In 2019, our Director, Halaleh Taheri, mobilized grassroots community leaders to take action and raise awareness on the realities of polygamous relationships. We worked with three grassroots organisations, supporting women from the communities where polygamy practices are most prevalent.

Finsbury Park: The Courage to Take Action

In Finsbury Park, MEWSo collaborated with a local Somali organization supporting women from Northern African backgrounds. In April 2019, we gathered ten women and encouraged them to share their experiences, self-identify their most pressing needs, as well as suggest how MEWSo and other support organizations could support them.

Almost all women shared they had insufficient knowledge on welfare and benefits entitlements, therefore no courage to change their situation, which increased their financial dependency.

It is common that women in financial dependency tend to bare domestic abuse for a long time. Indeed, Barkhado, a mother for four, and Salma1, who has a two-year old girl, bravely shared their story in front of the group that they suffered regular physical abuse by their husbands. And while for them violence was experienced first-hand, several of the rest admitted to know someone who has been in an abusive relationship for years as a first or second wife.

Participating women were also reluctant to leave an abusive relationship due to pressure from relatives not to bring shame to their families. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for women to be threatened by their husbands - from making them homeless with no financial support to threats of child abduction to countries where Islamic rules are embedded in law and in the favour of the father.

Despite the harsh realities our participants faced, during the workshop two courageous women, Ayaan and Faduma, expressed intentions to speak to their families and husbands about separation, or finding other alternative solutions.

What can community groups do to support women to take this big step? Next to the evident need of legal, financial and welfare advice, women like Ayaan and Faduma, Salma and Barkhado desperately need emotional support too: a safe space to reflect on the past and dream on the future; an empowering space to reminds them that they are free to take their own decisions; a peer space where women can turn for inspiration from peers who have already had the courage to take action.

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1 Names have been changed in order to protect participants' identities.
Westminster: “If I left him, where do I go?”

In May 2019, MEWSO and an Arabic organisation in Westminster co-organized a workshop in Church Street. 15 participants were invited to discuss how polygamy affects Arab women in Westminster. One woman was from Eritrea, one from Sudan, the rest had Syrian, Egyptian, Lebanese and Iraqi background.

The Middle East has always been a turbulent region, but especially after the Arab spring women have been put in a very vulnerable position when they are looking for male protection. As a consequence, there has been a rise in polygamous relationships across the region. The Islamic law allows men to have more than one wife, should they have the financial resources. Polygamy is seen as a sign of wealth and a good quality of life.

Throughout the discussion we noticed a common pattern: participants entered polygamous relationships predominantly in their countries of origin, only to be later reunited with their husbands in the UK. Rima arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker from Syria and was encouraged by her brothers to enter an Islamic marriage, the Nikah:

“I grew up with my cousins. We used to play outside as children, then we started going for a meal out or cinema on a Friday night. Here, I had only my two brothers. I was isolated and felt increasingly lonely. The Nikah was my option to bring normality and stability back in my life. But it didn’t reduce my loneliness. My husband travelled a lot for work, and I started feeling his absence even more after our child was born. I came to know about his other wife after looking at his phone. We are still together – a part time husband is better than no husband at all. If I left him, where do I go? Will my brothers accept me and my child back in our home, after bringing shame to the family? For how long will they be able to support and provide for us?” – Rima

Westminster: “It is a long-standing tradition”

For our second workshop we partnered with a Middle Eastern and North African group in Westminster. Polygamy in Morocco is still legal, but in 2004 the government imposed measures in an effort to reduce the practice. There are mandatory financial qualifications in order to marry a second wife. In addition, a husband must have written permission from his current wife before marrying a second wife; however, these measures can easily be manipulated, especially in a society where a man’s word and protection is deemed more important than a woman’s.

The group brought ten brave women together in discussion. While each woman had their own story of how they had entered the polygamous relationship, the present situations for eight of them – all young women, second wives, married through Nikah only - were all very similar: feelings of being trapped in dysfunctional (and often abusive) relationships; leaving their situation meant they need to seek welfare and legal advice; and several women put emotional support on the agenda, preferably mindfulness classes, rather than counselling.

However, Sheifa and Feiza, mature women with grown up children, experienced polygamy in a different way. They strongly disagreed with our quest to support women in polygamous relationships. Both Sheifa and Feiza were the legally recognized spouses of their husbands, and were aware that their husbands had other wives and children in their homeland. “Let things be the way they are. It’s a man’s issue, not ours. It is a long-standing tradition, after all”, concluded Sheifa.

Yet Selma’s story solidifies polygamy as much a woman’s issue as it is a man’s. Selma, one of the youngest women in the room, came to the UK on a temporary via, married through Nikah, hoping that
a civil marriage would follow. When her temporary visa expired, she became effectively illegal, with no access to public funds, and totally dependent on her husband. She now shares a house with family members, and her husband who is absent for long periods. With no access to public funds, she is fully dependant on him and his family. Dependency increases the chances of physical, financial and emotional abuse. Selma does not want to go back to Morocco, where she risks her child being taken away by her husband’s family.

Women in polygamous relationships are invisible to policy-makers and society, but their cases are complex and require institutional, legal, practical, and emotional support. Those women have limited civic rights (as a second wife), strong financial dependence and bear various types of abuse. There are currently no organisations in London providing specialised services for women in polygamous relationships.

During the workshops we gathered women who experienced polygamy first-hand to understand their needs better. We know now that those women need access to support around preparing for separation, divorce, court proceedings, welfare and housing advice, as well as emotional support and befriending services.