jamila was born in a small village in Afghanistan. At the age of 14 she was moved to a different village after an arranged marriage with someone 23 years her senior. Due to pregnancy complications she had to be taken by a car to a nearby town to receive medical treatment. Before getting into the car, she took her shoes off. ***"I thought this was the norm, to take off your shoes the same way you take them off before entering someone's home"***. Years later, Jamila's husband died shortly before the Taliban took over the country. Her son had been working as an interpreter for British troops and got help to come to the UK. He brought his wife, his sister and his mother, Jamila. We met Jamila when she was very isolated and knew nothing about this country. She was shy and hardly left her room. Her children persuaded her to attend our Conversational English classes so she gained some basic English skills. She even joined some of our trips to Kew Gardens. Our Advisor supported her in learning about our health and social care systems, and in socialising with other migrant women. Jamila has since been moved from a hotel into permanent accommodation but she is still in touch with the Advisor and attends some **MEWSo** classes online.

## LGBTQ+ SERVICES

Throughout the year we organised regular social activities for migrant women from the LGBTQ+ community. Many of them are refugees and asylum seekers. Many don't have a support network, or financial resources to travel across London and our regular groups are the only time when they meet other LGBTQ+ women from Middle Eastern background.



### Mina: An Experience of Bigotry

When she was 12, Mina kissed a girl in school and the headteacher informed her father. She had a strained relationship with her family from then on. Later, she moved to Tehran in the hope of being more free. She studied Biology at university and was living with her girlfriend on the student campus. At the end of the fourth year, the university learned that the two women were actually a couple and Mina was sent for psychological treatment. The therapist had to report back to the university the outcome after ten sessions. But by the third session, he advised her to leave the country. ***"You are a lesbian and you will live like a lesbian, there is nothing I can do."*** These words stayed with Mina and she decided to apply to do her Masters in Manchester, so she came to the UK on a student visa. Our LGBTQ+ advisor supported her with practicalities such as obtaining the necessary papers for a teaching qualification, finding a job and welfare benefits. Mina is now settled in London and working as a teaching assistant. She is happy as she doesn't need to hide her sexuality. She doesn't

have any contact with her parents.

Recently she heard that her girlfriend was forcefully married off in Tehran. Mina attends **MEWS**'s LGBTQ+ group and shares her positive journey with other women to give them hope and the strength to continue to be themselves.



# POLYGAMY SUPPORT

## Family Matters

**MEWS** partners with Greenwich University on an innovative project to develop bespoke services for women affected by the practice of polygamy.

So far, since the start of the project, we have reached 45 migrant women, who come from various countries including Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Bulgaria, Palestine, Morocco, Libya, Sudan, Congo and Tanzania.

We launched a questionnaire in English and Arabic that has been filled in by over 40 women when they had the chance to tell us what kind of support they hoped to get.

We conducted five individual interviews and delivered two storytelling workshops where the women, casually chatting, openly shared their experiences and discussed the effects of polygamy on their children and in the family home. A solicitor in Family Law was present to answer questions about women's rights when in polygamous relationships.


It was striking to see that every single woman who attended said she knew of at least one or two, and in some cases five, other women who are married to men who have more than one wife!



Even though the practice of polygamy, which is extremely harmful to most women, is illegal in the UK, there are still some 20,000 such relationships in Britain today.



**45** women in polygamous relationships supported



Throughout the year we delivered several training sessions for frontline professionals where we talked about harmful practices, including how to recognise signs of polygamy.



## END VIRGINITY MYTH

Following our successful campaign to ban virginity tests and hymen reconstructive surgeries in the UK, the Domestic Violence Bill has now been amended to recognise these practices as illegal. However, **MEWSO's** role does not end here. There is still much to be done across the voluntary and statutory sectors and within our traditional communities. We are steadily building a network of partners who recognise the issue – from the police and social services to colleges and voluntary sector partners.

We also submitted evidence to Parliament demonstrating that more action is needed to stamp out virginity testing if women and girls are to be properly protected from honour-based abuses. Our evidence explains the direct link between a "failed" virginity test (even though there is no scientific test that can definitively prove virginity) and honour-based abuses and killings.

We delivered several training sessions to raise awareness and build skills across the voluntary sector to meet the needs of girl survivors or those at risk from virginity testing.

The training explains the background of these customs and the communities where they are most common. Professionals will gain the confidence to challenge them and respond when girls are pressured to conform. The training can also impact an organisation's overall services, such as improving operational best practice and breaking down cultural misconceptions.



### New Office

We have relocated our Islington office! We are now based in the Andover Estate Community Centre, where we run our Olive Club, advice sessions and some workshops. You can find us at **Andover Estate Community Centre, 55-57 Corker Walk, Andover Estate, N7 7RY.**



## RECOGNITION

Our Executive Director Halaleh was nominated for a Mayor's Civic and Ben Kinsella Award at Islington Council's annual awards ceremony. ***"I have worked with so many good people for so many years in Islington, helping local women make the most of their lives here, it is such an honour to be nominated."***  
– Halaleh



Guilène Marco, **MEWSO's** Chair of Trustees, won the Pat Haynes Memorial Trustee of the Year Award from Voluntary Action Islington. She joined our Trustee Board in 2020 following her dream for London to become a 'sanctuary city' for migrant women. Since then, she has been leading our Board in a professional and inspiring manner.



A personal letter from the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to **MEWSO's** Executive Director, Halaleh Taheri, praises her and **MEWSO** for championing the rights of women and supporting migrant women traumatised by war and conflict.



***"I know you and your team have helped hundreds of women across our city, including by successfully fighting to get virginity testing and hymen reconstruction surgeries banned in the UK, raising awareness of women coerced into polygamous marriages, and providing advice and support to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing."***

– Sadiq Khan



## RAISE YOUR VOICE

Following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in Iran and the continued protests for women's freedom, we organised a conference in December, 2022, where over 80 women activists from across the Middle East told us about their experiences of living under oppressive regimes. We debated what we can do as individuals and collectively to support their fight for freedom.



We call for investigations and trials of everyone suspected of being responsible for heinous crimes against humanity.

We demand a boycott of all the cultural businesses related to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We discussed freedom of speech, freedom to wear the hijab or not, educating girls and the right of women to work, the abhorrent practise of honour killings, the routine arrest, rape and torture of women, and women's rights – such as they are – in different Islamic states.

**MEWS**o members have been regularly attending the protests in Trafalgar Square since the events. As part of our Raise Your Voice campaign, we have lined up some important activities to mark the one-year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Jina Amini at the hands of Iran's 'Morality Police' – follow our Newsletter for updates.



## PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS

We became a member of Westminster City Council's new Women's Safety Forum, which aims to target, prevent and reduce sexual assault, rape and harassment in the London borough. The group will be a sounding board to ensure collaboration between all of the Council's women's safety initiatives, which includes developing an ambitious Night Safety programme in the West End and other public spaces in Westminster.

As a grassroots leader, **MEWS**o was invited to organise focus groups where ethnic minority women from Haringey discussed barriers to accessing healthcare. The findings were published in a report by Haringey Healthwatch.

This year, we continued our partnerships with Islington and Hackney to distribute hardship payments to local women in need.

We continued to stay connected with partners across the boroughs, including DV commissioning groups, BAME Healthforum and more. We joined the national coalition Freedom From Torture, and continue to partner with the Sex Education Forum, Solidarity Knows No Borders and other coalitions towards ending violence against women and girls.

Among the various speeches delivered by our Executive Director throughout the year, she was invited to speak at the Rosa Foundation 2022 Conference. There, Halaleh spoke about how to use campaigning to change the law, from the view of **MEWS**o's success in getting virginity tests banned.



We continued to work with Islington and Westminster Councils who have generously supported many of our classes and group activities. We were chosen to deliver advice and engagement work for the Feyli women in Westminster – an innovative approach to bring community cohesion across the borough. We are excited to work again with the Community Priorities Team in Westminster who are supporting our classes at Derry Hall.

**THANK YOU**

# MEWSO

**Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation**

**We would  
like to thank  
all our funders,  
individual donors,  
partners, supporters,  
volunteers and members of  
staff, for their ongoing  
support and commitment  
to protecting women's rights  
and supporting women to  
thrive in London.**

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**Westminster Office Address  
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