



## Rose Hill Insight Project

### Syrian Sisters Wellbeing Workshops



## Evaluation Report (March 2025)



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**Cover image:** Syrian Sisters discussing wellbeing and the challenges and benefits of parenting between cultures: the second session of our wellbeing workshops.

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## Introduction

The Sundial Centre for Education on Harmful Practices ('Sundial')<sup>1</sup> is an Oxford-based charity dedicated to ending harmful practices and abuse suffered by girls and women living in the Midlands and the south of the UK. These include (but are not limited to) female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA), early and forced marriage (EFM), female cosmetic genital surgery and online harm.

Our mission is to end these harmful practices affecting girls and women by:

- providing education for schools, communities and professionals
- offering technical expertise to frontline domestic abuse services
- supporting survivors with information
- empowering young people to champion initiatives against harmful practices through art
- conducting research with practical value.

This briefing relates to a series of workshops on wellbeing for the Syrian Sisters. Syrian Sisters was founded in 2016, with a mission to initiate programmes led by Syrian women that protect Syrian women and girls across socio-economic backgrounds and empower women to find their political voice. They aim to participate in building a new, peaceful Syria that respects and safeguards equal rights for all its citizens. They now welcome women and their families from all backgrounds, including refugees from Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, among others. All of the women attending our sessions have a history of displacement.

## The sessions

The purpose of these workshops was to engage with the women, and provide a safe and supportive space to explore 'well-being' in their particular cultural context. Between November 2024 and March 2025 we ran four workshops as follows:

|                           |          |              |
|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| Culture and mental health | 29/11/24 | 8 attendees  |
| Healthy children          | 31/1/25  | 12 attendees |
| Healthy relationships     | 14/2/25  | 11 attendees |
| Healthy self-esteem       | 7/3/25   | 13 attendees |

## Facilitation

The workshops were designed and run by Vania Martins (Facilitator and Domestic Abuse Specialist). Vania is a very experienced facilitator with significant front-line experience of working

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<sup>1</sup> Previously known as Oxford Against Cutting.

with culturally and ethnically diverse groups. Vania was supported by Co-facilitator Syrian Sisters' Founder, Nuha Abdo.

### **Planning**

The content and pace of the workshops was planned in advance with Nuha Abdo. The issue of building trust with an external facilitator and the need to address complex matters was discussed. It was agreed that we would start with an initial workshop with open and wider questions and at the end let the women decide if they would like to have the following workshops. It was also agreed to keep the workshop focused on mental wellbeing for two reasons: to keep the workshops as a positive environment and to provide a space for the women to discuss this aspect of their lives as this is not usually something discussed.

At the end of the initial workshop, and after a conversation between the coordinator and the group, we were informed the group would like to proceed with the remaining workshops. Times for future dates were agreed taking into consideration school holidays, religious celebrations and activities the group had already planned. Nuha reviewed all sessions to ensure the content was appropriate, and no amendments were made to the original design of the sessions.

### **Structure & content**

Each of the workshops was structured to include an icebreaker and 'check-in', for example:



For each session, a 'discussion agreement' was then introduced to set a respectful, non-judgmental tone. Careful boundaries were established around sharing information on oneself and others, and advice to keep the subject matter discussed within the women's group due to its potential sensitivity. It was emphasised that there is no obligation to speak and that anything said would be confidential. Support from one of the facilitators was on offer throughout.

During the sessions, a series of discussion activities were introduced, for example, a 'culture wheel' to prompt discussion around values and traditions, with questions such as 'why is family important?' or more in-depth exploration around ideas on parenting and the adaptation of cultures for diaspora communities. Facilitators checked in at the end of the sessions with everyone's wellbeing, asking about their planned weekend activities or making suggestions for self-care such as watching a

favourite movie or a show, yoga or gentle stretching or writing in a journal. Finally, verbal feedback was obtained from the attendees and group organiser/co-facilitator Nuha.

## **Discussion points and themes emerging**

A variety of discussion points and themes relating to culture and wellbeing emerged during the sessions, which we have summarised below.

### **Community was an extremely important theme running through many of the conversations.**

This included the importance of collective wellbeing, and recognition that in Syria their lives were very community based - living a lot 'in the street' and between each other's houses. Community is a central element of life. They cook together and when the winter is coming they all gather to prepare the food (canned food, pickles, jams, etc). When there are weddings, the whole community helps - they prepare the food, they help setting the home, they will also help financially. Weddings are the responsibility of the community not only family. Community spirit and recognition of interdependence is seen as essential so that families are not isolated, and "*we are all neighbours*". When there is a problem, everyone helps and when there's a celebration everyone comes together. There is gossip, but the women reported "*this can also be good because it is like therapy, there is good gossip, it is human nature. But respect is very important*".

**In response to the question 'What is mental health?',** the facilitator explained that this means looking after our emotions, feelings and thoughts. Culturally a notion of 'depression' is not much recognised, because women are busy looking after the family (children, spouse, in-laws, parents, etc) and supporting the community. Some of the women complained they have physical symptoms, but doctors keep telling them it is depression. They see their pain as not being taken seriously, though acknowledge the language barrier.

The women did, though, mention that they have no time for themselves - everything is about looking after the house and their families. This group is very important because it is their time to sit down, talk about life in their language and spend some time together. The importance of community for wellbeing was re-emphasised. They like to organise things together - during the summer they have picnics, they go to the city farm with the children, they will also have community celebrations. Being together, even if just for tea and chat, means a lot for their wellbeing.

**When discussing 'healthy children',** the women indicated that parenting can be quite challenging due to expectations at home and outside, creating tensions. These tensions also exist for the women with their own parents, as they need to justify how they are raising the grandchildren: there are conflicting intergenerational expectations. Educating children in Syria and in the UK is very different. In the UK, they feel, parental authority is challenged while in Syria it is not questioned. They recognise that there is always a generation gap between families, but here they need to deal not only with the generation gap but also with a cultural gap. There are other notions of respect that they need to incorporate. The women feel that sometimes their culture is misunderstood within the UK.

In terms of generational differences, there was specific mention of the use of hijab. Although many followers of Islam believe their faith does not require women to cover their hair for immediate family, the older generation still does this. There has also been a change within their own generation as some of them do not wear hijab. The women's children also tend to not wear hijab,

which grandparents and elders may see as disrespectful. There are also other conflicting cultural expectations, e.g. it is considered to be extremely disrespectful in Syria to cross your legs in front of your family and elders. Here it is very normal, so they had to adapt.

**In addition to this, the term ‘self-esteem’** was not directly translatable for the group, and an explanation in their own terms was needed. Following some initial difficulty in finding ‘good traits’ the facilitators gave a prompt, and the women produced the following about themselves and about each other:

|                                       |                           |                    |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Good mother</b>                    | <b>Good friend</b>        | <b>Responsible</b> |
| <b>Good cooker</b>                    | <b>Creative</b>           | <b>Reliable</b>    |
| <b>Good wife</b>                      | <b>Helping hand</b>       | <b>Beautiful</b>   |
| <b>Good housewife</b>                 | <b>Caring</b>             | <b>Leader</b>      |
| <b>Good daughter/ daughter-in-law</b> | <b>‘Makes the effort’</b> | <b>Supportive</b>  |
| <b>Good community member</b>          |                           | <b>Someone fun</b> |

It was agreed that having good self-esteem is important because *“if you trust yourself, you are happier and good to be around”*. In addition, it can also show your children that you are happy, as *“children don’t like when their mothers are sad”*.

The women **recognised that their sense of self-worth is connected to others**, particularly through motherhood, as being a good mum is very important. Also, being a good housewife, looking after your family is very important to feel valuable and *“bringing their share”* to their marriage makes them feel worthy although sometimes it is work that not everyone sees. They felt that a lot of things can impact their self-esteem, e.g., problems with children, their husbands, not speaking the language, *“not understanding things”*, *“not knowing how to do things”*. Also, they said it is hard to get compliments about what they are doing. Men and children tend to not compliment very often. The wider community can be better at doing that because women teach and interact with each other.

As so much of the women’s lives are around the family and the house, it is difficult to think about themselves or self-care and often a struggle to understand these notions. For example, several of the women watch TV after everyone has gone to bed and the house is clean. But they see that as ‘rest’ not as ‘me time’.

A lot was discussed around **societal expectations, and the ways that these are gendered, in particular in terms of reputation**. For example, there is a lot of pressure on girls to be ‘pure’. A girl that has a reputation of engaging with boys is considered not good for marriage. Things are a bit more open now but still it is of great importance that girls keep a good image not only for herself but also for the reputation of her family. Men do have more freedom, and being seen with women is not bad for them, but in certain situations this can also affect their reputation. A family would not

want to marry their girl with a man who has a 'bad reputation'. But communities are easier on men than on women, and it is easier to damage the reputation of a girl.

Once married, whatever the woman does will also reflect on the husband but what the man does also reflects on the woman. It also impacts the children. Community can gossip and exclude you, e.g., tell children to not play with 'that family'. Also, showing respect for your parents and grandparents and elderly in the community is important and shows they have raised a child well.

**A lot was also discussed about gendered roles.** For example, women have to cook well and look after the house and the children. A girl will be educated to do this because she is being prepared to have her own family from an early age. It is very important that girls know how to look after their homes in adult life. A man does not need to cook, he is also less involved in the children's lives, except for discipline, then he has the word but it is because husbands spend less time in the house. Also, because they earn the money, men can make decisions, but a respectful husband will make decisions together with his wife. Men who cannot provide for the family are often gossiped about, which can have a huge impact on the children. However, the reality of life in the UK also makes families have to work together when it comes to money.

**Relationships are perceived as different to other cultures,** because marriage is seen as not just about the man and woman. Marriage is more of a community undertaking and seen as a long-term project to build a life together and 'walk the same path'. Parents have a central role in choosing a partner, they either arrange it or if their child chooses someone, they have to accept it first - people cannot marry someone their parents do not approve of. Men are expected to provide for everything, and must be 'respected' so that families "*have a good life, make businesses, and have a good relationship with the community*". Women take on caring duties and work a lot but are not paid. Even if a woman works outside the house it is her money, because the man is the one that needs to provide. In the UK this is very difficult because of the cost of living. There has been generational change. Nowadays, girls go to university, they aim to have a career and earn their own money (but this will be her money). The older generation may not be as educated as the new one, so may work from home selling food or sewing.

**Further reflections** following discussion with our co-facilitator provided us with additional context. Firstly, there are many factors to consider, including whether women come from a village or a city, whether they studied in university or not, the family's education level, etc that will shape experiences, though there is generally an element of nostalgia when speaking about Syria. Views on gender and marriage differ from those in the UK, and there is thought to be a less 'economic view' of marriage than in some cultures. The importance of 'the collective' is essential to understand how marriages work because "*everyone is involved in everything*". Spaces for discussion are very important because they address themes women may not have thought about. Nuha is sure the women will talk with each other about self-esteem after the group, as sometimes they just need people to start those conversations.

## **Feedback and outcomes**

The opportunity for the women to step back a little and think about their own wellbeing was felt to be very positive, as usually all of the focus is about the family and the house. Feedback from the women and the organiser/co-facilitator reported that the women were "*very happy*" that we had run the sessions. Group organisers had long wanted to raise the issues covered themselves, but



*“it’s always easier with someone from the outside”*. Not being part of a community in the way they are used to at home is strange and that is why a space to be together here is so important. Discussions during the sessions were very open, showing the value of the safe environment that was created. In addition, there were more tangible benefits, such as helping to demystify the role of social services and how they can often help. In particular, as there were new arrivals to the UK that engaged with the group, it was really beneficial for them to hear about expectations in the UK on issues such as parenting, e.g., safeguarding expectations and legal limitations, such as being unable to discipline your children physically in the UK.

An important outcome from community group workshops is relationship-building and how this can feed into other groups in positive ways. For example, we have now been instrumental in introducing Syrian Sisters and recently arrived refugee women and girls through our work with a local ‘asylum hotel’, so that they can offer support to newcomers.

Of great importance to the women was the relationship they established with Sundial facilitator Vania Martins, which meant they can trust her and will listen to what she says. They were keen to have further workshops, and supportive of applying for other funding to continue the work. It was pointed out that the group opened up very well and enjoyed the conversation, particularly because *“it was well facilitated and gave them space to talk”*. These workshops:

- Add a new perspective to their activities to maintain social cohesion and avoid isolation. This is particularly important given their need for community and collective wellbeing.
- Provide guidance on navigating cultural differences and tensions that inevitably arise during their transition to life in the UK, where social structures are more individualized and can lead to isolation, e.g., understanding different expectations around gender roles and parenting.
- Provide a space for open discussion and emotional support. Whilst recognising that there is not really a notion of mental health and self-care as understood in the UK (particularly depression), mutual support within the group and these workshops has proven popular.
- Can adapt formats and different media to suit the women in ways that maintain their interest and make them feel comfortable. We learned, for example, that this might include showing curiosity about their culture; introducing popular television dramas to prompt discussion and having someone with language and cultural understanding to ‘translate’ terms like self-esteem.

Of utmost importance when aiming to work longer term with a group such as the Syrian Sisters is to take time to get to know the women and understand their needs. This means giving them the opportunity to choose aspects of the content (therefore co-producing), and adapting for cultural needs such as religious holidays. It is also important to invest time to build trust, for example, it was helpful for Vania Martins to attend group sessions to chat with women beforehand in an informal environment. She also attended their end-of-year party as she has become a familiar ‘friendly face’ to the group, leading to a better connection with the women.

**Moving forward**, we have secured funds to work in partnership with Syrian Sisters to deliver a further eight workshops sometime during 2025. The workshops will cover issues such as femininity and gender roles; more on healthy relationships; raising children; "honour" and abuse; and safety and support.

## Acknowledgements

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