

# AFRICAN WOMEN'S HEALTH GROUP (AWHG)

## June 2023-24 Annual Report

### Why We're Here

Set up and led by women from hard-to-reach communities in the deprived ward of Darnall, Attercliffe and wider areas in Sheffield who clubbed together three decades ago to formalise a self-help women's group where women were constantly asking for help, AWHG is a constituted voluntary sector charity governed by a voluntary Management Committee team composed of local women who themselves have faced challenges in finding their way through life.

Our geographic reach has expanded in recent years as isolated and disadvantaged women of *Black and Ethnic Minority* heritage, refugees and asylum-seekers who disproportionately experience poor health, housing issues, poverty and increasingly, anxiety, continue to find their ways to our door. Our aim is to provide much-needed health, welfare advice & advocacy, English, IT and vocational training alongside health & wellbeing services at a time of increasing poverty, depression and strife. Our aim is to:

- Reduce isolation, stigma towards single parenthood and discrimination by helping affected women strengthen social networks and confidence to become better integrated and active into their locality;
- Reach out, empower and equip disadvantaged women with advocacy, awareness and interpreting support, health, legal and practical tools to make informed decisions and take action;
- Address high levels of unemployment by providing basic skills, literacy, vocational training, childcare and homework support to help equip women and further generations of young people living in poverty, distress and despair with skills to achieve their full social, emotional, civic and employment potential.

### Our Service Users

As a self-help group, BAME women at AWHG support one another. Newcomers say news of our helping with personal, practical and quality support, particularly when women come in crisis situations, helps our reputation grow. Word also spreads about each woman who achieves a small success. As each newcomer sees how others have developed skills to move forward in life, we also serve as informal, collective role models.

A majority of women coming through our doors are unemployed or from low-income households in a district experiencing some of Britain's highest indices of deprivation. Most are from migrant or refugee communities and of Pakistani, Yemeni, Somali, Bangladeshi, Sudanese, Syrian, Ethiopian and increasingly, Kurdish heritage. Some women have limited educational and employment experiences, English language, IT and qualifications to navigate statutory services and gain work.

Most hear of our services by word-of-mouth. As all of us come from a position of shared experiences, we understand and support one another while each newcomer can see how other women have developed new skills and moved forward in life. In this sense, we provide ideal role models through our collective efforts.

Classes, workshops, health activities, preparations of refreshments, celebrations and outings help bond and build confidence amongst women who might have limited social networks to

which to turn at times of trouble. Some say that looking forward to joining in with group activities in itself improves their outlooks.

Women attending group sessions to share stories say that better peer networks also make learning experiences more sociable as learners meeting others in similar circumstances helps break down taboos of shame as learners start to rebuild lives. Our welcoming venue offers refreshments which women can help themselves as they please while meeting others in a safe space where they feel can come for help.

## Our Team

Some of our **Management Committee** of local Somali, Black, Syrian and Yemeni heritage women first came to us as service-users and volunteers. Our Management committee help support our day-to-day running, supervising and supporting workers, tutors and volunteers while encouraging former service-users to join in and help. We meet quarterly and invite newcomers to join us reviewing the progress of our projects, making sure we provide safe services and keep within budgets. Feedback from service-users, staff, tutors, volunteers and partners also help us identify new needs and think about how to help.

## Volunteers

**AWHG's volunteers** represent a range of cultures including Pakistani, Somali, Kurdish, Syrian, Yemeni and Sudanese heritage; many are single, most are parents of young children and their ages range from 23 to 49. In keeping with our self-help ethos, a majority are former clients and learners developing new skills and confidence in a safe space. Others are recently arrived refugees seeking to build on existing educational and work experience skills.

Bilingual volunteers with Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Urdu and Bengali community languages, to name a few, also serve as informal interpreters, even accompanying and supporting women at appointments while explaining how systems work. They help tutors and support learners in larger classes who need a bit of extra help. We offer hands-on' experience, help build capacity, demonstrates what women can achieve and empowers them with skills for employment; a cohort have attended Volunteer Training facilitated with *Sheffield College* which included certification in *Basic Safeguarding, First Aid, Health & Safety*.

While serving as role models for new clients and sharing insight from their own experiences, volunteers help facilitate our services from a perspective of lived experiences, understanding and empathy for each new client starting their own journeys.

We celebrate their achievements. Without them, our team would struggle and hidden needs amongst lonely, struggling and anxious BAME women and refugees might not receive the attention volunteers help provide.

## ESOL and Employability

AWHG starts in late June of each year to recruit, interview and register learners for each further academic year, ferrying women to and from Sheffield College, helping with form filling, translations and follow-ups to ensure each woman's papers are processed. *Sheffield College*, meanwhile, provides funds to cover venue hire and tutors who are also recruited by AWHG itself.

Sheffield College also provides funding for three Celta-qualified English as a Second Language (ESOL) teachers who run five levels of **ESOL classes attended by 90 BAME women**. AWHG staff recruit and support tutors and learners while volunteers help take registers, remind women to bring absence notes for GP or benefits appointments, and help students, in smaller groups, learn how to receive messages, homework, join classes online, take tests and receive updates via *WhatsApp* and *Google Classroom*. We also help facilitate elements of exams including video recording of speaking and listening skills, which culminate in an end-of-year celebration where learners are awarded what might be the first certificates they've ever earned in their lives!

Most learners are aged of 25-60 and of Pakistani, Libyan, Somali, Sudanese, Bangladeshi, Yemeni, Syrian, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Afghani, Iraqi and Turkish heritage - now joined by an influx of Kurdish heritage women. Classes offer a chance to get out of home and meet others which isolated women say improves their mental outlook. It also help knit together a community of women who go on to help one another out in times of need. While improving English skills to fill forms, speak with GPs, teachers and neighbours, most say they slowly gain confidence and skills to become more active, volunteer or attend vocational training for employment.

We also help each woman coming to our ESOL classes to prepare or update existing CVs to help search for work.

## Employability Training and Support

Most women attending our ESOL classes move up a level each year. Those achieving Level 1 qualifications often go on to attend courses at Sheffield College or one of our own 12-week cycles of *Level 1 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)* in **Childcare** training with tutor *Helen Haythorne* of local training organisation, *Red Tape*. We facilitate three cycles each year so that total of 30 women annually gain skills to support nurseries or join *Red Tape* Level 2 *Childcare* training for further qualifications as Nursery Workers. We also jointly run three 12-week cycles of Level 1 **Health & Social Care** training for a further 30 women yearly moving towards employment which fits around family caring timetables.

Twice weekly we also help women log into our centre laptops to search for work as Teaching Assistants and as Passenger Services Support Workers helping children with disabilities travel to school or day care centres, a role which has become particularly popular.

## IT Drop-in Sessions

Seemingly simple tasks such as booking a GP appointment or updating benefits information have transited online and become inaccessible for women with limited digital and English skills. Where complex issues cannot be resolved online, waiting times for telephone assistance can literally waste hours of staff and client time.

Our IT Drop-in sessions are therefore critical to helping 30 women via three 12-week-long sessions each year to take first steps towards surviving in a digitalized world. By helping each and every vulnerable learner gain skills to open up and write emails, access critical GP appointments, update Universal Credit information for benefits, undertake online energy price searches, each small but vital steps help disenfranchised women gain skills to better care for themselves.

In order to reach a wider group of women, from last autumn helped support women in our ESOL classes directly gain basic digital skills to access services, learning and job searches online.

## Informal Support for Young People

Even as we contemplated how to best help disenfranchised women coming to our doors, we have found an increasing number of young people out of school because of a lack of secondary school places or where families have become homeless and moved to neighbourhoods with limited school places.

Some say they are bored and in need of fresh activities. While connecting them to our weekend *Homework Club* to keep learning, we help them log-onto our Centre laptops and work through homework tasks during the week to help stay engaged and progress academically while awaiting new school places.

## Refreshments: The Best Part of it All!

Building on our *Welcoming Place* initiative ensuring women who don't bring refreshments when they attend classes daylong are fed with a minimum of sandwiches, our volunteer team continue prepare sandwiches and lay out fruit for visitors each morning and welcome women from a range of heritages to simply pop in and met others.

Newcomers sometimes cry as they speak of spending whole days alone when their children leave home or close the doors to their rooms. Some say there's no talking in their homes anymore. The chance to simply join in and talk, while sharing simple sandwiches, joining our Friday *Health & Wellbeing* and "Let's Talk" sessions and inviting friends who didn't know they could join in. Most recently, Afro-Caribbean women spent a morning with us, just talking and talking, sharing and enjoying with us while offering other women at our centre fresh opportunities to practice English language skills with new friends!

More than fifty sandwiches and fruit arrays disappear each day; some women head straight to our kitchen when they arrive. This informal *Breakfast-Lunch Club* is also particularly popular Wednesdays and Thursdays when 25-odd women visit mornings, and 25 more come in the afternoon.

Newcomers also say they feel safe coming for help at our women-only service as our own experiences reflect theirs. Empathy and understanding of how easily women can find themselves alone, and with no one to turn to, comes naturally as we've all faced similar challenges along the way.

## Advice and Advocacy Support

Where digitally skilled residents have skills to resolve benefits, housing, schooling and disability issues swiftly, women lacking such skills often arrive in crisis, penniless, homeless, without heating or electricity. Unable to read letters and respond without external support, it only at this point that they realize there is a problem.

As our work is directed by our principle of self-help, information and resources are shared to empower and embed learning amongst hard-to-reach women and their peer networks. While helping women navigate access to what sometimes seems like impenetrable institutions with fast-changing requirements, upon which they depend for their survival, we move quickly to address gaps in mainstream services affecting some of Sheffield's most vulnerable residents - often the first to feel the impact of socio-economic and cultural deprivation.

Timing is critical so we frequently remind service-users to come to us immediately when they receive letters they don't understand. Delays can mean women might find themselves without homes, food, benefits and help. Once alerted, we act swiftly to make sure each visitor get the help she needs before matters get worse.

That's why we help women as they come through the door, with or without appointments, be they single parents or older women, in deciphering energy bills, health, housing, caring, education and benefit systems pressuring them to repeatedly apply, and often be rejected, for one job after another.

Where court cases, immigration or specialist issues arise, we also help clients access *Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)* services by taking clients directly to their office at *The Circle*, a community building in central Sheffield which houses a range of voluntary groups, so as to help ensure they quickly get help.

## Case Study:

*A very young United Nations refugee arrived with her two young girls, pregnant and in temporary accommodation. Without family and friends to help she became quite helpless. She had to go into hospital but had no one to look after her children, take them to school and bring them back home. After coming home, she needed*

*time to heal so we came to help with food, help and respite. Soon, however, her landlady wanted her out and she was scheduled to become homeless.*

*She asked for help, and we pleaded with Sheffield Housing to negotiate her stay in situ until a suitable place became available.*

## **A Search for Employment**

Our Advocate and Volunteers also spend hours trying to help women with limited skills search for roles they can try to apply for, or even to get through to appropriate offices for clarification of what is realistically wanted of them. Where older women with limited English and digital skills have been directed to find work, it can be heartbreaking to watch women with medical issues which limit what they can do try again and again, only to be repeatedly rejected.

A few who have joined our ESOL classes and improved English language skills have managed to find cleaning jobs in schools but with others, with limited skillsets and physical restrictions, are repeatedly pressured to keep up what seems like hope-dashing efforts to find work. Some, unable to support their children single handed, say they feel like failures.

As poverty and distress are directly linked to poor physical and mental health, women with limited educations, employment, digital and English language skills also speak of feeling demoralised and distraught as they do their best to comply with a system into which they simply don't fit. As they struggle to find work, many experience severe anxiety and depression. Some simply come in and cry. Others confide they skip morning meals to ensure their children are properly fed.

## **School Issues**

Increasingly, over the last years, distraught woman come to ask us to accompany them to visit school teachers at our local secondary school where young men, in particular, are regularly put in detention, referred to GPs for diagnoses of learning or behavioural issues or excluded from school.

The schools now ask us to come along to help which means we find ourselves in school each week. Language is a barrier and often, where young people stop feeling welcome, confidence is broken.

Thankfully, we have now begun to build relationship with the school's Liaison Officer who has helped to intervene and put forward what parents are trying to explain so as to improve communication, ensure an independent voice is present and that accurate records are kept.

## **Health & Wellbeing**

Our Friday *Health & Wellbeing* sessions continue to grow in popularity even as newcomers from new cultural communities join in and enlarge networks of friendship, support and comfort. As face-to-face services transit online, we have seen an increase in isolation, anxiety and depression have also substantially increased. Therefore, the *Health & Wellbeing* sessions have helped to support women with this.

## **Friday Fitness Sessions & Medical Student Health Talks**

Thanks to *Elena*, our fabulous fitness tutor who cheers up any room she enters, an average of 20 BAME women join us each week for free, gentle fitness classes. While they try to keep fit and maintain good health, they also say it offers a rare moment to find peace of mind for a short hour each week and keep worries briefly at bay.

Classes offer a rare chance to socialise so chances are, a visitor to our classes will be greeted by waves of laughter!

### Listening and Sharing Craft Sessions

As direct conversations about poor mental outlooks continue to be socially taboo in some of our cultural networks, a craft collective provides a vehicle for women, unlikely to engage in formal 'therapy', to simply come together and share experiences.

As women struggle to keep families afloat, a growing number report their GP have put them on anti-depressants. Our creative sharing sessions, facilitated by a qualified and experienced BAME community counselor, therefore help women develop collective strategies to address anxiety, stress and depression.

Our counselor might also offer quiet follow-on sessions where a woman joining our group is in need of further one-to-one and confidential support.

Our 'light touch' approach offers an alternative to oversubscribed mainstream mental health services which are rarely available in community languages and might lack insights into the cultures, social expectations and needs of women from marginalised cultural communities.

Feedback suggests that women coming together to reflect, share trauma and solutions results in collective brighter outlooks at times of financial and emotional crisis. Many say that just getting out of home and joining activities or sharing tips on taking better care of themselves and their families makes a huge difference.

## Case Study

*A woman dropped into our session on Friday and couldn't stop talking. She talks to everyone who comes in, explaining that it's a relief to meet us all after spending days of the week at home, alone in her sitting room, though she has four children at home who all sit in their rooms with doors shut.*

*In addition to joining our Fitness and Circle sessions, she spends the day with us on Fridays and pops in from time to time in the week just to meet with other women!*

## Sewing Sessions

Thanks to *Sheffield City Council* who enabled us to purchase a further four sewing machines, half a dozen women join us each week to share skills, socialize, design, repair and make clothes. While extending the life of textiles and household goods at a time of financial distress, sessions also encourage us to care for what we have and improve our skills for a more sustainable future.

## Family Activities

We brought whole households together this summer while picking litter on our streets and later, sharing refreshments back at our centre. Sessions were run in partnership with Sheffield City Council as were workshops, supported by our volunteers, helping 20+ children aged 5-11 to design, paint and create crafts.

As we listen, support and encourage women who might feel on the edge of a breakdown. It's worse when they have come from war zones, faced trauma, displacement and socio-economic isolation. Inviting them to join us for their first ever outings to the Peak District,

where most women don't have transport, resources or knowledge what exists out there makes it really special. We walk, picnic and are often greeted by fellow walkers calling out to cheer us on and make us feel welcome. Some say these outings have been the best thing they've done for years and that they feel like a cloud has been lifted.

Given the popularity of holiday activities which build on walks and annual Peak District outings for families, we hope to increase our offering of holiday activities for young people, particularly those who are out of school and can benefit from further skill-building, learning and social connection.

## Homework Club

Thanks to Sheffield City Council who stepped in when longstanding funding from *BBC Children in Needs* finally came to an end, we have been able to carry on supporting 30 young people aged 11-16, with three hours of GCSE-level Maths and English each Sunday morning.

Our *Weekend Homework Club* has now run for more than 25 years! It is particularly helpful for households where parents have limited English language, educational experiences and increasingly, where young people find they have no school places.

Many in these situations lack day-to-day structure in their lives, social networks and learning links to keep them on track so we also support them during the school week when they come to our Centre.

For weekend sessions, we interview each young person joining, listen to their personal, academic, emotional and home experiences as we try to gauge how best to help. Our approach to teaching is shaped by each child's needs. As time goes by, we learn through class feedback, parents and one-to-one conversations arising at breaks about further hidden needs which young people are embarrassed to talk about. We also ask young people about workshop topics they would like to explore.

We provide refreshments at the start and break-time of each Club session to help make learning more sociable; pauses to meet, share and break down stigmas where students might feel embarrassed by school failure and afraid ask for help. Attempts to address poor academic achievements otherwise come late and parents, lacking skills and financial resources to help, feel helpless. Those left behind by age 11 have a mountain to climb, do not know where to turn for help and often feel the future is bleak.

**More than just Academics ....** As we build trust with young people who might feel they have no one to confide in at times of distress, stories of bullying often emerge. After years of shame, fear and isolation, some discover others share similar experiences and visibly become more confident. A lack of motivation and emotional withdrawal slowly melts as kids share with peers and start taking an active interest in learning, speaking out in class for the first time ever!

Four qualified Maths and English tutors run our three-hourly term-time sessions and are supported by an Administrator who manages our class registers, photocopies worksheets, tests and organise termly parent-tutor reviews resources to support children struggling at school.

Volunteers who themselves have attended our Homework Club, some of whom now work as lab technicians in local hospitals, in IT and analytical sciences, have become models for a further generation who come with low educational aspirations.

Talks from former students who are the first in their families to find their way through educational systems, are inspirational to young learners who start believing that they too can go on to gain degrees and make informed choices while enable them to work in sectors which inspire them.

Celebrations are also key to recognising each learner's achievements. While inspiring generations, who's parents have often not completed secondary school, to aim high, we continue to share learning via peer role modeling, with our own staff team, volunteers and Management members demonstrating how each of us can take small steps and keep going until we do things we never imagined possible.

## Partnerships and Sharing with Wider Networks

Many of our clients are elderly, have mental or physical health issues and need help to access basic services that are fast migrating online. As services close and civic funding pots shrink, we have been overwhelmed by an increased demand for help.

Thankfully, given financial constraints, partnership programmes have helped us diversify our services, trial new activities and help women and families with nowhere to turn. They also offer a conduit for conversations with organisations tackling similar social challenges while ensuring we enhance, rather than duplicate our work.

*Sheffield College* funds our ESOL classes while *Sheffield City Council's Skills for Life* funds *Red Tape* who provide tutors for our Level 1 introductory courses in *Health & Social Care* and *Childcare*. *Community Wellness Service Group* also helped us source a fitness tutor who runs sessions as part of our Friday Wellbeing programme.

We regularly take or signpost clients to *Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)* while *Sacmha's* Corrie Moss, now a management member, invites women to visit *Darnall Community Allotments* who share food growing strategies, plants, gardening gloves, trowels, seeds and more. Corrie also facilitates healthy eating, crafts, aromatherapy and fitness sessions to help children and women improve wellbeing.

Local schools continue to signpost young people struggling with academics' while *Sheffield City Council* has linked up to trial family rubbish-picking initiatives and holiday activities for young people. We look forward to building on such links to help a younger generation continue to achieve!

*Voluntary Action Sheffield* facilitates key community engagement hubs and while our participation in *Sheffield City Council Partnership Board*, where we shared learning about some of Britain's hardest-to-reach BAME communities and consider linked up strategies for community, statutory and mainstream services was paused this summer when our Chair, *David Blunkett*, retired, our Chair continues to represent excluded voices via *South Yorkshire Community Foundation's* grants panel which considers the value of projects seeking resources.

## Our Work is made possible thanks to the following funders:

Special thanks to the *Big Lottery*, our anchor for many years, who have enabled us to keep funding our p/t staff, volunteers, core overheads, IT Drop-ins and elements of our Health & Wellbeing programme.

*Sheffield City Council* has enabled us to continue facilitating our sought-after **Homework Club** where young people aged 11-16 can re-gain confidence, build friendships, practical and academic skills to ensure their continued engagement and success at school and beyond.

*Sheffield City Council's Skills for Life* programme also indirectly funds *Childcare* and *Health & Social Care* classes at our centre which are managed by the wonderful *Red Tape* team. Enabling local women to achieve gives faith to everyone and reminds us that we can all improve our lives!

*Sheffield City Council's* small grant has thankfully enabled us to continue facilitate sewing sessions with socio-culturally isolated women who can come together to sew, with help from our wonderful sewing tutor, while meeting one another, connecting, mending clothes and household items at a time of stretched resources, while improving English language skills, gaining confidence and gaining transferable skills for employment.

Many thanks are also due to *Sheffield College* who fund our ESOL classes.

## **Volunteers and Sessional Staff:**

Thanks is also due to *Asiya Dull*, who helps particularly vulnerable women take first steps towards navigating a world of online communications; our qualified and experienced community counsellor, *Samira Siddiqi*, for facilitating weekly craft activities knitting together 60 women yearly to share strategies for tackling anxiety, depression and building resilience at times of trauma. Our *Fitness Tutor, Elena*, formidable *Sewing Tutor, Niyam Mohamed*, who supports women in repairing, designing and making clothes, textiles and domestic goods, *Freelance Welfare Advisor, Maryam Ali*, who steps in, as needed, to support women in crisis and to our **Weekend Homework Club Team** including Maths tutors, *Showkat Mahmud* and *Hassan Iqbal*, as well as English tutors, *Sonia Bhatia* and *Natasha Ashley* who help our young people thrive!

Last, but not least, our volunteers, Management Committee members and all the wonderful women who make our services vibrant make all our efforts rewarding.

We look forward to each and every one rising to achieve further untold things!

AFRICAN WOMEN'S HEALTH GROUP

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2024

AZIM & WAKAS  
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**AFRICAN WOMEN'S HEALTH GROUP**  
**RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS ACCOUNTS**  
**FOR THE YEAR ENDING 30.06.2024**

	£	£ Total
Balance B/F 01.07.2023		124
<b><u>Grants Received (Restricted)</u></b>		
Sheffield City Council	10500	
Sheffield Yorkshire Community	9870	
Main Grants	50968	
Community Organisation	23293	
Sheffield College	9300	
		<u>103931</u>
		<b>104055</b>
<b><u>Payments</u></b>		
Salaries	31861	
Seasonal Workers	10765	
Admin Workers	5845	
HMRC-Paye	4103	
Creche Workers	2510	
Outreach Support Workers	1385	
Project Support	2865	
Consultancy Fees	4663	
Voluntary Action Sheffield	149	
Voluntary Expenses	650	
Event Activities, Food and Health Workshop	1180	
Insurance	650	
Bank Charges	81	
Premises Rent	9570	
Community Wellness	992	
Telephone & Internet	226	
College Fees	450	
Travel & Refreshments Cost	2685	
Stationary & Equipment Purchase	3060	
Repairs	40	
Accountancy	500	
Misc		
<b>Total Expenses</b>		<b>84229</b>
Restricted Funds Available As At 30.06.2024		<u><u>19826</u></u>
<b>BALANCE AT BANK 30.06.2024</b>		<b>19826</b>
Less: Cheques presented after date		<u>0</u>
		<u><u>19826</u></u>

ACCOUNTANT'S REPORT

In connection with my examination, no material matters have come to my attention which gives me cause to believe that in any material respect the accounting records were not kept in accordance with section 130 of the Charities Act or the accounts did not accord with the accounting records or accounts did not comply with the applicable requirements concerning the form and content of accounts set out in the Charities Regulations 2008 other than any requirement that the accounts give a true and fair view which is not a matter considered as part of an independent examination.

I have come across no other matters in connection with the examination to which attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.


Azim & Wakas  
Chartered Certified Accountants  
537 Abbeydale Road  
Sheffield S7 1FU



CLIENT'S APPROVAL

I approve these financial statements and confirm that I have made available all relevant records and information for their preparation.

Committee member A. Mohamed ..... Dated 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2024 .

Committee member  ..... Dated 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2024