

ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023



AFGHAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION
REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT SERVICES

BUILDING INCLUSIVE FUTURES:
STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS, BREAKING
ISOLATION

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We commence by acknowledging that the locations in which many of us reside, work, and convene, including the digital infrastructure facilitating our activities, are situated on the ancestral lands of Indigenous nations. We extend our acknowledgment that our offices in the Greater Toronto Area and Peel Region are situated on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, Haudenosaunee, the Chippewa and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River, whose presence on this land spans time immemorial.

We deeply respect the enduring connection and historic ties that Indigenous Peoples have with this land, irrespective of our diverse origins and settlement histories. As Canadians, and as newcomers to this land, we collectively bear the responsibility of fostering respectful relationships with Indigenous communities.

We commit to continue to learn about contributions, and ongoing struggles of Indigenous peoples, including the deep, systemic and ongoing violence they continue to face. We acknowledge our responsibility and re-affirm our commitment to working towards the truth and reconciliation process as allies, while continuing to respect and protect this land we now call home.





MESSAGES FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

As we reflect upon the past year, I am deeply honoured to share the remarkable achievements of our organization with you. Your unwavering support has served as the bedrock of our success in making a profound impact on the lives of refugees and immigrants in Canada. This annual report encapsulates the tireless dedication of our staff, board and volunteers and the transformative power of your generous donations.

Over the past year, our Board has devoted tireless efforts to transition our organization under the new Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act. This endeavor involved a comprehensive review of our constating documents and the drafting of new by-laws to ensure our compliance with the new legal framework. Concurrently, our Board has taken significant steps to update and develop various policies, including our Human Resources Policy.

The unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine have continued to cast their shadow on families seeking refuge in Canada. Our organization has been relentless in addressing these issues and offering support to those affected. We have strived to provide a support and hope to vulnerable communities in their journey towards a new life in Canada.

One area of focus for our advocacy efforts was Bill C-41, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and to make consequential amendments to other Acts. This was proposed in the House of Commons in March 2023 in response to the concerns that anti-terrorism provisions in Canada's Criminal Code were hindering the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan. As part of our advocacy efforts, we were invited to appear before the Senate Committee on Human Rights which was tasked with studying the Bill. We were grateful for the opportunity to advocate for effective humanitarian aid solutions and contribute our expertise to discussions that directly impact the lives of people in crisis-affected areas.

The effectiveness of our work would not have been possible without your generous donations. Your contributions have not only transformed the lives of refugees but have also played a pivotal role in advancing our organization's mission. Your support has facilitated refugee settlement and success, providing essential resources and opportunities to those in need.

Looking forward, we remain committed to our vision of creating a world where refugees and immigrants can thrive and find hope in their new home. We are excited about the journey that lies ahead and the positive impact we can make together. Thank you for being an integral part of our mission. We eagerly anticipate another year of working hand in hand with you to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most.

Asma Faizi
AWO Board President



MESSAGES FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

This year was characterized by significant global events and a multitude of local challenges, which had profound effects on the communities we serve in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Peel Region. As an organization dedicated to assisting newcomers and refugees, we were profoundly impacted by the displacement and suffering experienced by countless families in Ukraine, the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, conflicts in Somalia, earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and overall instability in the region.

For many of our community members, particularly those with family members and loved ones in their home countries, each passing day brought growing uncertainty and anxiety. Our newly arrived and newcomer communities, many of who come to Canada after years of displacement from war-torn regions and refugee backgrounds, were among the most marginalized and severely affected by the rising cost of living, housing shortages, and food insecurity.

To address these global and local challenges, we intensified our efforts to enable and empower our clients to rebuild their lives and successfully settle in their new homes. We worked diligently alongside our various donors to provide additional wrap-around support, with a strong focus on employment readiness, mental health and wellness, food delivery, and programming for mothers, families, youth, and our seniors.

Over the past year, we received invaluable support from partners such as the United Way Greater Toronto, the Hilary and Galen Weston Foundation, the Region of Peel, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, all of which bolstered our organizational capacity and allowed us to develop innovative programs. As our initiatives thrived, we expanded our services in mental health, crisis counseling, employment readiness, and support for seniors, mothers, and families. Additionally, we enhanced our Community Food Hut initiative to address food security issues and advocated for solutions to the challenges posed by the cost of living and housing.

I wish to acknowledge the unwavering support and strong collaborations with partners such as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), the Region of Peel, and the Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH) Association.

Our numerous achievements are without a doubt also a testament to the incredible dedication of our staff and volunteers, and the steadfast support of our community members, funders, and donors. Without your collective commitment, none of our work would be possible.

Looking forward, we remain resolute in our mission to provide essential services and comprehensive support to those seeking a brighter future in Canada while continuing our efforts to build a more inclusive, supportive, and compassionate society. Thank you for your ongoing support and belief in the mission of the Afghan Women's Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services.

Adeena Niazi
AWO Executive Director

ABOUT AWO

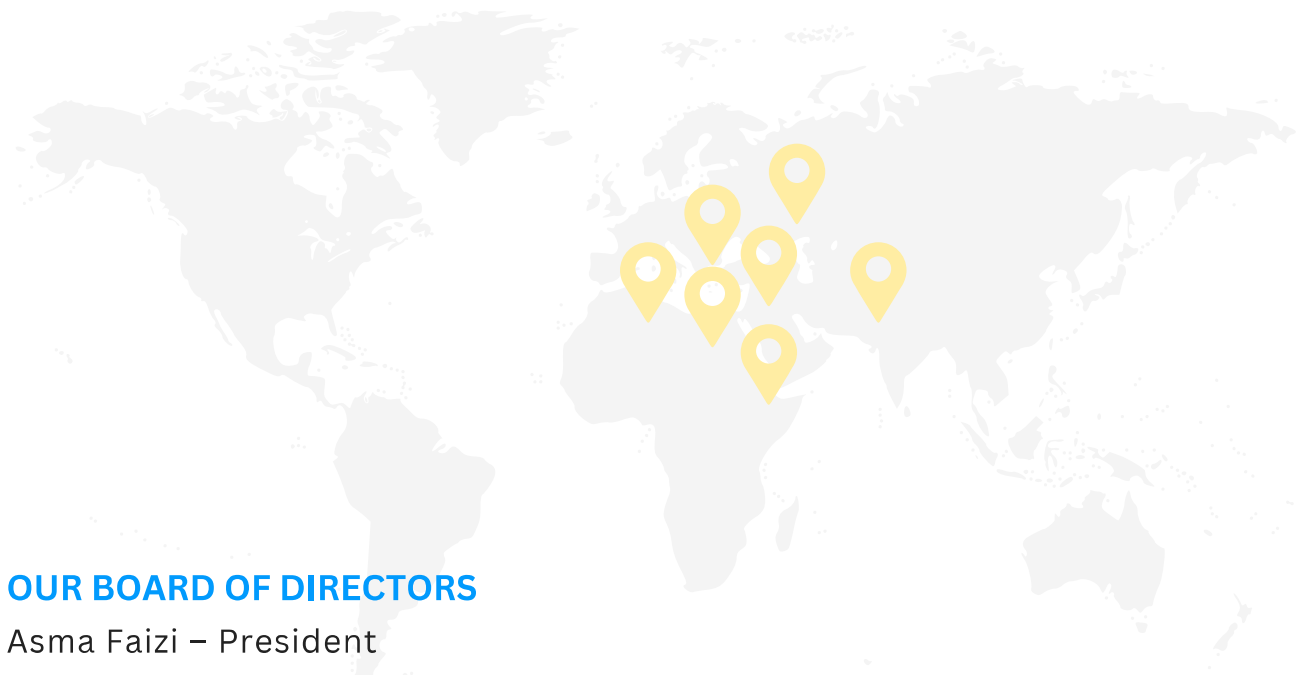
Founded in 1990, the Afghan Women's Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services (AWO) provides settlement and integration services to newly arrived refugee and newcomer communities throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Peel Region.

The majority of our clients are women and their children who have escaped war, persecution and displacement from their home countries. They face multiple and intersectional socioeconomic barriers during their settlement journey. AWO's unique contribution lies in the provision of gender-sensitive, culturally competent, and linguistically appropriate services. These services play a crucial role in fostering safety, creating a sense of belonging and enabling clients to realize their full potential here in Canada.



We serve all newly arrived and newcomer communities, however our clients come mainly from the regions of **Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa**. Our services are delivered in **Arabic, Dari, English, Kurdish, Pashto, Persian, Somali, Ukrainian and Urdu**.

Each year, we deliver over 90,000 direct services through our trauma-informed, client-focused programs. These initiatives extend beyond addressing settlement needs and Language Instruction, and include holistic mental health and wellness supports, youth and seniors programs, art-based and cultural initiatives, along with wrap around services.



OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Asma Faizi – President
Beheshta Jaghori – Vice President
Huria Jalalzai – Treasurer
Zohra Safi
Sheba Shernanze
Hakeema Mashal Sidiqi
Nasimeh Bayat
Kobra Rasul
Abeda Baluch
Parween Pazhwak
Mashaël Mohammadi



OUR VISION

Refugees and immigrants, especially those who have experienced wars and persecution and those who are marginalized, leading self-sufficient and dignified lives in a socially inclusive society.

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to improve the quality of life of refugees and immigrants, to promote their social and economic inclusion, and empower them to become contributing members of society and live in dignity.

OUR VALUES

Gender equality; access and equity; dignity and respect; social inclusion; and economic empowerment.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

To promote greater social and economic inclusion of women, youth and seniors; to empower marginalized and isolated women and their families; to enhance mental health services; strengthen partnerships and collaborations; and to enhance organizational capacity and sustainability.

STANDING STRONG: A YEAR OF SOLIDARITY, RESILIENCE AND COURAGE

In our role as a settlement agency, with a special focus on refugee women and their families, we are exposed every day to the direct and indirect consequences of war, violence, and the violation of basic human rights.

We also have the privilege of collaborating with courageous women who have taken leadership roles in the struggles within their countries of origin and in their new homes, advocating for girls' right to education and fundamental human rights.

A year following the invasion of Afghanistan, the struggle persisted, as did our commitment to standing alongside women leaders and activists in their global and local quests for justice. In August 2022, alongside newly arrived women leaders from Afghanistan, we marked the one-year anniversary of the Taliban invasion and hosting a panel discussion on Afghan refugees in partnership with the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW).

In November 2022, we stood in solidarity with all women who experience gender-based violence and oppression, and actively participated in the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence by hosting activities in all of our locations and for our community members.

As the year came to a close, we honored International Women's Day by hosting a panel, **A Way Forward: Strategies for Supporting Women in Afghanistan**, bringing together a panel of women with expertise in law and global politics to map out the current situation and potential ways forward for the women of Afghanistan.



EVALUATING OUR PROGRESS: AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION



Navigating three years of pandemic challenges and refugee crises from both Afghanistan and Ukraine prompted a thorough examination of our services. As we closed the fiscal year 2022-2023, AWO, supported by IRCC, initiated a comprehensive evaluation of our settlement program. This insightful initiative involved engaging with AWO management, staff, Board members, volunteers, and service users to gather feedback on our program's effectiveness.

An independent evaluator crafted a survey and questionnaire to assess the past year's program performance and follow up on previous evaluation recommendations. The final report outlined a series of recommendations spanning seven critical areas, guiding immediate and long-term actions.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SETTLEMENT SERVICES POST PANDEMIC

Food Security

Allocate resources to support dedicated emergency food program staff; Enhance food storage capacity; Develop a focused and lasting strategy to combat food insecurity among newcomers.

Childcare Services

Secure additional childcare space; develop a focused strategy to address newcomer childcare requirements.

Language Services

Add classes to accommodate more learners; Allocate resources to eliminate language assessment and class waitlists.

Housing

Employ dedicated housing support workers; Establish a centralized, newcomer-specific housing strategy.

Mental Health

Expand specialized, linguistically, and culturally trauma informed mental health support services; Include more events and programming, including peer support, to alleviate isolation.

Employment

Offer specialized and tailored supports; Provide assistance for professionals; Establish programs for gaining Canadian work experience; Implement expedited recognition of overseas credentials; Extend financial assistance for further education and training.

Youth & Parenting

Secure specialized workers in schools; Provide daily support for students; Expand team sports; Create dedicated clubs for girls; Develop strategies for a smoother transition to formal schooling; Conduct a study on newcomer transition to schooling.



The Hon. Charmaine Williams, Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity visited our Scarborough location and spoke with our Let's Talk Not Hide team who are championing the promotion of speaking out and preventing gender-based violence in newcomer communities.

OUR LINC JOURNEY: LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION POST PANDEMIC

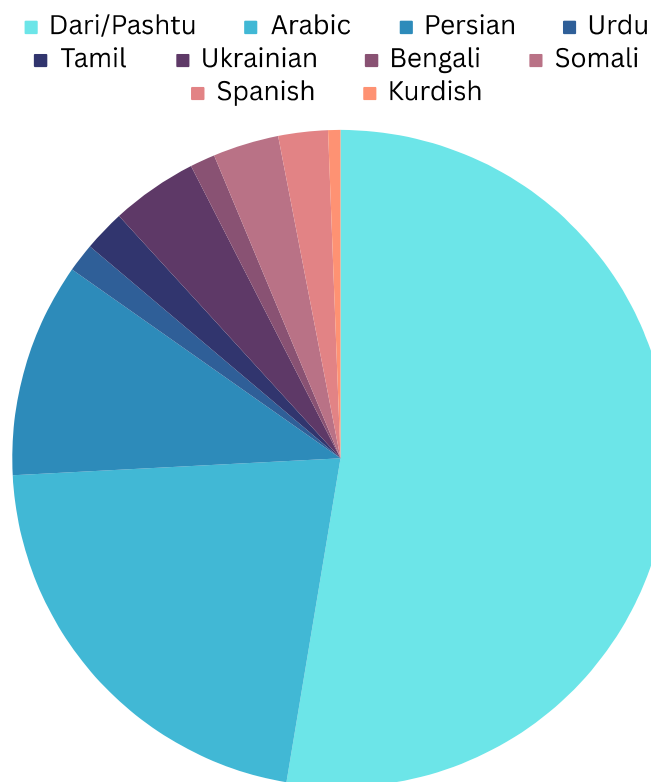
For the initial three months of the year, AWO provided English language programs virtually. In September, we transitioned to a hybrid and synchronized learning model, offering classes both in-person and online concurrently. This approach fosters a flexible format, ensuring a safe learning environment within women-only classrooms. It promotes inclusivity, maintains gender sensitivity, adheres to cultural appropriateness, and mitigates isolation.

Despite encountering numerous technological challenges, the LINC program persevered in enhancing language skills and aiding newcomers develop competencies essential for successful settlement. Participants received instruction on Zoom usage and were placed into digital language support groups to practice lessons. These groups also served as valuable social and networking opportunities for newcomers confined to their homes.

Learners were assigned practical, real-life tasks encompassing navigating city transportation, handling banking (both in-person and online), and acquiring vocabulary to discuss vital topics like health and Ontario's legal system. Communication skills were honed through sessions covering financial literacy, mental health and well-being support, Indigenous history and culture, Ontario's education system, and employment readiness.

We are pleased to report that we provided services to a total of **855 learners** across the pre-intermediate to high intermediate proficiency levels

FIRST LANGUAGE OF OUR LINC LEARNERS



OUR CNC IMPACT: FOSTERING INTEGRATION FOR NEWCOMER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) team delivered vital assistance to newcomer children and their families during the early stages of the pandemic recovery, offering virtual enrichment programs for children and parental support. Families benefited from age and culturally appropriate educational content through video resources and received arts and learning activity kits.

In September, 2022 our childcare services transitioned to in-person, accommodating an even greater number of newcomer children.

Our CNC programs play a crucial role in enabling women with young children to participate in LINC classes. They also contribute to a more successful integration and transition for newcomer families, in particular, single mothers in need of additional supports.



OUR IMPACT: Stories of inspiration and Success

I am from Afghanistan. When I came to Canada, I knew very little English. I started at level 2 initially but I did not think I could continue there. Often, I could not understand what people said and could not communicate with others. Throughout the pandemic, I attended classes online and progressed to level 3 and 4. Still, I was very worried about my new life in the new country.

Luckily, I joined the LINC school at Afghan Women's Organization and it literally became my second home. I found a lot of support there and was taught how things worked in Canada. If I had any questions, I felt comfortable asking them in class. Within the first few months I learnt so much and with the friendly and flexible environment I gained more confidence.

I decided to apply to Anderson college to study. It wasn't easy for me to make this decision. I discussed it with the teacher who believed in me and my ability to succeed in my further studies. I am now attending the college full-time and continuing to study English at AWO in the evenings because I believe that I can learn so much more at this place.

AWO's welcoming school and dedicated staff played such an important role in helping me settle in Canada and achieve my goals, I am so very thankful!

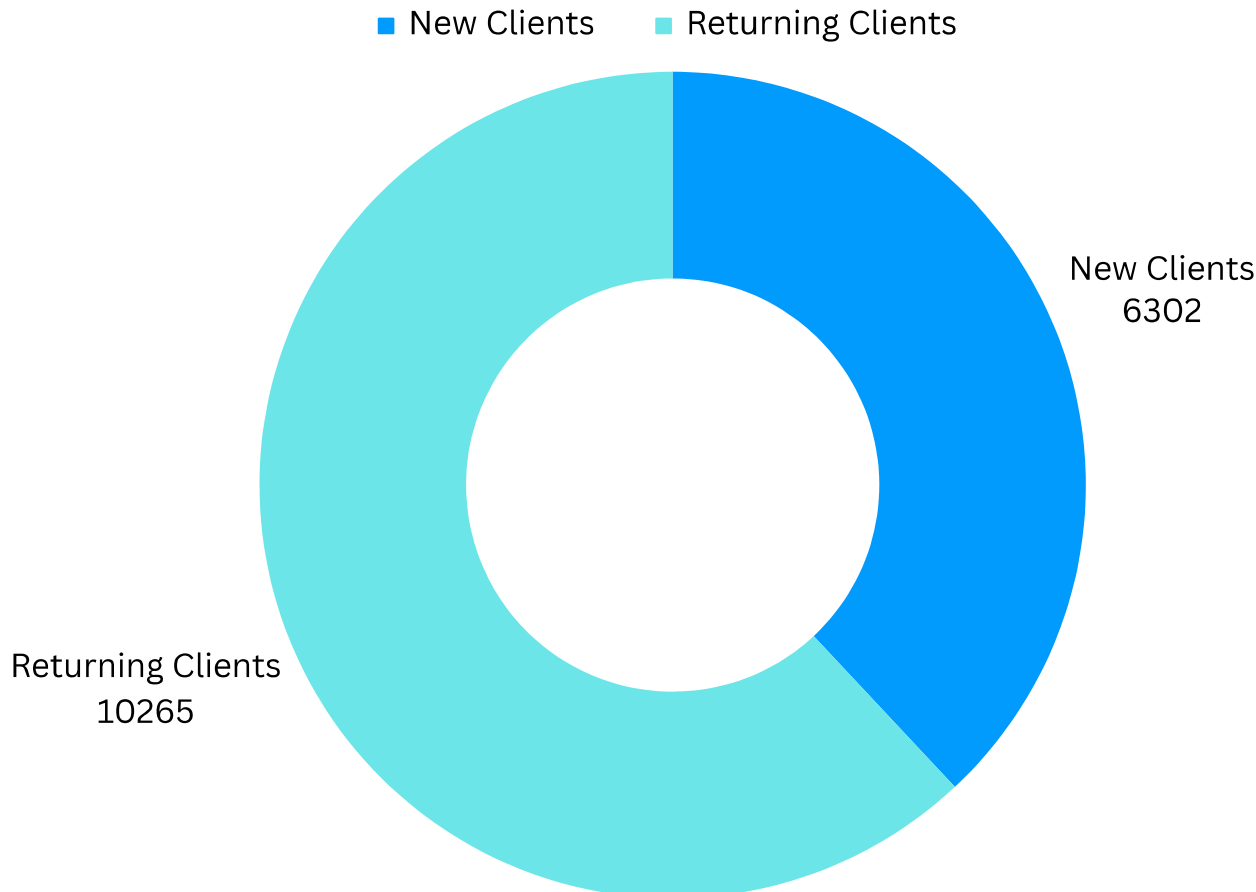


OUR SETTLEMENT SERVICES: EMPOWERING NEWCOMERS IN A CHALLENGING YEAR

Despite facing setbacks and heartbreaks caused by the pandemic and devastating refugee emergencies, AWO experienced a fruitful year. We established valuable partnerships within the settlement community, enhanced our knowledge and skills to advance settlement practices, and renewed our sense of optimism for the full participation of the women and families we serve in Canadian life.

AWO continued to warmly welcomed thousands of newcomers, including women, to Canada this year, providing essential settlement services at our four GTA locations, including Mississauga. Our services were offered both virtually and in-person, catering to a diverse group of individuals from Central and South Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, East Africa, and North Africa. We continued to support refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine in particular, offering specialized orientation services to aid their transition.

SETTLEMENT SERVICES: OUR IMPACT IN NUMBERS



OUR SETTLEMENT SERVICES: EMPOWERING NEWCOMERS IN A CHALLENGING YEAR

AWO successfully transitioned to a hybrid service model this year, offering safe in-person services, including one-on-one and group sessions. Our client services followed stringent health and safety protocols established by our Joint Health and Safety Committee.

Additionally, itinerant services at libraries, community centers, and schools resumed during this period. We expanded online services, and increased digital literacy focus. We also provided over 60 new laptops to young newly arrived refugees, particularly women through private donations.



32,904

ATTENDED INFORMATION
& ORIENTATION SERVICES



844

EMPLOYMENT RELATED
SERVICES



986

SHORT TERM
COUNSELLING - ONE-ON-
ONE SESSIONS



2725

THE COMMUNITY
VOLUNTEER INCOME TAX
PROGRAM

OUR IMPACT: Stories of inspiration and Success

"I have found immense joy in participating in AWO programs, and the Conversation Circles, in particular, have been an incredibly enriching experience. I have gained valuable knowledge about various neighborhoods in my community. I boosted my confidence and courage to express my thoughts freely among diverse individuals, without any hesitation. Moreover, I have had the pleasure of forming numerous friendships along the way."

-- Anonymous Service User

"The support I received from my counselor changed my life. When my husband left us, I found myself feeling isolated and overwhelmed, caring for my two children on my own. I felt utterly helpless, uncertain of what steps to take next. However, with the assistance and encouragement I received from AWO, I found the strength to enroll in college, and my daughter now attends daycare. I now have new hope that my children will grow up in a nurturing and positive environment."

-- Anonymous Service User

"Everything changed positively for me here in Canada through AWO; the services came just in time and I was able to connect with my community. The LINC school made me feel confident in my ability to contribute. I now see a bright future for me, my family"

-- Anonymous Service User



OUR TEAM: EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING



We expanded our team to enhance program access. New members, including an Employment Coach, a Volunteer Coordinator, an Equity Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator, and settlement counselors (including one Ukrainian speaker), played vital roles. They facilitated access to services like the Volunteer Income Tax Program, weekly English Circles, and various educational and recreational activities, to facilitate newcomer integration.

AWO's team, including frontline staff, childcare workers, LINC Instructors, and volunteers, prioritized professional growth this year. We organized a range of development opportunities, including training, webinars, and information sessions. These sessions covered critical areas such as mental health, gender-based violence, trauma-informed approaches, digital technology, and equity, diversity, and inclusion, significantly enhancing the knowledge and skills of our staff and volunteers.

Furthermore, our team initiated efforts to contribute to research initiatives underway within Ontario's settlement sector, playing a pivotal role in expanding crucial disaggregated data for further efforts and making strategic contributions to research and data advancement in the sector.

OUR EMPLOYMENT SERVICES: ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR A THRIVING FUTURE

This year, our employment services transitioned to a hybrid model at all four locations, maintaining a strategic focus on gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate support. We prioritized accessibility in job opportunities, introduced bridging programs, and emphasized credential recognition, viewing employment as a transformative journey toward recognizing the full potential of newcomer's talents and skills.

Our holistic approach caters to our newcomers' particular needs, offering innovative initiatives like mental health and wellness programs, peer networks, digital skills development, and language proficiency enhancement. We support them through challenges of credential recognition, skills assessment, and adapting to the Canadian work culture, and job market.

Our approach stresses the importance of peer support networks, trauma-informed and culturally sensitive strategies, and a comprehensive understanding of labor rights and responsibilities, particularly for newcomer women. Additionally, Workplace Safety and Harassment Prevention hold significant value in preventing and addressing abuses within employment practices.

Our strategic collaborations with **COSTI, Polycultural Immigration Services, LifeLine Afghanistan, Labour Education Centre**, and **YMCA** enhance our client services, particularly for women, providing job-appropriate skills training, facilitating job fairs, and connecting clients with ready-to-hire employers.



OUR IMPACT: Stories of inspiration and Success

Shortly before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Nazakat Danish was training as a cardiac surgeon. However, the onset of turmoil in Afghanistan forced Nazakat to leave her home country, putting her promising career as a lifesaving surgeon on hold. Last year, she sought refuge in Canada with hopes of resuming her medical profession, but finding a position that matched her skills and qualifications proved to be a formidable challenge.

*Fortunately, a family member recommended that Nazakat explore the **‘Prepared for Successful Employment’** program at AWO. This program played a crucial role in helping her overcome significant language and job market barriers, and pursue professional development efforts. Our specialized sessions improved her work place communication, facilitated credential recognition, and provided her with academic counselling and professional networking opportunities.*

Nazakat was successfully employed by a health care agency and now works as a Personal Support Worker while continuing her journey towards requalifying as a medical doctor in Canada.



Nazakat Danish

OUR IMPACT: Stories of inspiration and Success

Zaki Rasool, known as "the Outlaw Scrapper," was a dominant figure in Afghanistan's Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) scene. However, with the Taliban's takeover in 2021, the MMA was banned and athletes like Zaki went into hiding due to the regime's strict restrictions of combat sports.

Fearing for his life, Zaki eventually joined the 3.6 million Afghans seeking refuge amid a humanitarian crisis between 2021-2022. Expecting a brief stay in overcrowded Abu Dhabi resettlement camps before heading to the U.S.A., Zaki endured these harsh conditions for an astonishing one and a half years. Unable to play sports or exercise, the prison-like atmosphere and isolation in the camps took a severe toll on his well-being.

A ray of hope emerged as an opportunity to immigrate to Canada surfaced. Then through word of mouth, Zaki discovered AWO's Settlement and Employment programs. With personalized employment counseling and active participation in AWO's skill-building workshops, information sessions, and job fairs, he connected with potential employers. With renewed confidence, Zaki has now charted a clear career path, secured an Ontario driver's license, and is preparing to enter a skilled profession. He has also reignited his passion to represent Afghanistan in the MMA, a goal that he is actively working towards, he hopes in 2024.

Zaki's journey illustrates the transformative power of support and resilience, underscoring the impact of AWO's vital programs on newcomers and refugees' lives, particularly those who fled persecution and restrictions due to the Afghan crisis.



Zaki Rasooli

OUR IMPACT: Stories of inspiration and Success

Atefa and her family arrived in Canada from Afghanistan via Tajikistan, enduring forced migration and unstable conditions in a second country. Resettling in a yet another new country added to the challenges and took a toll on Atefa's mental health. As the sole breadwinner, she felt more pressure and vulnerability with added language barriers and unfamiliarity with the Canadian labor market.

Turning to AWO for settlement services, Atefa connected with our employment program. She attended biweekly information and networking sessions, easing her transition into employment and boosting her confidence. Atefa actively participated in job readiness sessions and attended job fairs for further support.

Her journey led to initial employment in home support and later a position with a housecleaning agency. Atefa's dedication paid off with a well-deserved promotion to a supervisor role. She now enjoys part-time employment at a daycare center, showcasing remarkable progress and determination through AWO's support.



Atefa Azar

OUR INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES: INTEGRATING EMPLOYMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

Our Employment Program has seen significant innovation through two employment-focused projects funded by partners attuned to the unique needs of newly arrived refugees and immigrants, aligning with our commitment to address Canadian job market realities. The **Prepared for Successful Employment**, supported by **Scotia Rise (Scotia Bank)** has been instrumental in supporting AWO's employment services amid surging demand from newcomers seeking employment.

This pioneer program targeting an underserved group—newcomers who have recently arrived with limited formal work experience and multiple employment barriers. Our project staff has innovatively designed sessions in multiple languages to build confidence, identify transferable skills, and provide essential employment-related skills like financial literacy, all vital components in equipping individuals for a successful employment journey.



OUR INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES: INTEGRATING EMPLOYMENT AND WELLNESS

Our **WE Café** Employment and Wellness project, supported by the **WES Mariam Assefa Fund**, stands as a pioneering initiative for us in the Peel Region, uniquely emphasizing the intersection of employment and mental health wellness, aligned with AWO's community needs and commitment to innovative solutions.

With the Tamarack Institute serving as strategic mentors, this project received invaluable guidance, aiding in troubleshooting challenges, fostering connections among funded projects, and providing encouragement as we adapted to insights gained.

The **WE Café**, a cohort-based program, empowered newcomers, particularly marginalized women, to enhance their workforce confidence. Recognizing the recurring need for resume updates and job application assistance among newcomers using AWO's employment services, the **WE Café** takes an integrated approach, promoting independence while offering crucial peer support. Concurrently, we provide mental health and wellness support, acknowledging the stress and anxiety associated with job-seeking and unemployment.

As a result of these learnings, AWO's employment team is incorporating a similar approach to enhance newcomers' resilience and independence on their employment journey.



OUR YOUTH, MOTHERS AND CHILDREN: EXPANDING HORIZONS AND BUILDING COMMUNITIES

This year AWO successfully expanded our Youth programming beyond Toronto and North York to include services in Scarborough and Mississauga. Our dedicated youth counselors provide comprehensive support, including one-on-one counseling, educational guidance, employment assistance, language services, and tailored settlement support. Our popular programs include the Communication Circle, Reading Club, Homework Club (with UTS), 'Chai and Chat', the Mother and Child Wellness Program, and digital skills training.

Youth counselors also conduct workshops in local high schools (with TDSB) and adult learning centers in the GTA, empowering our youth with knowledge on employment opportunities and law enforcement interactions. We regularly plan and facilitate youth participation in cultural festivals, workshops and volunteer initiatives that connect our youth with diverse communities, fostering a mutual understanding of Canada's diversity, promoting teamwork, personal growth, and a profound sense of belonging.



This year the Taste of Asia 2022 event showcased Asian cultures and featured AWO's youth program, leaving a lasting impact on 300 attendees. The annual Youth BBQ at Brimley Beach Park welcomed youth from across the GTA and introduced 150 newcomer refugees to their first Canadian BBQ, fostering a sense of community. Additionally, our valued partnership with Kids Up Front allows our youth to participate in sports as well as professional sporting events.

OUR YOUTH, MOTHERS AND CHILDREN: INTEGRATION THROUGH EDUCATION



With the generous funds provided by the Hilary and Galen Weston Foundation for the "Integration Through Education" project, our Mother and Child Wellness Program, conducted 47 sessions within 11 months, surpassing its target. In total, the program benefitted 1,682 newly arrived and newcomer individuals. Counsellors offered support in physical and mental health, nutrition, stress management, and parenting classes tailored to newly arrived mothers in particular.

To help bridge the digital divide, income and gender based disparities in access, the project distributed 71 laptops to women, youth and their families benefitting over 200 people. Homework clubs, educational trips, and a Summer Program supported an additional 91 students and 410 participants, enhancing skills and fostering community ties.



521

INDIVIDUALS BENEFITED
FROM 47 POSITIVE
PARENTING SESSIONS



200

IMPROVED THEIR DIGITAL
ACCESS



71

LAPTOPS DISTRIBUTED FOR
TARGET INDIVIDUALS



30

SUMMER PROGRAM SESSIONS
CONDUCTED, REACHING 410
PARTICIPANTS.



91

PARTICIPANTS IN 23
HOMEWORK CLUB
SESSIONS



400

INDIVIDUALS BENEFITED
FROM 10 EDUCATIONAL
TRIPS

PANDEMIC IMPACT ON OUR MOST VULNERABLE

Throughout the challenging pandemic period, newcomer seniors, particularly those living alone or in high-rise buildings, faced heightened risks of declining mental and physical health due to isolation. Our dedicated AWO staff, peer leaders, and volunteers stepped up to support lengthy lists of seniors, many of whom were isolated and anxious. Volunteers provided valuable assistance with grocery and pharmacy deliveries, while peer leaders maintained regular check-in calls and conducted group sessions via WhatsApp and Zoom.

As we navigate the post-pandemic landscape, we are encouraged by the fact that more seniors have developed enhanced digital literacy skills, enabling them to connect with programming and family members through their devices. There is a strong desire among seniors to reunite with friends during in-person AWO sessions. Consequently, in-person sessions for seniors resumed at our AWO locations last year, adhering to stringent health and safety guidelines. Simultaneously, online seniors' sessions, including active WhatsApp groups, continue to be a valuable resource for those who find online participation more accessible.

Regrettably, a lingering effect of the pandemic has been the surge in grocery costs, resulting in many of our seniors experiencing food insecurity. Ensuring that our seniors have access to an adequate food supply and the medications they require remains a top priority for the AWO staff throughout this past year.



OUR ELDERS AND SENIORS: BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT

AWO's seniors programming remains vital in serving newcomer seniors in the GTA. Supported by New Horizons for Seniors Programming (NHSP) and Sony Music Group's Global Social Justice Fund, our diverse team of senior peer leaders represents five language groups—Dari, Farsi, Arabic, Somali, and Urdu.

They serve around 180 senior women elders, among our most marginalized and vulnerable group. Seniors engage in various capacities, from active participation to volunteering and paid positions. Our seniors program has significantly improved their well-being, reducing loneliness, boosting confidence, and strengthening social connections, particularly through the Neighbourhoods for Newcomer Seniors project.

This initiative empowers senior newcomers, fosters safety, and encourages exploration of their neighborhoods. We offer a range of activities, workshops, and cultural experiences that enrich their lives and promote integration.



OUR VOLUNTEERS: ENHANCING IMPACT THROUGH INNOVATION

Volunteers are vital in enhancing our services to newcomers, offering Canadian experience, fostering leadership, and aiding in our mission. This year, our volunteers played a pivotal role in our Community Food Hut's success, assisting with food distribution. They also provided key support for medical and administrative appointments, translation, and more.

As AWO expanded, effective volunteer management became crucial. Through funding provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, we empowered employees to more effectively supervise volunteers by completely redesigning our Volunteer Program. This involved 40 staff attending 14 sessions on volunteer management, conflict resolution, and workplace mental health. Additionally, 42 employees participated in research, leading to the Volunteer Program Report, which influenced the implementation of volunteer management software and a website redesign.

These enhancements strengthened our capacity for change, resilience, and support for our employees and volunteers.

The project also addressed employee and volunteer needs by providing resources and training, benefiting predominantly women and newcomers. We streamlined volunteer management with VOME software for onboarding and hour tracking, improving our ability to meet community needs within our volunteer program.



OUR VOLUNTEERS: OUR COMMUNITY FOOD HUT



VOICES FROM OUR VOLUNTEERS

"I have been volunteering with AWO for six months because the benefits of volunteering are almost endless. Just ask a volunteer and you will be amazed by the many ways a person can grow in just a few hours. Many people say that volunteering has changed them in ways that they never expected. They have made friends, learnt new skills. I am a person who grew with AWO in a few months."

OUR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Our dedicated mental health counselors play a pivotal role in supporting our community members particularly during this challenging period. We conducted risk assessments, facilitated goal-setting sessions, and maintained regular bi-weekly check-ins to monitor progress. Orientation sessions, specifically tailored to newly arrived refugees and immigrants, enhanced awareness of mental health community resources and on coping strategies to improve wellness.

During this time we strengthened valuable partnerships with key organizations such as the **Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)**, **Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)**, **Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services**, and **COSTI**. These collaborations, in particular with CAMH provided skills development sessions for our mental health and frontline teams, enabling collaborative delivery of services to newcomers.

Our mental health team also facilitated referrals to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and connected service users with multi-disciplinary clinics and healthcare providers. They also accepted both internal and external referrals to our services. Furthermore, we actively shared skills and resources within our organization, conducting bi-weekly Mental Health Wellness cluster meetings and launching an agency-wide Wellness Hub. These initiatives have strengthened all of our staff's capacity and understanding of mental health and wellness issues.



40

GROUP SESSIONS



240

PEOPLE WERE IMPACTED
BY THE PROJECT



160

ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT
SESSIONS (NON-PR AND
CANADIAN CITIZENS)



288

ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT
SESSIONS

OUR IMPACT: STORIES OF INSPIRATION AND SUCCESS

A 30-year-old male refugee newcomer from Afghanistan had been living alone in Canada for 3 years. He came to visit AWO's mental health counsellor a year ago, presenting with chronic depression, loss of hope, and a lack of motivation. Without access to a family doctor or an OHIP card and lacking other documentation and supports, he was in a very dark place and had suicidal thoughts.

With the assistance of the mental health counsellor, he underwent an assessment, and his skills and strengths were identified. Gradually, he regained hope, obtained his health card and other necessary documents, and was referred to a family doctor. He eventually received psychiatric assessment and support.

With his family sponsorship currently in process, and he now attends monthly sessions while receiving bi-weekly one-on-one support from a mental health counsellor. He is in a much better place now, stable, and no longer has suicidal ideations. He is on track to achieve his life goals and is grateful for the support and services he has received at AWO.

--Anonymous Service User

ADVANCING OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION: A YEAR OF TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRESS

Last year, AWO introduced a full-time Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator to strengthen the integration of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) practices and principles within our organization. Working closely with our EDI Committee, senior management, and board, we initiated a comprehensive revision and update of our EDI policy and practices.

We also designed and delivered a series of targeted workshops and training sessions, tailored to AWO settlement staff, volunteers, and service users, focusing on relevant topics such as intersectionality, truth and reconciliation, indigenous history, colonialism, anti-Black racism, gender diversity and micro-aggressions.

Furthermore, we cultivated valuable relationships with guest speakers who shared their expertise on a variety of related EDI issues. These engagements broadened our horizons to a diverse range of issues, especially relevant for our frontline staff in their interactions with newcomers.

In addition, AWO engaged in collaborative efforts within the interagency landscape, aligning with Toronto South, North, and West Local Immigration Partnership organizations, as well as the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services' community of practice, all centered around advancing equity and inclusion.



OUR CRISIS SUPPORT: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE:

Intimate partner and family violence continued to cause ruptures in newcomer communities over the past year, exacerbated by global crises like pandemics and wars. This type of violence disproportionately affects those who are marginalized and already facing multiple barriers.

For six years, the United Way of Greater Toronto has funded our 'From Violence to Resilience' program, providing direct counseling and support groups for individuals, particularly women, at risk or experiencing violence. Our Dari and Arabic speaking crisis counselors offer culturally sensitive education, awareness, prevention, healing, and empowerment. Service users learn to identify early warning signs and receive individualized, culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate supports.



Our prevention model collaborates with trusted community agencies and leaders to address gender based violence as a broader societal issue, involving all community members, including men, in the conversation. The healing component offers safe spaces for survivors to express their emotions through one-to-one counseling sessions, aiding in trauma recovery and identity reclamation. Service users are empowered to become financially independent and self-reliant, regaining agency over their lives.



80

SERVICE USERS ATTENDED
PARENTING SKILLS
SESSIONS



240

ONE-ON-ONE
COUNSELLING SESSIONS
WITH UNIQUE USERS



180

COMMUNITY MEMBERS
PARTICIPATED IN 16 DAYS OF
ACTIVISM AGAINST GBV

OUR IMPACT: STORIES OF INSPIRATION AND SUCCESS

Referred to us by Victim Services of Peel, we conducted a needs assessment for the person involved, initiating counseling sessions to address their emotional well-being. We also helped enroll them in LINC classes to improve their language skills. The program assisted the person with housing and filling out an application for their autistic child's needs. Later, the individual decided to enroll at Sheridan College and gain experience and networking skills by volunteering with AWO.

"I was lost and desperate, but now I am a new person. I obtained my driving license and will soon complete my accounting certificate. It's not just me whose life has changed; my kids have also joined different programs. Thank you, AWO, for making such a significant difference in our lives."

-- Anonymous Service User

"The AWO workshops have empowered me so much that now I know how to stand and advocate for my rights. I live in a rented apartment, my landlord was aware that I am a single mom and had limited knowledge of laws and regulations, so he increased the rent very often, however he wanted. I was paying a hefty amount every month it used to go up and become more unaffordable.

One day I shared this issue with the AWO Staff member, she educated me on tenants' rights and guided me on how to communicate this issue with the Landlord. I refused to pay the increased rent and reminded the Landlord of my rights as a tenant and the court to solve this if he decided to keep violating my rights. After five months we had our court date and he lost, and I won. This may look like a mini victory, but it means a lot to me as I know now the importance of taking a stand for my rights in the right time."

-- Raheema, A Service User

OUR WELLNESS LINES: TRAUMA INFORMED SUPPORTS FOR WOMEN

Our Wellness Line projects, supported by the Canadian Women's Foundation, became even more relevant during the pandemic. Wellness 2.0 specifically catered to racialized newcomer and immigrant women, offering trauma-informed emotional support to prevent GBV while providing timely referrals to crisis counsellors.

The Wellness Line also plays a crucial role in averting further isolation among these women and girls. It encouraged them to connect with peer leaders and fellow participants alongside prioritizing their safety. This facilitated engagement in activities and conversations aimed at enhancing their mental and physical well-being. These support groups created a safe space for GBV survivors to share their feelings, including shame, anger, frustration, guilt, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. Moreover, these groups empowered survivors to make decisions for their future while participating in social activities.



Art Exhibition in the community: Wellness line Project- Funded by the Canadian Women Foundation

OUR IMPACT: STORIES OF INSPIRATION AND SUCCESS

Hajia, a survivor of gender based violence (GBV) with three young children all under the ages of five, initially faced terrible isolation upon arriving in Canada.

She was forbidden by her family members from participating in activities or socializing with other women and only allowed to stay home and care for her children.

Our Wellness Line program, introduced to her by a friend, became a lifeline in Hajia's journey to independence. With guidance from our peer leaders who respect her cultural background, she has enrolled in English classes, secured daycare for her children, and actively participates in wellness sessions. She has also benefited from one-on-one counseling for additional support.

-- Hajia, a Service User



Lighting the Candles : Wellness line Project- Funded by the Canadian Women Foundation (Dec 6th, 2022)

OUR STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING GBV: RAISING COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Our **Let's Talk Not Hide** initiative, funded by the Ontario Government's Neighbors, Friends, and Family (NFF) program, is dedicated to transforming harmful norms and behaviors that perpetuate family violence and violence against women. Our Peer Champions conduct workshops in newcomer communities, raising awareness about the signs, types, and impact of gender based and intimate partner violence, alongside conflict resolution strategies and healthy relationship-building skills.

The sessions are conducted in English, Persian, Dari, Urdu, and Pashto. Survivors of violence find a safe and supportive space to share their feelings and experiences while receiving workshops that empower them to make better choices for themselves and their families. Our prevention of GBV initiatives target all of our community members as well as the general public, including specific groups such as Faith communities and newly arrived refugees. This has resulted in a surge of participation by diverse communities accompanied by a growing willingness to engage openly in discussions and share personal stories, free from stigma and fear.



1285

ATTENDED SESSIONS THROUGH
PREVENTING GENDER-BASED
VIOLENCE PROGRAM

OUR COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH ON GBV

Community-based research forms the cornerstone for transforming norms regarding gender-based and family violence within newcomer communities. In the second year of our **3-year Hear Us + Heal Us** project, funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE), we continued our work with four newcomer groups – Afghan, Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi.

Through interviews with service users, providers, and community leaders, we have been developing community-driven solutions to foster positive and progressive changes in attitudes and actions concerning gender-based violence.

Our accomplished team comprises a gender and law specialist from Afghanistan, a valuable partnership with the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, and highly skilled researchers with backgrounds in community and international development, adult education, psychology, law, and gender studies.

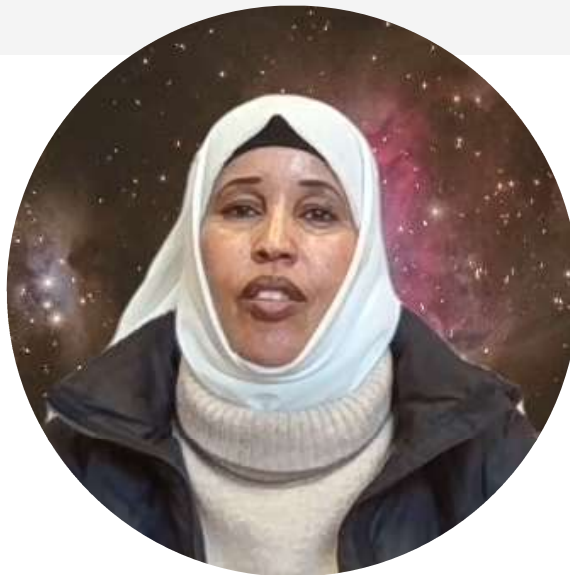
An advisory committee representing the study's participant populations further enhances our efforts. We eagerly anticipate finalizing and sharing the study's results in the coming year.



OUR IMPACT: STORIES OF INSPIRATION AND SUCCESS

Lul Askar first arrived in Canada from Somalia in 2019. For her first years in Canada, Lul lived on PEI. Unfortunately for her, it was difficult to access language services on this lovely island, and she wasn't able to connect to an Arabic-speaking community. Finally, Lul decided to relocate to Mississauga and was referred to AWO by our Somali-speaking peer leader. Through AWO, Lul was connected with Ontario Works, started LINC classes, acquired necessary household items, her daughter was registered in school, and Lul took computer classes for Somali speakers.

For Lul, the best thing was that she felt that someone cared about her. Peer leaders and our frontline counsellors checked in on her regularly with weekly phone calls. One of Lul's favourite activities has been our Wellness and Self-Care sessions as well as English conversation circles where she has met and learned from women from different cultures. She finally feels confident to travel around the city independently, which has been a significant change in her life. Looking into the future, Lul is working towards becoming fluent in English and finding work as a PSW or in a daycare.



Lul Azkar

OUR HOUSING AND FOOD SUPPORTS

In the past year, we have focused on key actions in the areas of housing and food security to support the well-being of newly arrived refugees. Given that some government-sponsored Afghan refugees faced budget constraints that fell short of covering the minimum GTA market rent for housing AWO sought the assistance of United Way of Greater Toronto's (UWGT) Afghan Resettlement Fund. Through this we provided 40 families, benefitting a total of 120 individuals, with a six-month monthly rent subsidy, significantly reducing their financial stress.

Additionally, the rising grocery costs have left many of our community members in the GTA, in particular vulnerable groups like seniors, single mothers, refugee claimants, and large families, in need of food support. AWO's partnership with Second Harvest, over the last three years, has facilitated food redistribution. With additional funds from UWGT, we secured a dedicated space at our Scarborough location and expanded storage and refrigeration for perishable food, enhancing our ability to address this pressing issue.

Our biweekly Community Food Hut, is a crucial initiative run by part-time staff and further bolstered by dedicated volunteers.

This much needed service allowed AWO to deliver culturally appropriate, nutritious food to more than 2,000 newcomers, an average of 238 individuals per week.

This initiative not only improved food security for newcomers, it also served as a platform for community engagement, fostering volunteerism, and facilitating valuable networking and peer support opportunities for newcomers volunteers.



OUR ACTION ON CLIMATE

AWO collaborated on a City of Toronto Climate Action Fund Project in Don Mill Thorncliffe and Flemington Park areas, deepening engagement on climate change initiatives with our newcomer populations. The project offered participants, particularly those in Toronto's high-rise building, opportunities to climate-proof and reimagine their neighborhoods. Twenty green ambassadors were identified and trained by the project, and worked diligently to adapt a toolkit that guides a step-by-step journey, encouraging reflection and learning on climate change and urban forestry while envisioning local solutions.

The toolkit's redesign, aligned with the most recent City of Toronto climate data and goals. This impactful effort, developed through consultation sessions with community members also involved 2 community peer leaders, 5 volunteers, 1 youth worker, and 1 placement student.

Over the course of 10 community sessions, valuable insights and innovative ideas emerged, culminating in a final event that drew 40 attendees. As a result of this collaborative effort, a comprehensive climate action toolkit was launched, leaving a lasting imprint on our community.



OUR IMPACT: STORIES OF INSPIRATION, COURAGE & SUCCESS

My name is Susan, and I'm originally from Afghanistan. I had a happy childhood back home, I pursued a law degree, and had a good job. I got married and had a healthy child, Muhammad. However, due to the crisis in 2021, I lost my job as a women's lawyer. I joined women's demonstrations for civil rights, which put my life and safety in danger.

Last year, I arrived in Canada with my husband and our one-year-old child, having no friends or relatives here. However, I felt relieved and happy because I had my husband, who was my love, my only hope, and my support in Canada.

However, tragedy struck when, on the second night of our arrival in Toronto, my husband Ahmad Shoaib suffered a heart and brain attack while swimming in the hotel pool. He went into a coma and was hospitalized, and I was with him for a week with our one-and-a-half-year-old child, while pregnant with our second child. I had no friends or relatives and felt scared and confused.

In this darkest and most challenging time of my life, when I felt lost and overwhelmed, AWO came to my side like a guardian angel. They provided emotional support, accompanied me in the hospital, helped with translation, and cared for my son. Unfortunately, my husband passed away a few days later.

While mourning the greatest loss of my life, I was also worried about arranging my husband's funeral. AWO's staff covered the funeral costs and assisted in the funeral arrangements, including moving the body to the mosque and performing the ceremony.

I will forever remember the day of my husband's funeral; the weather was stormy and dangerous, and the vehicle carrying his coffin got stuck in the middle of the road. A group of AWO volunteers and male family members of the staff carried the coffin on their shoulders to the cemetery. It was a moment of immense support and kindness that I will never forget.

The AWO was there for me during my pregnancy, delivery, and in the aftermath. I was also extremely worried about my younger brother, who was a refugee living in Pakistan, facing the constant threat of deportation to Afghanistan, where he would have been in grave danger.

AWO took immediate action to sponsor my brother, Khalil Murad, from Pakistan and covered his settlement expenses. Today, my brother is here in Canada, safe from persecution, and a wonderful support to me and a loving uncle to my fatherless children. The AWO staff, mental health workers, and volunteers held my hand through my darkest days when I felt completely lost and helped me find my way back.

Now, I have my own subsidized housing, I'm studying in LINC level 4-5 with the goal of pursuing a Law degree again in Canada one day. I've started my life anew, and I have hope not only for myself but to help others as well.

While I've made significant progress, I still battle post-traumatic stress, and there's always a lingering fear that if the AWO hadn't been there on the second night of my arrival in Toronto, when I lost my husband so suddenly, I wouldn't have made it.

Despite the countless obstacles and challenges life has thrown my way, my sons Mohammad and Ahmed and I will be forever grateful for the kindness of God, the Canadian government, and the Afghan Women's Organization. We are committed to making them all proud.



Susan

OUR COMMUNITY: CELEBRATING ARTS AND STORIES

AWO community members participated in two artful storytelling projects over the past year. One explored folktales from Central Asia and the Arab world and the other related stories of Afghan women through textiles.

Through the Wonderbox funded by the **Toronto Arts Council (TAC)** was a storytelling initiative that matched a group of senior community members with a group of youth to share and recreate folktales from Iran, Afghanistan, and the Arab world using a “wonder box”. A wonder box is a storytelling medium from the ancient Arab world that was used by travelling storytellers. A wonder box was collectively imagined and designed by the participants and community artists then constructed by placement students. The senior-youth teams each made a visual representation of the folktale they explored that was presented in the wonder box and shared at a community screening on August 23, 2022.

“It was a great experience, as a person who loves stories I loved sharing them.”

“The project had different cultures, we learned from each other, and learnt things that we didn’t know outside of the Arab world, things we didn’t hear before.”





Weaving Journeys was a project funded and hosted by the **Textile Museum of Canada**. The participants from AWO represented different generations of refugee and immigrant women who came to Canada. Some had escaped the uncertainty and the violence that generations of their families had faced in Afghanistan. The collective of women are a combination of diaspora and recently arrived newcomers. The six stories they shared are woven into their immigration journeys, and show how culture, resilience, and beauty defeats hardship and war. With the Afghan rug, the Afghan food cover, and the Indian saree in their minds and hearts, the participants shared their personal stories. They reflected on the talent and hard work of Afghan women and strength it has taken for them to make home wherever they are.



OUR STAFF AND BOARD: CELEBRATING HONORS AND AWARDS

AWO takes immense pride in its dedicated team of staff and volunteers. In the past year, four exceptional women from AWO were honored for their remarkable contributions.

Asma Faizi, President of AWO's Board of Directors, received the prestigious **2022 YWCA Toronto Woman of Distinction award**. This recognition was a testament to her pivotal role in creating opportunities for Afghan women and girls over nearly two decades.

“Despite the horrific suffering that Afghan women have endured over the past four decades and continue to endure today, I am motivated by the women who refuse to give up; by those who remain in Afghanistan and protest; and by those who do not stop dreaming for a better Afghanistan. I want these women to know that women around the world are listening to them. I want them to know that they are not alone.”

--Asma-Faizi, AWO Board President

AWO also has the privilege to have **Freshta Karimi** working with us coordinating our community-based research on gender-based violence in newcomer communities. She brings with her a wealth of experience, having served as the founder and director of Da Qanoon Ghushtonky, one of Afghanistan's largest legal aid service organizations. In recognition of her remarkable work, both in Afghanistan and on the international stage, Freshta has received the prestigious **Ludovic-Trarieux Prize for Human Rights**. This annual award honors lawyers of any nationality who have demonstrated exceptional dedication to defending human rights, often in the face of significant personal risk.

At our AWO Mississauga location, **Ivanka Gotcheva**, our Manager of CNC, was honored by Charity Village as a top finalist for her outstanding contribution to **workplace mental health**. We extend our gratitude to Ivanka for her diligent care of colleagues and for reinforcing the importance of self-care in the not-for-profit social service sector.



We would also like to highlight the achievement of our colleague, **Sediqa Akbari**, whose article in the International Social Work journal won the 2022 Best Article prize. Articles are evaluated for scholarship, relevance, originality, international focus, and contributions to theory, policy, and research. Her article, '**Peace, Love, and Justice: A Participatory Phenomenological Study of Psychological Well-being**' by Bragin et al. in Volume 65, Issue 3, March 2021, explores psychological well-being in Afghanistan.

Congratulations to all our colleagues for their exceptional work in 2022-2023!

WORLD REFUGEE DAY

On June 20th our staff marked World Refugee Day, a day designated by the United Nations to honor the resilience of refugees worldwide. On this occasion, we celebrated the courage displayed by individuals who have sought refuge in the face of conflict, persecution, and danger, seeking safety in foreign lands.

The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Afghan Women's Organization joined forces to shed light on the stories of refugees. Throughout this week, we shared accounts of individuals who have found sanctuary in Canada from various countries. Additionally, we showcased the remarkable contributions of people

and organizations that have played a pivotal role in making refugees feel welcome and supported. It is incumbent on us all to extend a warm welcome to refugees and also to assist in their seamless integration into society once they have sought refuge. Furthermore, it is our collective responsibility to provide unwavering support, encouragement, and empowerment to these brave individuals.

AWO Youth volunteers, staff, and our community also marked World Refugee Day with an event showcasing the cultural richness of our youth. The highlight was a captivating 'Attan' performance, symbolizing unity and resilience, underlining the significance of supporting and celebrating refugees, and emphasizing their contributions and potential.

The event also served as a platform for promoting dialogue and awareness. Youth volunteers were acknowledged and applauded for their talent and commitment. This successful celebration helped nurture empathy and support for refugees, while highlighting a more inclusive and compassionate society that prioritizes their safety and dignity.



OUR CULTURE: CELEBRATING MELA SAMANAK

AWO, joined by over 1200 community members and guests, celebrated MELA SAMANAK, a cherished festival heralding the arrival of Nowruz, the spring equinox. This marked our first Samanak gathering following the pandemic, a tradition spanning centuries and transcending cultural and geographic boundaries.

Typically, hundreds of women unite to prepare the revered Samanak dish, sharing it with their families, friends, and neighbors. We express our heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated staff organizing team, along with all our guests, sponsors, artists, and vendors, for their invaluable contributions to this memorable event.





OUR CULTURE: HOSTING IFTAAR DINNER

The AWO Youth Program hosted an Iftaar (the meal Muslims eat to break their fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan) dinner, bringing together 135 attendees for community engagement. Guest speakers from the Toronto Police Community and the Canadian Muslim Foundation encouraged dialogue, transcending cultural boundaries. This event exemplified our commitment to unity and community engagement, leaving a lasting impact on the relationships formed.

OUR PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP OF REFUGEES

Since the early 1990s, the Afghan Women's Organization has sponsored over 5,000 refugees from conflict and war-torn countries all over the world to Canada through our private sponsorship program. As these individuals leave a situation of crisis to a safer home in Canada, we help, along with sponsors, to put into motion pre-arrival settlement plans, providing an array of practical, financial, and emotional supports to those who have newly arrived to Canada.

In the past year, AWO received 260 arrivals, coming from India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine through its private sponsorship program.

Comprehensive settlement plans guided these newcomers, ensuring they obtain OHIP cards, undergo language assessments, enroll their children in school, and address immediate needs, with a long-term plan securing their future.

Orientation to Canadian life supports newcomers as they navigate an overwhelming amount of information. Many families lack suitable clothing for Canadian seasons and essential household items, which generous donations help provide.

This year brought additional challenges, with rising living costs leading to increased food insecurity and housing affordability issues for refugee claimants. AWO's Community Food Hut in Scarborough and the United Way's Afghan Resettlement Fund provided crucial support.

While these interventions were invaluable, they represent temporary solutions to issues expected to have lasting impacts. AWO is eager to develop sustainable, collaborative solutions working closely with its partners and allies.

We are delighted to announce that this year, we also completed our application for another five-year contract for the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.

OUR FINANCES

AFGHAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION INCOME STATEMENT FOR THE PERIOD OF APRIL 1, 2022 TO MARCH 31, 2023

REVENUE

FEDERAL	\$ 6,290,938
PROVINCIAL	\$ 211,674
MUNICIPALITIES	\$ 175,520
FOUNDATIONS	\$ 736,390
OTHER AGENCIES	\$ 239,137
DONATIONS/FUNDRAISING	\$ 842,958
MISCELLANEOUS INCOME	\$ 67,281
TOTAL REVENUE	\$ 8,563,898

EXPENDITURES

SALARY, MERCS & BENEFITS	\$ 5,767,390
BUILDING OCCUPANCY	\$ 795,826
PROGRAM EXPENSES	\$ 262,104
PURCHASE OF SERVICES	\$ 311,646
OFFICE AND GENERAL	\$ 135,057
STAFF TRAVEL	\$ 13,086
STAFF TRAINING	\$ 7,225
REFUGEE SETTLEMENT	\$ 927,320
AMORTIZATIONS	\$ 116,155
TRANSFER TO RESERVES	\$ 224,534
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 8,560,343

EXCESS REVENUES OVER EXPENSES AFTER RESERVE TRANSFER

\$ 3,555

OUR DONORS

AWO acknowledges with gratitude, the outstanding contributions, support, and inspiration received from the government agencies, foundations, corporations, community organizations and private donors.

40,000+

ArcelorMittal Tailored Blanks, Elizabeth Jollimore

20,000+

International Association of Women Judges Canadian Chapter

10,000+

Abdul Hadi Jalalzai

5,000+

Golden VP, Inc., Layli Sediquee

3,000+

The Pop-Up Chapel Co.

2,000+

Angela A. Bradley, Caroline Lee, BLG Foundation, Granite REIT Holdings, Limited Partnership, Hila Taraky-Arfocus Legal Professional Corporation, Justice Anne S. Derrick, Marina Paperny, Rosemary Nation, Toronto Dominion Bank -TDCT0334

1,000+

Anne Molloy, April Grosse, Carolyn Phillips, Celia Rhea
Ella T Taylor-Walsh, Francesca Marzari, Georgina Jackson, Heather Holmes
Hon Justice Anne L. Kirker, Hon Madam Justice, Hon Justice Jo'Anne Strekaf,
Janet Wilson, Lois Hoegg, Meredith Jackson Donohue, Miss. Margaret Walker,
Noor Ahmed Tazak, Patricia Hennessy, Wendy Best

500+

David Walsh, Deborah Deacon, Eleanor Sidnell, Gerald & Melissa Lodder, Kimberly Moore, LeeAnne MacLeod-Archer, Lenora F Butler, Lindsay and Bill Watson, Luke Wintjes, Marie-Claire Albanese, Mrs. Mary MacMillan, Mr. John A. MacMillan, Robert and Sue Bauman, William Wright

300+

Adrian J. Olsthoorn and Mrs. Jacqueline P. Vonbun, Doreen Rounds, Frances Kiteley, Julia Vourantonis, Justice Lauren Marshall, Margaret L Hatfield, Margaret McTaggart, Mark and Christine Creedon

200+

Ali Asghar Qasemi, Amy Stein, Anne Marie Everitt, Brian Riordan, David Macrae, Diana Cameron, Elisabetta Macri, Ernest Loch, Heather Barnabe, John Ferguson, Lisa La Horey, Marie Lew, Mary Ann Lee, Matthew Kirchner, Michael Waby, Miriam Gropper, Moira Hutchinson, Mrs. Anne E. Griffin, Patricia Bond, Paul Antze, Paypal Giving Fund, Risa Levine, Robert Centa, Sa Dick, Sedika Sulaiman, Shawn Greenberg, Stephanie Slobodian, Sylvia Haak

In Kind Donations

LesLois Shaw Foundation-Baby Love Program - 11,300 Diapers Donated

OUR FUNDERS



Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada



Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada

Women and Gender
Equality Canada



Employment and
Social Development Canada

Emploi et
Développement social Canada



OUR PARTNERSHIPS

Thank you to our many community of service providers and institutions that we rely on to do the work of supporting newcomers and refugees.

You have provided us with referrals, shared your space, provided information, and so much more. Your support, generosity, and peer leadership help us get the work done in the company of kindred spirits.

Here are a list of our partnerships:

- Access Alliance
- Access Employment
- Achēv- Employment, Newcomer, Language and Youth Services
- Furniture Bank
- Investing in Neighbourhoods (IIN) Program – City of Toronto
- Jenner Jane Marie Community Centre (JJMCC)
- Kid's Up Front
- North York Community House
- OESP – Ontario Energy Board
- Ontario Justice Education Network (OJEN)
- Peel Career Assessment Services (PCAS)
- Peel Family Education Center (FEC)
- Peel Regional Police
- Second Harvest
- The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO)
- Victim Services of Peel
- York University- Centre for Refugee Studies

OUR SERVICE LOCATIONS

AWO Head Office:

150 Consumers Rd unit 203, North York,
ON, M2J 4G9, 416-588-3585

AWO Don Mills:

747 Don Mills Road, Unit 200 Toronto,
ON, M3C 1T2, 416-422-2225

AWO Scarborough:

2555 Eglinton Ave. East, Unit 211
Toronto, ON, M1K 5J1, 416-266-1777

AWO Mississauga:

3050 Confederation PKWY, Unit 302
Mississauga, ON, L5B 3Z6, 905-279-3679

Itinerant services are also provided at
various other locations in the GTHA

www.afghanwomen.org

