

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION REPORT

well
together

SYRIAN SISTERS



INTRODUCTION

In May 2025, at Rose Hill Community Centre in Oxford, 5 women speaking Arabic and Kurdish met Jane Gallagher - a Community Capacity Builder from the Well Together programme - to talk about their experiences of Syrian Sisters. They discussed their engagement in the activities provided through the Syrian Sisters group, prompted by open questions. The following report summarises the main themes, supported by participant quotes.

THEME 1: FROM CLOSED DOORS TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The group participants spoke about how the groups has given them confidence, a reason to leave the house, and a lot of new friends.

"Coming here, we feel happier. We left our neighbourhoods behind, and we come here and we don't have a neighbourhood that understands us or our culture. Here, we meet people who speak our language, we can chat to each other, we tell stories, and we laugh - you can always hear us laughing and laughing!"

"Before we just stayed at home and we didn't go outside too much, here we can come and share our story. Mentally it helps us a lot. We are very stressed at home, and we come here and we get a positive energy, and we take that positive energy back home."



"I don't have family here, I didn't go out until I came here on Fridays."

"People who come here are from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, lots of other countries. I've been coming here for eight years. And we make friends – yeah, yeah, yeah! We come very new to this country, and we don't have any friends, but we come to Syrian Sisters and we make friends."

THEME 2: COMING HERE MAKES US HEALTHY AND GIVES US EXERCISE

The women spoke of how Syrian Sisters enables them to walk to the group, get some exercise and feel purposeful.

"When we come here, we walk here, and that helps us - going outside and doing this exercise helps."

"This exercise [Zumba] is fun. Coming here makes me have things to do and feel busy. All this stuff is helping, you know? I do more things, I go more places, I feel better."



THEME 3: COOKING MAKES US HAPPY!



Cooking is a big part of the group's heart, and they cook large meals, free of charge to anyone in the community who wants to come and eat.

"When we cook together here, we feel happy because we are giving something back. We come together and cook in the kitchen, and it helps us a lot."

"We cook, and we have coffee and we eat!"

"The best thing for me is seeing people, making a big lunch for a lot of people and then sitting together and eating. Giving food to people makes us very, very happy."



SYRIAN SISTER FOUNDER

HELPING PEOPLE TO FEEL SETTLED AND PART OF THE COMMUNITY

"The reason I started Syrian Sisters is because I'm a social worker, and I used to support refugees in my country of Syria. When I came here, I then knew how hard it is to be a refugee, it was real. Believe me, when I came here, I spent months crying, thinking, how am I going to make friends, how am I going to live in this country? I did speak a bit of the language, and I think about these women who don't go out, who don't have a job, who don't speak English, don't have friends, and, you know, the hijab is also a barrier, a cultural barrier. And I said, let's get started!"

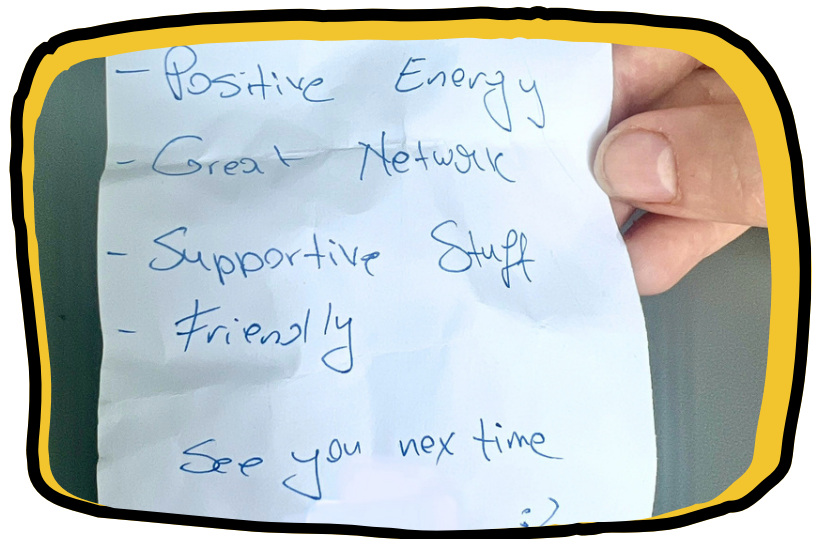
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Even at the beginning we had lots of women come, and we have had lots and lots of women coming over the last 8 years. We help the women get training, work experience, a lot of different types of support. We set up a project with the Pitt Rivers museum to help women to be trained and volunteer in the museum, and it was amazing. We did a driving theory test, help them with practicing interviews, practicing writing CVs, all the things you will need to settle in this country.

”



That's why I started this, that's why I think this group is needed. People come here and they feel more settled. It's the aim of this group to help people to feel more settled in this country, and I really want them to be part of the community.



“

We run our group every Friday, and every term we do something different. Sometimes we do Zumba, free community meals, sewing, craft, jewellery-making, lots more. We put a lot of energy into doing it. In summer we do a lot of activities for children and parents, families, every year we go to the seaside, and every year lots of the children are saying to me, “Nuha, have you booked it yet? Have you booked it yet?” It’s amazing.”





There is a lot of horrible stuff against people like me. I had a good chat with someone from Reform UK. I asked him what he aimed for, and he said he did not want any immigration. He said there are “too many people like you” now in this country. I said to him, but if there were no people like me, who would do all the hard work that people like me do?

A little while later he came back to me, and he said, “Did you say you were Kurdish?” and I said I was – and here said, “Hello” to me in Kurdish! I said that was very good, and asked him where he learned it. He said, “From my barber – he is Kurdish!” And I said “Ah ha!” He said, “You know, you are safe here, you have food on your table, you can stay with your children.” And I said, “I will stay – I’m British now, but I don’t just need food on my table, I need more than that.” It was a good chat, he was happy – he left happy!”

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WHEN THEY NEED IT

When Afghan women came, we did a lot of mentoring for them. When Ukrainian people came, we helped lots of them find jobs in our network, we have a very strong network. We refer people to counselling services, to mentoring services, to Citizen’s Advice, I know a lot of them and work with a lot of them. We build relationships with other groups and then some of them come to our groups and our women go to their groups.

We have a WhatsApp group, and people make friendships on there. One woman had a baby and she didn’t have any family or support, she couldn’t look after her baby, the ladies helped to take care of her baby. It’s how we live - because we don’t have family. One of the ladies didn’t have any benefits because of a mistake, and we were all supporting her. When food came, we said, “Take what you like, take what you need.”

3. CONCLUSION

The focus group discussion highlighted the ways that Syrian Sisters helps and supports refugees and immigrants to feel settled and part of their new community.



A place to get out the house, meet people and make friends



A chance to speak your language, feel understood and get support where needed



Opportunities to feel part of the community and to also give back to the community

Participants emphasised how the group has given them a place where they feel they belong, where other people understand what they might be going through and where support is mutual.

Well Together is delivered in partnership by OCVA and Community First Oxfordshire. The Programme is funded by the NHS Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board.



Community First
Oxfordshire



Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action



Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire
and Berkshire West
Integrated Care Board



To help us understand and communicate the impact of Well Together for the participants and attendees of funded activities, we have completed a series of focus group discussions. Each has been facilitated by the Well Together teams' Community Capacity Builders with the support of activity organisers / facilitators. The outputs of these focus groups sit alongside stories produced using storytelling methodology and data submitted through online forms.

The focus groups discussion were based around open questions like:

- What does it mean to you to be able to take part in this activity? / What does it mean to you be a part of this group?*
- What do you like about coming here? / What do you like about being a part of this group?*
- What do you get up to when you come here? / What do you get up to with this group?*

before moving on to more specific questions about the health inequalities / clinical areas that the groups are addressing through their activities (where appropriate) - such as:

- Have you found out more about health checks? / Do you know how to get a health check?*
- Has attending this activity encouraged you to eat more healthily? / What have you found out about eating well? / Have you changed what you eat since coming here?*
- Has your level of physical activity changed since coming here? / Have you been more active since coming here? / Do you move more since coming here?*

With thanks to everyone who has been involved!