

Name of Project: Ascent Ending Harmful Practices

Lead partner: Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC)

Delivery partner: Ashiana Network

Borough: Waltham Forest

I am Aida originally from Ethiopia. I came to the UK to unite with the men I was forced to marry. Being married to my husband of 10 years was one of the difficult moments of my life; I did not have a say in how I can live my life. I felt trapped in a marriage I did not wanted to begin with. I was forced into isolation and made to feel worthless by my husband as I endured his putdowns throughout our marriage. I was like a prisoner in the marriage I did not want but could not leave due to cultural pressure. I sought comfort in the limited phone contacts I had with my mother who lives back home and finally gained her approval to escape to safety.

Following my separation from my abusive husband I was linked with Ashiana Counselling Service to help me recover from the effects of abuse I encountered over the years. When I embarked on my counselling journey, I was scared of what the future may hold for me. I was not sure if I had a future. It was tough being a separated Muslim women; *living alone, without the control of a “male” figure* as the community pressure reminded me of this everyday. I felt rejected by my family and community at large. I only wanted to separate from my abuser not my community; but often I was told a women’s place is with her husband. It was hurtful not being heard or the pain I suffered. It felt like I cannot define myself as a woman without the existence of a husband to shape my boundaries.

I struggled to define myself within the boundaries community set for me. It felt like a lonely and scary experience to be me. At times, I doubted the decision I took. When I first begun counselling, I was lost. I felt ashamed and deeply upset to have gone against the norms of my community. I desperately needed to be accepted by my family. Counselling helped me validate my experience. I was finally heard without being judged. It felt liberating to express my experience without being minimised. I was able to explore my thoughts and feelings without the pressure of being judged. Non-judgemental space of counselling helped me accept myself.

My counsellor helped me envisage the future I want for myself. In the beginning, it was scary being single; the uncertainty of future scared me. With time the inevitable possibility of being a divorcee did not feel scary but liberating. My counsellor was supportive and showed me ways to better manage my anxieties. I began this academic year, unsure, if I could finish my course, but with the support of counselling I was able to manage my fears and quieten my inner critic. I was able to define myself and set career goals. The more I could imagine the future I wanted for myself the less scared I felt. For the first time I did not fear the future I wanted to build for myself. My counsellor helped me see my own strength. My peers and teachers all commented in the change they saw in me and in time I begun to see the changed woman I have become. At time of ending with Ashiana counselling service I successfully passed all my modules and had one final exam to do. With a positive counselling experience, I was able to grow and celebrate my achievements with my counsellor. I felt proactive and sociable. For the first time I looked forward to school breaks and planned social activities. Thank you for helping me find my way I now plan my own future.