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### REPLANTING OUR ROOTS: A Best Practices Analysis on how to empower Arab migrant women and develop leadership through service work

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**REPLANTING OUR ROOTS:**

**A Best Practices Analysis on how to empower Arab migrant women and develop  
leadership through service work**

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER IN MIGRATION STUDIES

by **Linda Ereikat**

**Summer 2020**

University of San Francisco

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this applied project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

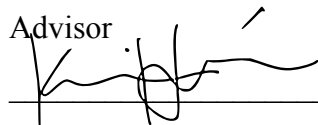
APPROVED:



8-5-20

Advisor

Date



8-5-20

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Date

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## **Acknowledgments**

I dedicate this research to my mother, Aida Ereikat, who crossed continents and remains my inspiration.

This research is also dedicated to the Arab and Resource and Organizing Center. May we continue to fight for justice and serve our community with dignity from here to our homelands.

## **Abstract**

This research is focused on identifying the best practices and methods used by community service providers who serve Arab immigrant women, a heavily marginalized and isolated demographic. Specifically, this research seeks to answer, what are the best practices for community engagement, leadership, and empowerment in the lives of Arab migrant women in San Francisco? I examine the elements of community empowerment, engagement, leadership, and methods of providing services from the Asian Women's Shelter, the Chinatown Community Development Center, and the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. The methods used were personal interviews with key leaders of these organizations. The Arab Resource and Organizing Center is an important element in my research because of its uniqueness in providing its services with a political framework along with a cultural familiarity and relevance in a bureaucratic immigration and social services system. This will be an applied project on the Arab Resource and Organizing Center and I will be providing policy recommendations for the organization.

## **Introduction**

This applied project is focused on finding the best practices in serving Arab migrant women. The outcome of the project will offer policy recommendations for the Arab Resource and Organizing Center, a grassroots organization providing free legal immigration and social services to the Arab and Muslim community in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to its services, AROC is also known for its community organizing efforts against war, militarism, Zionism, and imperialism. I decided to focus my project on AROC because of their dual strategy of providing essential services while simultaneously organizing the community it serves towards social justice. Their framework is proactive in fighting for the world we want to see as people committed to immigrant rights and empowerment (AROC Who We Are, 2020).

AROC can be a service provider through the San Francisco Immigrant Legal Education Network, a network composed of thirteen organizations, widely known as SFILEN. The San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network is funded by the Mayor's Office of Housing, Community Development Division (MOH-MOCD). SFILEN represents immigrants from African, Arab, Asian, and Latino communities, providing free immigrant legal assistance and community education to low-income immigrants in San Francisco. Collectively, the Network proudly provides services in over twenty languages and dialects. AROC believes that service providing is not enough in the fight for changing the world, and is committed to its community organizing component which aims to protect and defend the Arab community through approaches like mass protests, Know Your Rights workshops, education, youth programming, civic engagement, and women's programming (AROC Who We Are, 2020).

This research is important because of the gaps that exist in studying Arab American communities, such as accurate numbers, migration statistics, and locations. According to the *Arab America* website, “Arab Americans are not officially recognized as a federal minority group and because of this, reporting numbers are rarely exact. Reports of the population of Arab Americans are estimated to be “715,000 in California” (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2003). These gaps and inaccuracy of numbers make it harder for nonprofits, city institutions and agencies, educational institutions, mental health workers, etc. to accurately serve and support the Arab American community. There are several reasons why we need to study Arab Americans more profusely, and this research seeks to contribute to empowering, safe, respectful, and culturally relevant service providing. As the Islamophobic and anti-Arab political climate intensifies, so has our immigration policies, such as Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban that came to power in 2017. For this reason, more and more people require legal services in the fight for status and security. As navigation through immigration law remains expensive, stressful, and confusing, more people are relying on local grassroots organizations that provide free to low cost legal and social services.

My project focuses specifically on Arab migrant women because Arab women are both invisible and hypervisible (Naber, 2011). They experience patriarchy through culture, but bigotry in American society. Oppressed if covered, but “Western” and rule-breaking if they do not. These narratives have increased the silencing of Arab women and do not give them their voice and agency. The understanding of Arab women in the eyes of the West is often orientalist and looks to them as in need of saving. By migrating into the US, these concepts are strengthened as they become invisible and hypervisible at the same time.



I chose to focus on this organization and choosing the demographic focus on Arab migrant women due to my own experiences. When I was fourteen years old, I joined AROC's Arab Youth Organization in the summer after my first year of high school. Upon joining, I was having several issues with my behavior at school and finished the school year with perplexed grades. It was the youth organization that instilled my first understanding of social justice and activism. Upon learning about how the world functions outside of the school curriculum, I felt empowered in learning and becoming a leader in my community. While education was not the only component of our program, it remained a big factor when we learned about campaigns, understood the meaning of solidarity, and made a commitment to serving our community. I was mentored, supported, and guided by this organization in high school and joined the staff in the middle of college as Administrative Coordinator. It was AROC that inspired me to pursue my Master's degree, particularly in a social justice-centered discipline such as Migration Studies, and to commit my life to serve and empower the community that did the same for me.

The particularity of researching Arab women stems from my upbringing and the family who has raised and cared for me all consisting of Arab migrant women who were displaced due to war. For my grandmother, Montaha Ereikat, who arrived in San Francisco in 1973 as a result of the 1967 Six-Day War in Palestine. For my mother, whose resilience as a Palestinian woman shaped me. For my aunties, who have nurtured me and empowered me to use my voice. This research seeks to serve as a tool for empowerment for those being of service to immigrant women in community spaces.

My project is named, "Replanting Our Roots" because of how migration causes people to uproot themselves and plant new seeds in the diaspora. In the context of this research, I view

community service work parallel to the act of replanting trees to grow. The replanting of trees symbolizes life after the struggle. The roots will only grow with the right care and nurturing. Together, we find growth through the devastations and beauty of migration and envision our communities growing after being uprooted. The theme of this project is around community care and devotion to the movement of immigrants' rights and empowerment.

### **Theoretical Framework: Post Colonialism and Third World Feminism**

Understanding Arab cultural, familial, and societal factors come with complexities and a need to not view the population in the negative framework of the West. Arab women being “othered” and silenced comes from the concept of Orientalism. Dr. Lila Abu Lughod discusses the intersections between Orientalism and gender in the context of Arab women (2001). Orientalist constructs of Eastern women as the “other” have been used to justify colonialism for centuries. She explains that these constructs have been gendered and continue to function in contemporary times. Orientalist views of the West have created a fixed image of the Muslim woman that generalizes them through stereotypes and removes their agency away. The construction of the identities of Muslim women has been wrongfully depicted through a lens that problematizes their context and considers the complexities that are involved. Their roles as mothers, wives, professionals, sisters, daughters, etc. continuously shape the boundaries of women in society. The image of Muslim women is one of the most visible examples of the generalization of the Orientalist depictions of women. This creates a lens of women who are silenced and removes their agency, which leads to being marginalized in society and even in spaces where they may need services. These assumptions and unfair categorization of an entire population are detrimental to the community's well-being.

## **Literature Review**

This section will introduce different topics about Arab women post-migration, including the gender dynamics and politics of Arab women both at home and in diasporic society, Feminism, Orientalism, and Post-Colonialism. I discuss assimilation in the Arab American context, then argue the importance of culturally relevant community centers providing space and services for immigrants, through Cultural Community Wealth (Yosso, 2005). I also use the model of the Black Panther Party as an example of their work's success. This project seeks to understand the role of community centers and spaces during the cultural and identity transformations of Arab migrant women, specifically in San Francisco where there is a large Arab community presence. The literature focuses heavily on Arab cultural dynamics to understand the intensity of cultural expectations and traditions placed on Arab women, and how these are (or are not) carried during life in the diaspora. I will also look at political factors, such as 9/11/2001, which brought intensified scrutiny and marginalization into Arab communities nationwide.

### **Arab Women**

Susan Muaddi Darraj (2002), an Arab American writer, argues that Arab American women often have to fight two separate battles, one at home against sexism that is personal and one in society against political racism. Nadine Naber (2011) also expands on this concept by exploring how the Arab American communities she has lived in, worked in and studied create certain issues as cultural and private, which divert from political and public issues. "We must call for a new movement that resists the choice between racism and imperialism, on the one hand, and sexism and homophobia, on the other" (Naber 101). Nadine's emphasis on how

patriarchy cannot exist without destructive systems of oppression speak to how gender justice must go hand in hand with fighting institutional and systemic oppression.

Given that these political issues could naturally call upon the feminist movement and uprising, many Arab feminist scholars argue that there also must be a critique of Western feminism. Amal Amireh (2011) explains, “Western feminist discourse on Arab women has a chilling effect particularly on the relationship between Arab and Arab American feminists” (Abdulhadi, 201). She explains that Arab American feminists not only have to combat sexism and patriarchy in their communities but also have to deal with the violent stereotypes of being Arab which are exhibited excessively through the media. Arab women are not included in the Western feminist agenda and when they are, it is often portrayed as them in need of saving from their savage and barbaric Arab men and culture. This contributes to racist and violent Islamophobia in Western society and systems. The liberation of Arab women in the eyes of Western feminists often draws upon the removal of their hijabs and being against their cultural constructs. Amira Jarmakani (2011) explains in her published essay on *‘Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility’*, “At the most obvious surface level is the narrative of the imperialist-colonialist civilizing mission, which capitalizes on the image of exotic, oppressed women who must be saved from their indigenous (hyper) patriarchy”. What does it mean when an entire demographic is portrayed as in need of saving? What is becoming of Arab women when the understanding of who they are in the world revolves around conflict? This creates a societal understanding of tension and consistent removal of agency and voice. The portrayal of Arab women as weak and submissive beings is detrimental and hinders the reality that Arab women have historically and currently been in professional and leadership roles. To generalize all Arab women as being

oppressed and in need of saving deeply affects livelihood, futures, and how they see their place in the world.

Postcolonial feminist theory, however, seeks to replace the not non-inclusive and shadowing feminist thought with a more culturally relative, transnational, and radical lens. Amal also talks about how Arab women do not have the same agency and role in being politically active and outspoken as their Western feminist counterparts. “The domesticating language is the effect of a Western paradigm that, in the name of politicizing the personal, ends up domesticating the political in third world women’s lives” (Naber, 2011).

### **Orientalism**

Dr. Edward Said is a Palestinian scholar whose research focuses on the “orient” and how Arabs are viewed in the Western eye. Dr. Ensieh Shabanirad discusses how Orientalism is present in the literature of Western novelists and that they have constructed and represented the “Orient”. Dr. Shabanirad discusses, “...the colonial female subjects are represented by an ambivalence of desire and disdain. They are mysterious yet untrustworthy, sexually arousing yet not quite clean, intriguing, and yet uninteresting” (Shabanirad, 2015). Arab women do not only endure the political and familial structures of oppression but also the Orientalist view that they must exist upon arrival. Edward Said explains this perspective more by:

“Liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange. From this perspective also, one can see 'the complete consort dancing together' contrapuntally.” (Said, E. W. (1994).

Orientalism has undoubtedly been amongst the tools to silence and suppress Arab women. Dr. Naber argues that articulations of Arabness in America have been haunted by the Orientalist definitions of culture. “The uninterrogated naturalization of a dichotomy between Arab and American culture among Arab Americans, usually associated as it is with essentialist understandings of religion, family, gender, and sexuality among Arab communities allows Orientalist thought to be left intact and activated” (Naber, 83). Dr. Naber dwells on an existing struggle of Arab migrants, as trying to navigate between and balance two opposite cultures can be hectic. Arab migrants often hold onto their values and traditions upon arrival, which is why people committed to service work must understand that it is crucial.

Orientalism also includes how patriarchy is a part of colonialism. “The construction of native women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models, and labels occurs in Oriental discourse” (Shabanirad, 24). Arab migrant women already endure patriarchy in their communities, but they also experience intensified sexist and patriarchal assumptions because of their backgrounds. These assumptions seek to silence and eliminate any agency of Arab migrant women.

### **Postcolonialism**

Why Arab immigrant women require services in the first place can only be justified in the context of forced migration due to war, imperialism, and militarism in their homelands. This has been theorized as postcolonialism. Post-colonialism is an academic discipline that focuses on the psychological, political, and socio-economic effects that people who have defeated, or who are still experiencing, colonialism endure. In addition to his work on Orientalism, Professor Edward Said also has immense work on postcolonial theory. Edward Said argues that colonialism is not

over entirely and that we are still seeing the harsh effect of colonialism in the form of chaos, corruption, and war. “The powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture, whereas those of the Oriental peoples have been ignored or distorted” (Hamadi, 2014). This is relevant to my study on Arab migrant women due to the reality of their displacement from their homelands. The Western world is arguably not a warm and welcoming place for those from the East, due to Orientalist and Islamophobic understandings of the Middle East. The majority of people in the West may not know how to best support a population that they have been conditioned to have a negative and violent perception.

Further, Robert Young (2001) explains the oppression of women under patriarchal structures of both colonial power and colonized indigenous societies. “Women, therefore, had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms (Young, 379)”. This is a concept very evident in the lives of Arab women who have endured both political violence stemming from colonialism and regimes to the gender-based violence and family dynamics. Further, the concept of, “double colonization, has referred to, “how women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. Women are subject to representation in colonial discourses in ways that collude with patriarchal values. Thus the phrase ‘a double colonization’ refers to the fact that women are twice colonized — by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too” (McLeod, 175).

### **Society and Culture**

In an essay published in, “*Arab and Arab American Feminisms*”, Amal Amireh discusses the view of Palestinian women in the eyes of Western feminists. “Palestinian women were assuming a more visibly public political role as opposed to their more traditional private political

role” (Amireh, 29). Amal critiques the Western feminist paradigm that, “in the name of politicizing the personal, ends up domesticating the political in third world women’s lives. In the process of this domestication, the dichotomy between the political and the personal, the public and the private, is upheld” (Amireh, 2011). This shows the intersections between the social implications of Arab women with the political climate. Gender and political struggle challenge patriarchal understandings of the third world when women are engaged in armed struggle, but the view remains distorted in concepts. She goes on to explain, “When Western feminists, for instance, address gender and nationalism concerning Palestinian women, they privilege sexual politics to the exclusion of all else, such as history, class, war, and occupation” (Amireh, 2011). This completely removes the agency of Arab women by firmly believing that they must either be submissive and oppressed beings or should they become the opposite, they are seen as rare. This takes away from having an identity that can flow freely and make its distinctions.

Dr. Naber continues to explain that, “Before September 11th, Arab American feminist scholars had been arguing that US government and corporate media images portrayed Arab women through colonialist tropes, oppressed Arab Muslim women compared to liberated American women and that these tropes were emerging alongside expanding US economic and military interventions in the Middle East” (Saliba, 1994). The notion that Arab women should strive to become like the American women if they want to be considered, “free” is racist and feeds into Orientalist discourse. The rhetoric that Western women are free is also dangerous because of how Western women are still marginalized and fighting for gender justice. Arab migrant women should not be told that they need to strive to mirror any Western women, they should be able to exist in a society that respects and acknowledges their preferences on how they



choose to live their life. A radical feminist approach would seek to understand that women are not free anywhere and that we need to stand in solidarity and take action together.

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. The narrative American women took in what they thought of as defending and liberating Arab and Muslim women was extremely troubling after 9/11/2001. Though the invasion and destruction of the US-led terror in Iraq and Afghanistan was an obvious mistake, it was not portrayed as such in the past. In her publication of, *'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?'*, Dr. Lila Abughod quotes former First Lady Laura Bush discussing the US role in Afghanistan: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes, they can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment, The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (U.S. Government 2002). The Western understanding of Arab and Muslim women does not come without the central argument of what we understand as freedom.

In a talk titled, "Rethinking Orientalism" given at Rutgers University in 2018, Professor Najde Al Ali explains, "Predominantly white Western and middle-class contexts of feminism were called into question by the third world and post-colonial feminists. The experiences of women under colonial rule, women of color, and working-class women suggested that gender cannot be separated from forms of oppression based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality." (Al Ali, 2018). The intersectionalities of the oppression of Arab migrant women are crucial in understanding how to best support them. The first step is understanding that culture remains a huge part of their lives, and may grow post-migration.

Arab culture, language, tradition, and identity are heavily indoctrinated into the lives of many Arab women, both of whom are migrants themselves or come from immigrant families.

“As with all products of human belief, there were caveats, and shades of gray, and matters of proportion. Our immigrant parents’ generation disproportionately pressured girls to uphold idealized demands of Arab culture” (Naber, 2011). The expectations placed on Arab women and setting them to a high standard of gender roles, expectations, and identity are disproportionate when compared to their Arab male counterparts due to the constructed gender dynamics in the diaspora. “Concepts of, ‘good Arab girls’ operate as a marker of community boundaries and the notion of a morally superior ‘Arab culture’ in comparison to concepts of, ‘American girls’ and ‘American culture’...” (Naber, 83). This viewpoint of what “America” means and is viewed not only within Arab societies but within Arab households, carries a rather negative context in how we understand the West socially. This is important in understanding Arab migrant women because of the often negative connotations of what the West is like, which influences how they choose to live here, whether they participate in society, and where they will go to ask for support.

### **Critical Race Theory on Community Wealth**

Tara Yosso’s work (2005) draws upon critical race theory and the concept of “community wealth”, where she discusses the potential of community cultural wealth to transform the schooling system. Her work challenges traditional cultural capital theory and instead looks at how cultures carry knowledge. This guides this research in understanding that by service provided through a cultural community center, it can indeed transform and empower the community in which it serves. Yosso explains, “Indeed, a CRT lens can ‘see’ that Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least 6 forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital” (Yosso, 2005). Though the article revolves around cultural wealth in education, these six forms of capital are integral to service

providing and community organizing. It allows the community to be served and supported through a lens of familiarity, comfort, and trust.

### **Assimilation**

This brings me to discuss the concept of assimilation, which is tentative amongst different Arab immigrant communities. Assimilation theory is important in understanding how Arabs fit into diasporic societies. In, “Constructing Difference and Sameness: the politics of assimilation in London’s Arab communities”, Caroline Nagel explains, “Assimilation, I shall argue, signifies observable, material processes of accommodation of and conformity to dominant norms. It is, in this respect, profoundly political rather than ecological...” (Nagel, 259). Nadine Naber’s analysis of the Arab community can argue that assimilation is not celebrated in certain Arabs who reject Western society and have their understanding of it. The understanding and willingness to assimilate can vary among different Arabs from different socioeconomic backgrounds and even reasons for migration. Nagel’s study on assimilation in Arab communities focused on London and she explained that “In sum, Arabs fit uneasily into current conceptions of immigrant-host society relations. They are posited neither as an oppressed ‘racial’ minority nor as an accepted, ‘assimilated’ component of British society” (Nagel, 269). This analysis is very similar to Arab communities in the US, especially after 9/11 when they became more racialized and scrutinized.

### **Black Panther Party**

Community-based centers provide necessary services for the survival of the community they serve. While community centers must be given the means to be service providers, the concept takes the role of the state who should be obligated to provide these services. This creates

a separation between the nonprofit sector and the state. From a Marxist lens, the state must be accountable and responsible for the livelihood and wellbeing of the people.

The Black Panther Party, an organization that formed in 1966 in Oakland initially to confront police oppression on their community, was able to empower and organize the black community and used service providing as a tool starting in 1969. An example of how they took care of their community was their Free Breakfast Program, which started because of how black children were unable to focus and succeed in school due to extreme poverty so severe that they had limited access to food. “The National School Lunch Program provided reduced-price, but not free lunches for poor children, and the National School Breakfast Program was limited to a few rural schools” (Pien, 2010). The state failed in addressing the issue of poverty because it did not give free lunches to its students. The BPP established this program at an Oakland church in 1969 and was extremely successful in meeting the needs of the people. Diane Pien explains:

“Local businesses, churches, and community-based organizations donated (sometimes with community pressure) space for the program and nutritious food like eggs, grits, toast, and milk. The Panthers fed more than 20,000 children nationally in 1969. By 1971 at least 36 cities had a breakfast program. In a 1969 U.S. Senate hearing, the National School Lunch Program administrator admitted that the Panthers fed more poor school children than did the State of California.” (Pien, 2010).

What started as a local effort to combat hunger for black children in Oakland miraculously led to pressuring Congress to expand the program nationally. Pien explains, “The Panther’s Free Breakfast Program spotlighted the limited scope of the National School Breakfast Program, and helped pressure Congress to authorize the expansion of the School Breakfast Program to all public schools in 1975” (Pien, 2010).

The fact that this non-state affiliated organization was doing more work for the community than the state itself shows the lack of commitment the state has to its underserved

populations. It also shows how organizations like the Black Panther Party effectively served their community by addressing their needs. But there had to have been an extra component to the effectiveness. Were the black students more comfortable when they were being fed by people who listened to and understood them? Was there a familiarity aspect in being cared for by people who aren't your parents, but possibly mirrored their traits? This is what I am attempting to research: to not only address the effects but to name the strategies in powerful and transformative services and community building.

Nonprofits have often replaced federal and state agencies in being service providers. In 'Making Immigrant Rights Real: Nonprofits and the Politics of Integration in San Francisco', Els de Graauw explains:

“Second, federal, state, and local governments have increasingly turned to nonprofit organizations to provide social and human services. This pattern was set by the Great Society programs of the 1960s—including the Urban Renewal, Model Cities, and Neighborhood Development programs that the Nixon administration merged in 1974 to become the Community Development Block Grant program—which awarded funding to community-based nonprofits to provide services to extinguish poverty and foster community development in poor urban areas” (Graauw, 39).

This model of nonprofit organizations providing necessary services with a mission to advance immigrant rights spread nationally. This specific form of advocacy has spread to cities such as Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. (Graauw, 39). Graauw notes that San Francisco is central in being a role model to this specific type of advocacy with the mission to advance immigrant rights work balanced with service work. While the work is arguably incredible and has won countless battles in policy reform and implementing crucial programs such as Language Access, there are still hardships. Graauw explains that nonprofits are subject to more government

restrictions on their political activities, have fewer resources to influence the policymaking process, and have a difficult time maintaining autonomy due to their reliance on government funding (Graauw, 40).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, much of the literature I looked at included several different key parts in this research. Studying identity formations and cultural transformations need to have different topics because of how dynamic and extensive the processes of subjects will be. I focused a lot on gender dynamics due to the complexities of gendered expectations and deep cultural importance in Arab communities. I wanted my literature to discuss the cultural aspect, the feminist framework, the political aspect through Orientalism and Post-Colonialism, the problematization of assimilation, the tool of cultural wealth, and the service model of the Black Panther Party. All of these theories come together in a way that addresses how we can better understand, learn from, and support Arab migrant women.

## **Methodology**

My methodology was in the form of personal interviews with community workers who work directly and closely with Arab migrant women. I conducted individual interviews with one AROC staff member and two specific community workers who have a history of working with Arab migrant women in San Francisco. The intention of having interviewed community workers was to not only better understand the best practices used to support Arab migrant women but to amplify the perspectives and tools used by small organizations not affiliated with a government agency.

One specific community worker I interviewed was Mouna Bemoussa, the Director of the Arab Women's Program from the Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco. I chose to interview Mouna because of her devotion and commitment to leading one of the only Arab Women's Programs that specifically serves survivors of domestic violence in the Bay Area. Mouna's history and experience with working with domestic violence survivor migrant Arab women allowed me to explore the avenues of services that are embodied in a response to the violence against Arab migrant women. Mouna was also one of the leaders and initiators of the first-ever Arab Women's Program at the Asian Women's Shelter that provides shelter and services to Arabic speaking survivors of domestic violence in the Bay Area.

The second specific community worker I interviewed was Soha Abdou, the Arab Family Program Coordinator at the Chinatown Community Development Center in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. I chose to interview Soha because of her work in coordinating Arab women's groups and being a strong support system for Arab immigrant families in the Tenderloin district in San Francisco. A large number of newly arrived Arab immigrants reside in this housing complex and Soha is a well-known and highly respected asset to the neighborhood.

The third community worker I interviewed is AROC's Executive Director, Lara Kiswani. Lara has been the Executive Director of AROC since 2012 and was a volunteer prior. She has experience in women's programming and curriculum development for Arab immigrant youth. Lara upholds the vision of AROC to empower and uplift the Arab community in her leadership. Lara is a service worker with a commitment to simultaneously community organizing the Arab and Muslim community towards collective liberation.

My questions aimed towards understanding how community-based organizations do their service work to best support and empower Arab migrant women. I asked the community workers about their experiences in working in community-based agencies not tied to the city and state but also attempted to dive into what their work entails beyond just service providing. Rather, the work that views service work as part of a larger vision of empowerment and community leadership post-migration.

The community workers I interviewed had a clear sense of how the system works when it came to services and support for immigrant communities. The workers were also able to tell me what they find the most challenging, important, and lacking in serving Arab migrant women. This allowed me to not only provide critique but offer policy recommendations and alternatives for the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. All three community workers have consented to their names being used in this study.

The outcome of the study offers policy recommendations on how to best support Arab immigrant women, addresses gaps, identifies areas of needed support, and finally provides an analysis of the specific AROC methods of service work that is tied to a more political context. This research can be used by other organizations doing service work for Arab migrant women, city institutions who run immigrant programming, funders, and anyone who wants to better serve and support Arab migrant women. This research is meant for people to better understand the complexities and cultural aspects of Arab women in hopes of being better supported when it comes to service providing. I hope that it can be used by service providers, both Arab and non-Arab, to help make Arab migrant women feel more empowered and less isolated in their migration experience.

### **Case Study #1: Mouna, Asian Women's Shelter**



*“I’m kind of like the Aunty” -Mouna B.*

I’ve been using this phrase regularly since I began working at the Arab Resource and Organizing Center in 2017. In addition to providing legal immigration services, AROC provides case management services to the diverse Bay Area Arab population. Though many people come to the center seeking support with job searching, health insurance, school enrollment, public benefits, and housing, the center often receives calls from women who are seeking information on help with domestic violence-related issues. Whether the requested information is for them or for someone they know, it often requires a referral to Mouna, the Director of the Arab Women’s Program at the Asian Women’s Shelter. Mouna specifically serves women from the Middle East and North Africa and leads the staff who work in the Arab Women’s Program. Before the women who are served by the Asian Women’s Shelter receive assistance, it often begins with a phone call or email to a woman dedicated to their safety and wellbeing.

I conducted this interview in an East Oakland cafe on a sunny Tuesday afternoon. I chose to interview Mouna because of her long commitment to serving Arab migrant women through the Asian Women’s Shelter as Director of the Arab Women’s Services program. Mouna, an Arab migrant woman herself, migrated to the US from Morocco when she was twenty years old. She describes her upbringing in Morocco as comfortable and explained that her reasons for migration were not due to war or turmoil in her homeland. Mouna first arrived in New Jersey where her sister was living. She was enrolled in English courses at a local community center. She later found herself in San Francisco and attended the City College of San Francisco. “It took me a while to learn English”, Mouna described [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]. She received her Associate’s degree in Early Childhood Education and finished her

Bachelor's degree in Multilingualism. Upon completing her degree, Mouna began volunteering with the Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco, an organization committed to addressing the needs of women, children, and transgender survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking, especially those who are immigrants and refugees (AWS Website, 2020). During her time volunteering, Mouna would simply play with the children of the women staying at the shelter for a few hours then go home. She felt bored and she wanted to use her potential, her language skills, and the ability to work with people on a more impactful level. The opportunity came in 2016 when a grant opened to coordinate an Arab Women's Services program, which Mouna applied to and began the pilot program to determine if there was a dire need for it. After six months of the pilot program that did programs and case management services, it was clear that a program dedicated to Arab women's services was necessary. Mouna continued coordinating the program and is now the Director of Arab Women's Services at the Asian Women's Shelter.

I first asked Mouna how the program operated because when I refer women in need of help, I do not know the process after giving them Mouna's phone number. In my role, she served as a pillar of hope when I would hear stories of survivors seeking help and never knowing what happens after we get off the phone. "It begins with a phone call and initial intake", explains Mouna. [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]. There, Mouna or another staffer can assess whether or not there is room at the shelter if the caller is going to escape their situation or is already homeless. The location of the shelter is kept secret for confidentiality and safety. Many of whom call Mouna don't need a place to stay, but are taken on as case management clients. Often, the escape plan takes months to plan. The women are guided on how

to obtain a driver's license. They memorize schedules, addresses, and make copies of all government documents. Most women need legal representation or general advice. Others just need emotional support. Support came up frequently in my conversation with Mouna, not limited to any single type, citing that women often did not have family here and migrated through their husbands. "Some of them have nothing and are ashamed to tell their families what's happening. Or that the abuser is so powerful that his family back in their home country will go after them" [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]. This contributes to the reality of isolation in post-migration and the importance that an organization equipped with the cultural capacity and training serves as an overall support system.

Mouna emphasized that the women feeling supported by someone who understood them linguistically and culturally were essential in serving them. However, Mouna cited gaps in social systems and other organizations without an identity-based focus in their objective. "We spend a lot of time talking to other service providers about how to work efficiently with Muslim and Arab women, and how to have the understanding and give them the services they need." [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]. Among the issues include service providers not understanding the specific cultures and customs of the women who need services.

Because of this gap, the Asian Women's Shelter has conducted training and workshops for community service providers in the past. One that I attended on behalf of AROC was titled, "Building Connections: a discussion on Islamic law and how to support Muslim Domestic violence survivors." The training was attended by several different representatives from nonprofits who serve Arab and Muslim women. The event focused on Islamic law, domestic violence laws (and lack of) in Islamically governed countries, and the global misinterpretations

of Islam concerning the agency of Muslim women. As part of the presentation, the speaker focused on breaking down a dozen translations of a particular verse in the Quran often used to falsely justify that domestic violence is encouraged in Islam. Specifically, the people who use the verse ranged from certain Islamic governments to Islamophobic people who want to either prove that Islam is an oppressive religion and call for its followers to be “saved” by the West or to justify violence against women. This creates a dangerous dynamic that both do not serve nor empower Muslim women, emphasizing the importance of having a concrete understanding of Islamic culture as the first step to allyship and becoming a support system.

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## Building Connections 2.0

Arab Women's services at AWS invites you to:  
*An evening of networking for service providers working with the Arab community and a discussion on Islamic law and how to support muslim Domestic violence survivors.*


**Monday, November 12th 2018**  
**5:30pm -8:30pm**  
**At Arab Cultural and Community Center (ACCC)**  
**2 Plaza St San Francisco CA**

**Program:**

5:30-6 pm	Light Dinner
6- 6:30 pm	Introductions
6:30-7:30 pm	Presentation & discussion with Zakia Afrin
	Islam and Domestic Violence: An introduction for Advocates. This workshop will discuss basic norms of Islamic law, current state of domestic violence law in Muslim majority countries and the U.S. At the end of the session, we will develop best practices together and share resources for clients and systems working around them.
7:30- 8 pm	Networking Reception

**RSVP required:** <https://goo.gl/forms/a76sVURIXvA082L52>

**Questions:** [mouna@sfaws.org](mailto:mouna@sfaws.org)



Arab women's services (ARWS) at Asian Women's Shelter (AWS) is a program geared towards Arabic speaking survivors of violence, providing information, referrals, case management and counseling in Arabic.

*Source: Linda Ereikat, email archives.*

When I asked Mouna to expand on the particularities of service providing for Arab migrant women, she told me about the history of the Arab Women's Program at the Asian

Women's Shelter's formation. She discussed the gaps she saw in finding services for monolingual Arabic speakers. She highlighted that a program was necessary because though Mouna was an Arabic speaking staff, she could not do it alone and without a structural plan in place. She also explained the importance of the program because of the unjust way that Arab and Muslim women were viewed by service providers.

“The bias that people hold about Arab and Muslim women is problematic. Everywhere. Social Work, legal, everywhere you go. If you are hesitant that means you are oppressed, uneducated, and don't speak the language. We spend a lot of time talking to other service providers about how to work efficiently with Muslim women, with Arab women, and how to have the understanding and give them the services they need.” [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]

As mentioned in my literature review, Arab and Muslim women are viewed in an Orientalist light in the West. This depiction is dangerous and even hurts service providing if the provider uses bias and judgments in formulating their case plan. Culturally informed training remains integral in empowering service-providing.

I asked Mouna what she finds the most challenging in providing services to Arab women. “The most challenging is trust” responded Mouna with no hesitation. [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]. Mouna went on to describe the trust playing a factor from the very beginning of someone calling her. When someone is given Mouna's phone number, they don't know who they are speaking to and are often told that she can help. Mouna explains that for survivors of trauma, trust is often already broken by the time she speaks to them. Mouna also describes this lack of trust coming from the cultural dynamics of not wanting your community to know about your issues. Mouna explains that in the Arab community, people often know one another. “They know most people know each other. If you are Yemeni, or another nationality, you don't want another Yemeni to know about your situation” [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020,

March 3) Personal Interview]. This is linked to the emphasis on family name and reputation forcibly placed on Arab women.

My next question for Mouna was how she builds trust with her clients. Mouna explained the importance of confidentiality at her agency, but that it often does not resonate with her clients. The commitment to confidentiality is sometimes not received well and instead replaced with an assumption based on the fear that Mouna, or any worker at the Asian Women's Shelter, will tell the entire community about their story. One small but effective way her team combats this issue is by having the phone line caseworkers change their specific Arabic dialects to be the opposite of the caller. For example, a caseworker might speak a Syrian dialect of Arabic if the caller is Yemeni, due to the fear of thinking the caller might know the woman's family or someone in their hometown. This is an example of how understanding gendered aspects of Arab culture plays a huge role in the lives of Arab women and needs to be handled accordingly by service providers. The strategy of code-switching is the best practice within itself. Being able to meet someone where they are at and prioritize their comfort and needs over yours is key to service work.

In addition to the lack of trust for service providers and fear over reputation, there also lies a lack of trust in the government or any agency that claims it can help. Mouna is required to disclose that if she is made aware of any violence or a threat to harm either themselves or others, that she will be required by law to report it. Mouna explains that for some of her callers, they do not always explain that the help they are seeking is for them. They will often describe the advice as being for someone they know and almost always ask if children will be taken away if they seek help from their abusive partners. This lack of trust in the system goes hand in hand with a

lack of understanding of the system. That is why it's often important for Mouna to spend time building trust and a relationship before the services are given. To be trusted, there needs to be a form of clarity that differentiates Mouna and her program from the government. Relating to Mouna both culturally and linguistically while remaining patient at the judgments brought to the agency and working through them together helps accomplish this goal.

My next question was about the main political, social, or economic factors that affect her work. Mouna explained that the majority of her monolingual clients have little to no educational background and little knowledge about systems such as financial, legal, and social services. She explains that this usually occurs when their husbands are the head of the households and have absolute control over the finances and overall decisions. This intensified patriarchy makes it even harder to navigate through necessities, emphasizing the importance of having community centers to support those in abusive relationships. In Mouna's agency, emergency housing and longterm rental assistance are provided. The women she serves are supported in finding work and have their rent paid for one year as they develop newfound stability. However, that stability being longlasting and useful for all women who seek help remains an issue. Mouna explained to me that it's not uncommon that many of the women who arrive at the shelter often return to their abusers. However, Mouna doesn't view the returning to an abuser as a failure. She explains,

“But really, some people go back to their abusers and that's the safest route that they choose for their life. And it's okay because the time that they spent with me outside of the shelter or with us at this shelter is a significant time in their life that they learned and healed from things that happened to them. So success for me means that somebody learned about domestic violence and learned about the patterns of control and manipulation.” [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview]

True feminism is in respecting that each woman should have the agency and power to decide what she wants for herself. Mouna's point above speaks to the fact that as service

providers, it is not their job to decide and speak for who they serve. Rather, they exist to support and offer different options in their paths. This is a way to uphold the commitment to agency and empowerment.

Mouna emphasizes the importance of education and how AWS conducting training on basic life skills has been integral to their work. Mouna explained that women often needed education on currency such as the values of a quarter, dollar, etc. As women escaping abusive husbands and households, they face another battle being immigrants. Not only are these women survivors of domestic violence, but they are also survivors of their immigration journeys that many of them often had no say in as the decision was almost always made by war, economic hardship, or their husbands. This speaks to the importance of having community centers to be sources of education that does not dismiss their experiences. If the women need education on what a quarter is, then the agencies should be prepared to give that.

Mouna goes on to tell me about a social factor affecting her work which is the victimization of the women she serves. This victimization first comes from the families of the survivor who assume that her abuse was her fault. Divorce and domestic violence are among the topics in Arab culture that are taboo and bring forth discomfort due to how home life gets emphasized to be completely private. Mouna says that their solution to this victimization is training caseworkers and advocates on how to work with survivors of trauma and more importantly, to not victim blame. “The educational aspect is very important because even asking, “What did you do?” changes the entire interaction” [Benmoussa, Mouna. (2020, March 3) Personal Interview].



I then asked Mouna about how her agency instills leadership in their clients. Mouna says that they encourage professional development such as school and training. However, many of the women who receive services often end up partaking in the domestic violence language advocate training that the agency offers. They also volunteer for events that the agency holds such as Ramadan and Eid celebrations. Mouna says that these training sessions often help them gain access to employment because it becomes one of their first forms of relevant work experience. The support they receive does not end and the women receive mentorship and support even after leaving the shelter. How they aren't treated as numbers and get forgotten about after the services received are integral to their leadership and community involvement. Mouna explained that this encouragement for independence and education spoke to their mission of fighting for the self-determination of marginalized women.

I asked Mouna about the three best practices in serving Arab migrant women to which she responded,

1. Access to culturally informative services: mental health, legal advocacy, social services, etc.
2. The service providers need to be culturally equipped in not just language, but to know where they come from in terms of country-specific, family dynamics, language dialects, education levels, etc.
3. Educating the public and service providers on how to give these services efficiently.

Finally, I ended the interview by asking Mouna to tell me about a time where she felt most impactful in the lives of the women that she served. She told me a story of a domestic

violence survivor mother who went to the store to buy milk for her baby and another item with twenty dollars and realized that she would not have any money left upon reaching the register. She wanted to change her mind but felt pressured and was not fluent in English. She purchased the items anyway and stressed about not having any money left for that week. Mouna said that they spoke about what happened and that Mouna discussed that it's okay to walk away from the register next time. It would be okay to not want the items anymore and leave. This simple statement is reflective that as women, we have choices and can walk away.

### **Case Study #2: Soha Abdou, Asian Women's Shelter**

*"Allah Helps Those Who Help Others"*

I interviewed Soha on March 10th. As I walked to the affordable housing complex that Soha's office is in, I viewed the inequities firsthand in the harsh conditions of the Tenderloin. It's hard to take in that immigrant families are expected to thrive and heal in a district whose residents have historically been failed by systems and local leadership. The Tenderloin is known to have a high volume of homeless people and increased violence, a symbol of failed city initiatives that prioritize gentrification and welcoming tech over public health. Tenderloin Family Housing at 201 Turk St. is a large unit of affordable housing. The majority of its residents are immigrant families whose children attend schools nearby. The building is referred to as 201 Turk St. by both community workers and residents. The large Arab immigrant presence can be seen on the blocks surrounding 201 Turk. There is Yemen Kitchen, a tiny family-owned restaurant serving authentic Yemeni food, a liquor store that plays Arabic music from the 1970s, a deli that serves falafel and tabouli, and two mosques on the same street. As you walk up and down Turk St., you see the mothers in hijab walking their children to and from school wearing themed

backpacks. It feels familiar and warm until I look on the floor and see the used needles on the floor and bodies laid out across the surrounding bus stops and buildings that make hope that they are only sleeping. The Tenderloin neighborhood is no white picket fence green gas common immigrant perception of America, it's a zone that exhibits the realities of poverty and failed governments.

Soha is rarely in her actual office at 201 Turk St. and her job is far from regular. She can be found throughout the building or even around the block supporting where she is needed. That's exactly what Soha is: needed. Soha does her job exceptionally well which is why she was among the first people I thought of when deciding who to interview for this research. I noticed Soha's strength in how she spoke with strength, but also in her determination in protecting and caring for the women she serves. Whether it was rushing to tell reporters at community events to not photograph the women who did not feel comfortable taking photos or calling on AROC attorneys to come down to 201 Turk to do legal consultations to deal with accessibility issues, Soha can be described as someone close to Superwoman.

I first asked Soha to explain how she got involved in this work. She started as a volunteer for four years and she was encouraged to apply for the position once it was created due to the increase of Arab families migrating to the Tenderloin. She is an immigrant herself from Egypt and came to the US accompanied by her husband. When I asked if she was involved in similar work in Egypt, she explained that the dynamics of support were different. In Egypt and most parts of the Middle East, support for your neighbors and community are norms. The support system is not limited to any agency or social worker but is spread by word of mouth to meet the needs. Soha describes that she grew up knowing that everyone is always helping each other.

Soha explains that she does this work for the sake of Allah, citing the Quran when she says we must always help one another. “There is a Hadith that says, Allah helps those who help others”, explained Soha [Abdou, Soha. (2020, March 10) Personal Interview]. Soha’s Muslim identity is an integral part of her work. She wears the hijab and is involved in several community efforts such as planning large Ramadan dinners and Eid celebrations in the conference room of 201 Turk St. Soha’s demeanor reminds me of the Arab women that I was raised by fierce but kind. Her compassion is unmatched but she remains strong and outspoken. She explains that being in service to others contributes to her faith as a Muslim.

I began by asking Soha about the challenges of providing services to our community to which she immediately responded with, “There is a mix between religion and culture” [Abdou, Soha. (2020, March 10) Personal Interview]. The first example she gave me was how people will often make statements on what is allowed in the Islamic religion even though it isn’t true. She explained that she has seen women in need of services often prefer or expect that a woman helps them with their needs due to them being Muslim, explaining how gender segregation is common in certain Muslim communities. However, it has been argued that this separation of men and women in extreme measures such as limiting male to female interactions is an influence of culture than it is as an Islamic principle. And she’s right. It’s not uncommon to attend Muslim community events that are mixed-gendered and see the seating separated with limited interactions between men and women who are not your spouse or family member. This is an important factor to remember in service providing because though it may be argued what is culture and religion, the comfort of your clients must be prioritized. Soha’s main priority is always the women she serves.

When I asked about the particularities of serving Arab women, Soha explained that this is determined by a case by case basis. She emphasized that honesty is a key part of her role in trust-building and refraining from acting as if she has all the answers. She gave me examples such as how any immigration legal issue is immediately referred to AROC and how she makes sure to not answer any questions she does not have the answer to, to uphold integrity. Soha recognizes that it is not her job to know everything, but to assist women in accessing resources and services available to them. This practice emphasizes the importance of community and understanding that support is a team effort. “If you write something wrong, you are the one who wrote it. You still need to protect yourself as well by saying upfront: “This is what I can serve in, but I cannot serve in that. That is not my specialization.” [Abdou, Soha. (2020, March 10) Personal Interview]. The emphasis on being honest with your clients prevents broken promises and expectations. The honesty an advocate brings into the situation builds trust with the client while setting boundaries and realistic expectations. Soha also emphasizes the importance of the women having choice and how caseworkers are not there to make decisions for them. By not making choices for your clients, you are teaching them agency and how to access their power. In a patriarchal reality, the choice is not always the first option. Through conscious service-providing, we can meet the needs of women and empower them with this basic skill of encouraging choice and decision-making. This question answered my question on how to build trust, which Soha firmly believes it is through unconditional honesty. She also stated that trust-building also requires the ability to empathize with the women as their advocate. As an Arab Muslim immigrant woman living in the same neighborhood as her clients, Soha’s ability to

do her job well is reflective of her own experiences of migration and the complexities that come with being an Arab Muslim immigrant woman accessing services.

I then asked Soha about the main political, social, and economic factors that impact her work. Soha's response was the rapidly changing policies and laws that go into effect, citing the most recent "Public Charge" law that the Trump Administration recently enacted earlier this year which complicated the naturalization process for legal permanent residence holders who are receiving public benefits (Immigrant Legal Resource Center, 2020). Soha emphasized that the change of policies, however, affects those most who have a hard time navigating and understanding the complex systems in place, especially immigration. "Knowledge is power" [Abdou, Soha. (2020, March 10) Personal Interview]. Having legal providers at AROC who not only practice immigration law but can thoroughly explain to clients what these laws and policies mean in their native language is crucial. Doing so reflects on the importance of Language Access and making sure the community can understand the knowledge brought to them that directly affects them.

When I asked Soha on how she implements leadership development in her role, she explained that giving women tasks and motivating them to take initiatives. "Leadership is dynamic, it can be so many things. Everyone is a leader in their unique way" [Abdou, Soha. (2020, March 10) Personal Interview]. Soha's understanding of leadership is not rooted in a singular way of doing but in a way of being. That is the goal of developing leadership with newly arrived immigrant women, teaching them that they are all leaders and are all capable of doing so in different ways.

I asked Soha about the three best practices in serving Arab migrant women to which she responded,

1. Honesty/Trust. Talking from your heart
2. Language. Brings comfort and understanding.
3. Cultural familiarity

Finally, I asked Soha to tell me about a time where she felt that she was most impactful in the lives of the women that served. Soha told me that she doesn't assess her impact much because she does her work for the sake of Allah and feels that is enough. Soha's statement was extremely humble, given that she has done immense work in her community. Her compassion is inspirational.

### **Case Study #3: Lara Kiswani, Arab Resource and Organizing Center**

I conducted this interview under unexpected circumstances due to the COVID-19 global pandemic that I am finishing this degree in. I had anticipated conducting this interview in-person but settled for the new reality of Zoom. I am grateful to have known Lara for many years as my mentor which made the conversation fruitful although the technology was used to communicate. Lara was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area to Palestinian refugee parents. She grew up attending weekend Arabic school in her neighborhood, a common theme in Arab Americans whose parents want them to learn the language and culture to compensate for not learning it in their K-12 schools. Lara explains that this experience made her value grassroots community organizations within a society where structural racism inhibits the full potential of the working-class and immigrant communities. Lara began organizing and advocacy efforts as a student activist shortly after 9/11/2001 in the anti-war movement. Her area of expertise is

educational work, focusing on youth and adult education, and it was in the Arab community that she was able to apply it more directly when she became the Executive Director of AROC.

My first question asked about the challenges of service-providing to Arabs. Lara explains, “I don’t think there is anything particularly challenging to providing services to Arabs. I think it is not unlike any other immigrant or working-class community. Relationship building, trust, language, and a proven track record all help to make service provision more impactful and relevant.” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]. Lara goes on to explain that language access is a barrier since the Arab community is grossly underrepresented and undercounted, due in part to lack of inclusion of a MENA category in the Census. My next question asked about the particularities of providing services to Arab migrant women. Lara describes that Arab migrant women are leaders in this work. She explains,

“Arab migrant women are not homogenous – they are upper class, working class, power, homeless, queer, trans, single, mothers, and elders. If we are talking about working-class migrant women, many of whom we work directly with, the particularities like in being able to draw out their lived experience back home to help them navigate society here. They are often left to run the household on their own while their husbands work long hours or are overseas. Most of them are monolingual. And their dialects vary widely. Some of them have jobs while also working fulltime as mothers. And most of them, in our base, have children. Being able to provide services to them often means having to go to them, and not expecting them to come to us. It means providing childcare. It means respecting their leadership and expertise on their lived experience and that of our community” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]

Lara’s emphasis on centering the voices of those most impacted and most connected through their lived experiences speaks to the importance of building leadership in the communities we serve. Lara brings up a basic best practice of, “having to go to them”. This is an important concept because it serves as resisting the barriers of mobility. Many of the women in need of services at AROC will often not have access to a car or ways of transportation. AROC



attorneys have conducted free clinics at the 201 Turk St. housing development as a way to serve the needs of the community. This not only creates trust but demonstrates commitment.

When I asked about the main social, political, and economic factors that impact her clients, Lara explained that war, militarism, racism, forced migration, and poverty are among the most common. “They are often fleeing countries impacted by US-led wars and arrive in a country whose policies are very hostile towards Arab migrants” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]. When I asked for her to explain the hostility, she explained that it is in the form of surveillance, repression, entrapment, and racist immigration policies like the Muslim Ban. Many who have fled wars arrive as asylum seekers and refugees who have little access to resources and are unable to find work until they gain status. Also, the constantly shifting policies make it that much more difficult as service providers, to be able to meet the growing needs of the community. “And not unlike other migrant communities, many of our youth find themselves as victims of our brutal legal justice system that disproportionately targets poor people of color.” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)].

I asked Lara about the role of trust-building in her work and to describe how she builds trust. “The only way to build trust is by building real meaningful relationships. That takes time. And it takes doing work together.” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]. Lara goes on to explain the importance of meaningful service work intended on social change. Lara explains deeper that,

“We can’t see the work as a charity. We can’t see it as purely a service. It must be understood as work for the sake of the well-being of people, and inherently, social change. If you don’t know the people you are working with, don’t understand their concerns, their needs, their experiences, their expertise, their visions for the future, you cannot engage in real community building, organizing or be in true service of the community” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)].

The emphasis on not seeing nonprofit service work as charity is vital in making sure the work being done in community centers is empowering and engaging the community in social change. Rather than view community centers as parallel to government service agencies, it is important to differentiate and implement strategies that have different goals and objectives. The intention in a provider such as AROC is to engage the clients in community organizing and seeing themselves as powerful agents of change.

My next question asked about leadership development in this work. Lara explained, “We provide services to our community and then organize them to participate in campaigns that shift the conditions that forced them to need those services in the first place. We value the leadership of those most impacted by an issue.” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]. Lara explained the details and timeline of a crucial AROC campaign, Arabic Language Pathway, that fought for Arabic to be taught in the San Francisco Unified School District. It started when the parents of youth leaders were frustrated with the lack of Arabic interpretation services in the school district. In response, AROC trained them to lead a campaign to demand that SFUSD hire Arabic interpreters. The youth and parent leaders then decided that they wanted to fight for Arabic in schools. AROC trained families, mothers, youth to speak in public about their concerns and demands of the district. When the district was slow to implement the decision to implement Arabic, AROC engaged the leaders that were developed through the campaign to decide what next steps should be taken, and to take part in the hiring process once teachers were being interviewed for the position. This campaign was successful and Arabic has been taught in SFUSD since 2019.

Lara answered my last question on an impactful story and explained that this campaign was a powerful one. When I asked why she explained:

“Despite Islamophobic and racist attacks, the community was held up by and supported by a wide coalition of immigrant rights, housing justice, faith institutions, social service, youth organizations, and other community-based organizations that stood up for Arabs and Muslims and showed solidarity with them. This had lasting impacts on how our community saw themselves as part of the social justice fabric of SF. And continues to have lasting impacts on the families whose children now get to learn Arabic K-12 classrooms.” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]

This campaign exemplifies the importance of women leading actions that they feel is important to fight for. The mothers were extremely distraught that being in this country meant that their native language was being compromised in the lives of their children. They knew that teaching their children Arabic was not enough if they did not study it and appreciate it in schools. The campaign was successful because the women had agency in fighting for something sacred to them like language that had affected their lives due to forced migration.

When I asked Lara how she assesses successful services, she explained that it was through analysis that sought to answer questions such as, “Were we able to meet our goal? Was the community member able to access a service that had a positive impact on their lives? Does the community feel empowered as a result? Do they trust AROC and see themselves as part of our organization? Were we able to learn something about our community, society, and what needs to be changed in the process?” [Kiswani, Lara. (2020, June 10, Personal Interview)]

The constructive criticism in this analysis is vital to improving and keeping the strategies to be fluid and changing. This can serve as a best practice due to how it seeks to find out if the community was served most effectively.

Finally, when asked about the three best practices for providing services to the community, Lara explained that is through:

1. Relationship to the community
2. Language competency,
3. Being informed and led by those you are serving”

### **Executive Summary Conclusion**

In conclusion, I argue that assimilation-based mentorship is not the goal in the framework of supporting Arab migrant women and that we should support the nationalities and cultures brought with them from their homelands to really and truly thrive in the diaspora. Community centers providing services to their communities open a new door to engaging the base to become agents of change and feel included in the community they live in. Building powerful relationships and longlasting community involvement starts with community centers providing the tools and resources to uplift immigrant communities.

Community-based service providers can act more of a supportive and empowering space for migrants because of language and their ability to act as a more familiar unit. Also, providing language competent services are what help women thrive rather than forcing them to learn English and integrate them into spaces that are opposite of their cultural norms and comfortability.

These interviews were able to conclude that trust, language, culturally informed training for service providers, understanding and respecting the cultural components and norms of the population served, honesty, solving issues of mobility, demonstrating cultural familiarity, building meaningful relationships, offering education and training led by the organization to the

women, centering the voices of women, and not conducting service work as a charity as the best practices of service providing for Arab migrant women.

Trust remained an ongoing theme throughout each interview. Building relationships and prioritizing comfort, respect, and clear expectations of roles are effective ways to serve. Reminding the clients of the organization's confidentiality policy and reiterating that all interactions remain confidential are also important.

The language was also a crucial theme. Ensuring the organizations have staff who can communicate thoroughly with the clients in their native language makes the work effective and defeats the notion of not fully understanding someone's needs due to language. Language barriers can result in defective communication which will hinder trust and the service process.

Culturally informed competence to provide services was also a theme. The provider must be aware of cultural norms, differing dialects, tribalism, gender roles, family dynamics, society, and certain culturally taboo concepts such as divorce. The providers must provide training that emphasizes the importance of being culturally informed in the service providing to ensure clients feel heard and respected rather than silenced and isolated.

Organizations that can provide English classes, life skills classes, volunteer opportunities to build work experience for future jobs, campaign and community organizing skills, financial literacy classes, and classes that encourage self-sustainability and independence are helpful in addition to providing services. Having already built trust and relationships, organizations can serve as mentors. It also establishes a longterm relationship that does not end after the services have been provided.

Ensuring staff and volunteers of organizations do not view service-work as charity ensures that the work being done is rooted in social change. Training staff and volunteers to view this work as having a goal to empower and engage immigrants towards self-determination and agency makes these goals more effectively.

## **PART II: THE APPLIED PROJECT**

My applied project will provide policy recommendations for the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. My recommendations are below.

### **Policy Recommendations for AROC**

1. Finding: Arab migrant women thrive in women-based programs.
  - a. Solution: Implement a women's program that provides case management services, English classes, volunteer opportunities, and community organizing skills.
2. Finding: Language Accessibility.
  - a. Solution: Provide all non-Arabic speaking staff with Arabic classes to better communicate with clients.
3. Finding: All service-providing staff must be culturally competent and informed to serve Arab immigrant women.
  - a. Solution: Mandatory intensive training on culturally informed services for all staff. This training must also include trauma-informed service providing and building relationships.
4. Finding: Trust and honesty are key to relationship building.
  - a. Solution: Ensure all staff is up-to-date with the confidentiality policy. Continue to update it and have the most current version ready in Arabic to share with clients.

5. Finding: Mobility issues prevent women from coming to the center.
  - a. Solution: Create a program that goes to the 201 Turk St. housing development once a month and provides legal services and other relevant information needed.
  - b. Including updates on the newest policy changes in government, city council, immigration, etc. Also having this material translated in Arabic.
6. Finding: Clients do not trust government agencies.
  - a. Solution: Ensure staff are trained in serving as liaisons between government agencies and the community. Commit to being trained in and training the community on not involving government agencies in issues to prevent harm.
7. Finding: Women do best as leaders.
  - a. Solution: Create an interactive program between the existing youth program and the proposed women's program. Cross-generational mentorship and connection will serve as an avenue to community building.
8. Finding: Women made an impact on the City and County of San Francisco with the Language Pathways Campaign.
  - a. Solution: Create a training in the proposed women's program to encourage delegating advocacy leaders in attending city council and Board of Education meetings. They will be able to mobilize people when needed and track pending decisions that affect their children and neighborhoods.
9. Finding: Trauma due to forced migration.

- a. Solution: Partner with Arabic speaking mental health practitioners to provide free to low cost mental health services for those active in the proposed women's program.

## **Appendix A**

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO RESEARCH PROJECT**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. If you agree to participate, I will ask for your signature or oral agreement. I will also leave you a copy of this form for you to keep.

#### **WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:**

This study attempts to collect information about how service providers have previously supported and how it can better support Arab migrant women better with their services. The purpose is to identify the best practices for serving and supporting Arab migrant women in our work. The outcome of the study will offer recommendations on how to best support Arab immigrant women, will address any gaps, identify areas of needed support, and finally provide an analysis of our services and organizing. I want to interview you to gain a better sense of your experiences in service providing to immigrant communities or receiving services from a community center.

#### **WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:**

In this interview, I'll ask you questions and record your answers. If there is any question you don't wish to answer for any reason, you may skip it. If there are issues you think I should be asking you about but do not, please feel free to share your views with me. I am first and foremost interested in what you have to say. If it is okay with you, I'd like to audio record, just to be sure I get your words exactly correct, but I will not share the audio with anyone else.

#### **DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation in this study will involve answering questions and should take you approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

You should not experience any risk or discomfort at all in this interview. You are free to end the interview whenever you choose to. If you agree to let me record the interview, you can always ask me to turn off the audio recorder at any time.

#### **PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**

I would like to use your name and agency in which you provided the services, but only if you allow me to. If you do not consent, your answers will be anonymous.

#### **COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There is no compensation for participating in this project.

#### **VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty. Furthermore, you may



skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**

Please feel free to ask me any questions that you have. If you have questions later, you may contact me, Linda Ereikat.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact me at 650-696-0071 or [Linda@araborganizing.org](mailto:Linda@araborganizing.org)

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.**

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*PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE, MARK, & DATE*

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

#### Service Provider Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How long have you been in the SF Bay Area?  
Where were you before?
2. How did you get involved in this work?
3. What would you say is the most challenging part of providing services to Arabs?
4. What are the particularities of providing services to Arab migrant women?
5. What are the main political, social, or economic factors that impact your clients?
6. What role does trust-building play in your work? Describe, if any, ways that you go about building trust?
7. What role does leadership development play in your work? What are the characteristics of clients that demonstrate leadership? What do you think contributed to their leadership development?
8. What do you think are 3 best practices for providing services to our community?
9. How do you assess successful services?
10. Describe an incident or story where you felt most impactful in the lives of the women you serve.

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