United States
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Project Summary

The Afghan Women’s Group will provide social and emotional support for refugee women who are survivors of war-related trauma and cultural displacement, using culturally significant crafts to facilitate social gathering and emotional healing. This collaboration will be housed within a trusted community-based organization, the Refugee Community Partnership (RCP), who has the infrastructure and staff to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate support, and with whom the project team members have a longstanding relationship. This project will be run by Grace May, RCP’s Bonner Intern and Volunteer Coordinator, and Divya Patel, UNC-CH’s RCP Co-Chair. They have both been working with RCP families and staff for several years in a volunteer and leadership context.

Background

In December 2021, Durham, North Carolina began welcoming Afghan families who were evacuated from their homeland following the violent Taliban takeover. Many arrived with Special Immigrant Visas for providing indispensable assistance to the United States during the war, at great personal risk to themselves and their loved ones. For most refugees, resettlement is a multi-year process, and the move is long anticipated. For Afghan evacuees, the process was abrupt, and adjustment to life in the United States will be a long and arduous process as they work to learn the language and culture and meet their basic needs. Coupled with the dissolution of traditional family roles - where children wind up the language brokers for their parents - internal family conflict produces higher rates of domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health crises with less opportunity for help. Most resource providers are unable to serve the refugee communities because of linguistic and cultural barriers, and as a result, families experience greater instability, increasing the risk of crisis.

The Refugee Community Partnership (RCP) is a grassroots organization composed of and governed by more than 1,200 migrant and refugee residents across Orange and Durham Counties. RCP began to work with the burgeoning Afghan community locally and now works with 138 of Durham’s roughly 300 newly resettled Afghan residents. Over the past year RCP has hired newly resettled multilingual Afghan adults as Community Coordinators and interpreters to act as a critical bridge between the Afghan community and the broader community and its resources and opportunities. RCP is one of the only organizations that provides interpretation in all of the Afghan languages – Dari, Pashto, Farsi and Urdu – through their staff team and Community Interpreters. Community Interpreters provide accompaniment to appointments and critical interactions with service providers, like the Department of Social Services, medical clinics and public housing.

Afghan families have shared firsthand through Community Interpreters about the difficulty of acclimating to life in the U.S. One reason many Afghan families cited was the social isolation; on top of their jarring and abrupt resettlement, families went from living communally to living in apartments blocked off and isolated from others in their community. This lack of connection to the community and the extreme social isolation seemed to impact Afghan women in particular, who traditionally stay home with children and have little engagement outside of the home. Trauma undermines a community’s sense of security and connection, yet research demonstrates both individual and collective trauma can be mitigated, even healed, by preservation of cultural identity in the context of community belonging.¹

As RCP began working with more Afghan women, we learned that many are talented at embroidery and sewing and longed to continue that practice in their new home community and also spend time with other Afghan women. Previous research conducted with Burmese women in the RCP community found that,

“the arts can offer refugee women an opportunity to express themselves and process complex issues in effective, creative, accessible, therapeutic, and cross-cultural ways.” Building off of this model, the Afghan Women’s Group will provide this much needed social and emotional support for refugee women who are survivors of war-related trauma and cultural displacement, using culturally significant crafts to facilitate social gathering and emotional healing. Through this project, we will partner with RCP’s Afghan Community Coordinator to develop and facilitate a regular craft circle where Afghan women can practice, hone, and teach their craft, while creating a regular space to foster inclusion and belonging. The Afghan Women’s Group will also promote peace building through this craft circle, as creating a space to build social and emotional trust will further healing, conflict management strategies, and interpersonal trust. By putting Afghan women at the helm, this project also facilitates community organizing, investing in their leadership development so that the Afghan Women’s Group reflects their community’s own priorities, while supporting them in creating a model to engage other Afghan women as well.

Anticipated Results

By creating a space developed by and for displaced women, we will meaningfully improve the social and emotional well-being of Afghan women in Durham, while developing a model that could impact refugee and migrant communities far beyond. The first outcome of this project is to provide social support for processing grief and the stresses of resettlement. Next, Afghan Women’s Group will provide economic opportunity for economically disadvantaged people by connecting Afghan women with the embroidery and sewing materials and business resources to enable those who are interested to use this skill for supplemental income, while also hiring multilingual Afghan young adults as interpreters throughout the craft sessions. Finally, Afghan Women’s Group will create a space for community discussion and solution making. Creating a space of inclusion and cultural belonging is vital for addressing the underlying dynamics of power and oppression which so often dictate the course of refugee and migrant community members’ lives. Community-driven solutions honor their multiculturalism and other assets, enriching the greater community in the process.

Implementation

Providing this eight session pilot will facilitate a community space for discussion, community power building and healing. It will foster relationships of support and community that will have ripple impacts throughout the entire family system.

May-June: Work with RCP staff to 1) reserve community center space and order supplies; 2) advertise upcoming Afghan Women’s Group in the languages of the Afghan community through RCP’s Member communication network, the Hive; and 3) schedule Art Therapy Institute facilitator, childcare provider, and interpreters for an eight week program.

Mid-June - Mid-August: Host an Afghan Women’s Group weekly for eight sessions. Each session will be facilitated by a therapeutic arts councilor from Art Therapy Institute. We will provide childcare and activities for kids, along with snacks and transportation reimbursement to remove the barriers to mothers’ participation. We will also provide embroidery supplies for women’s projects, and interpreters in each of the represented Afghan languages to ensure that participants and facilitators can communicate effectively.

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The Afghan Women’s Group seeks to ameliorate conditions leading to conflict within the home, while leveraging the infrastructure of RCP to support Afghan women in healing from trauma and violence by rebuilding their sense of community. The project approach draws on two of the three major areas of strategic peacebuilding outlined in the Strategic Peacebuilding Pathways Wheel: efforts to prevent, respond to, and transform violent conflict; and efforts to promote justice and healing. During times of extreme isolation, such as the pandemic and early resettlement, RCP experiences increased requests for crisis support due to domestic violence, mental health crises, and substance abuse. This project seeks to break the isolation that causes tenuous group dynamics as families are dealing with resettlement stresses, and men who are the typical heads of family and earners in particular struggle with stressors like limited job options, language differences, and limited resources. RCP reports that these are the conditions in which domestic violence, in particular, crops up, so this project also provides space for women to talk about that and get support to prevent and address violence in the home. Art is a universal language that has the ability to overcome some of the most common and divisive barriers. Afghan Women’s Group serves to unite Afghan women who have experienced destructive conflict and provide a voice for them when they might otherwise lack an outlet.

The Afghan Women’s Group uses group sewing and embroidery as an entry point for consistently and regularly bringing survivors of war and conflict together to process trauma and promote peace building. The Afghan Women’s Group creates a space for community building and belonging to address social and emotional health. As trust and community are built, participants can bring to surface issues of conflict and violence that they’ve experienced, securing validation and acknowledgement, identifying possible responsive actions, and generating collective commitment to actively following through on agreed-upon steps. The Afghan Women’s Group will ensure inclusion across displaced and divided social groups, develop respect, and promote psycho-social healing after violence and trauma for Afghan women through a creative, healing, and cross-cultural space.

August: Work with RCP Staff to evaluate the format of the Afghan Women’s Group both in terms of its process and impact. This evaluation will solicit feedback from participants and tweak the model for future use as needed. Once this Project for Peace is completed, we will be left with a tested model with which to pursue future grants to continue this work through RCP.

Connection to Peace