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Testimony of Arab-American Family Support Center Before the New York City Council Committee on Women & Gender Equity

Tuesday, February 22nd, 2022

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee Chair, Councilmember Tiffany Caban; the Committee on Women & Gender Equity; and the entire New York City Council for holding this crucial oversight hearing on barriers to accessing survivor services in New York City. My name is Salma Mohamed, and I am the Partnership & Capacity Building Specialist at **the Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC)**. I am a survivor of gender-based violence and a Muslim, Arab-American daughter of Egyptian immigrants. I am honored to testify today on behalf of marginalized immigrant and refugee families throughout New York City.

At the **Arab-American Family Support Center**, we promote well-being, prevent violence, prepare families to learn, work, and succeed, and communicate the experiences and needs of the people we serve. Understanding that our services are more essential than ever, we have expanded our reach across programs and launched new initiatives to meet the heightened need for domestic violence case management support, mental health services, academic enrichment for youth, cash assistance, access to health insurance and food security, and much more.

We welcome all those who are in need, but with **27** years of experience, we have developed a research-driven, community-focused, culturally responsive, and linguistically-competent approach to serving New York's growing Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (AMEMSA) communities—communities that have been historically underrepresented and underserved. Our staff is representative of our client base, we speak 36 languages, including Arabic, Bangla, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu, and we take a trauma-informed and intersectional approach to all our work, enabling us to serve populations that mainstream providers are largely unable to effectively reach.

AAFSC provides services out of all five boroughs. In addition to providing support out of 13 physical locations, including the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, Family Justice Centers in each borough, we offer in-home case management in every neighborhood of New York City.

In 2021, **AAFSC** served 10,000 people. With gender-based violence occurrence and severity on the rise, we saw a 40% increase in demand for our domestic violence services and, subsequently, our **Anti-Violence Program** provided case management, crisis intervention, court accompaniments, and safety plan assistance to **1,862** survivors.

When we saw high-risk cases of domestic violence double, we responded swiftly and nimbly, training case managers to respond to increased homicidal and suicidal risk, and we launched a **Domestic Violence Helpline**, which provides remote and immediate access to on-call, culturally and linguistically competent crisis intervention services with expanded hours. Our team also provided over **\$550,000** in emergency financial assistance through our limited general operating funds. Most of these funds supported survivors to cover the costs associated with finding safe shelter. We will not stop there.

Since **1994**, we have dedicated ourselves to centering the lived, intersectional experiences of the communities that we serve in all our work to ensure we are adequately addressing the issues our communities face.

In our work providing direct services and as members of a Collective with partners Sakhi for South Asian Women, Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families, Violence Intervention Program, WomanKind, and the Korean American Family Service Center, we understand the following are barriers survivors face in accessing services:

- (1) Fear of retaliation by the partner; fear of deportation or incarceration

- (2) Community isolation, discrimination, and trauma
- (3) Lack of financial resources
- (4) Limited availability of linguistically accessible mental health services and restorative justice approaches for those who wish for a non-systems approach to healing
- (5) Housing costs, limited availability of vouchers and other affordable safe housing programs

These issues have historically hit minority women, girls, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals in severe and distinct ways. The pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges. AMEMSA survivors must navigate the intersection of gender, racial, and class discrimination when trying to access services. For example, many of our clients must navigate language hurdles, racism, xenophobia, and wage gaps, all of which reinforce traditional barriers and create new ones.

Few scientific studies examine domestic violence among immigrant and AMEMSA populations in the U.S. but what we do know is troubling.

As we have seen, and as a qualitative study called Arab American Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence in Dearborn, Michigan noted, complex patriarchal family dynamics and community normalization/ victim-blaming often hamper a survivor's ability to access services.

A recent report from the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence demonstrated, from 2010 – 2019, foreign-born clients visited the Family Justice Centers (FJCs) more frequently on average, were more likely to report living in a shelter (36.5% vs. 10.9%), less likely to report open family court and criminal court cases in their initial contact with the FJC, and less likely to report that the police had been called in response to domestic violence in their initial intake at the FJC.

We have supported countless immigrant and AMEMSA women who are hesitant to pursue help for a variety of reasons, including widespread fear of incarceration, deportation, family separation, and family or community retaliation.

Unique challenges require unique solutions.

Most providers are not equipped to identify and tackle matters like forced marriage, virginity exams, in-law abuse, gender expectations in our communities, and other forms of deeply rooted, culturally specific, and honor-based forms of gender-based violence. In this way, AAFSC's culturally and linguistically competent support fills an urgent service gap. Our **Anti-Violence Program**, and those of our partner agencies, address these barriers by adopting a culturally responsive outreach approach and working individually with survivors to build trust and tailor service plans to their unique needs.

AAFSC leverages our trusted position to support survivors in navigating feelings of fear, guilt, and shame that can prevent AMEMSA survivors from reporting violence and build their capacity to process their experiences, find safety, learn about legal remedies, and/or explore carefully tailored non-system tools (i.e. healing practices). Through our services, we protect survivors and challenge harmful attitudes, break cycles of violence, and ensure that all community members can live safe, healthy lives.

To address these barriers, AAFSC, along with our aforementioned partners, request that the City ensure that all legislation addresses the unique and multi-layered challenges minority women face and prioritize community-based organizations for funding for Citywide Initiatives that support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. Specifically, we request the City:

- Enhance funding to culturally and linguistically competent CBOs through the DOVE Initiative, Immigrant Survivors of Domestic Violence Initiative, and others.
- Create and improve economic and housing security for survivors of color, inclusive of immigrant communities. Allocate city funding to provide public benefits for all income-eligible New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status. Continue allocating emergency funds to communities who did not receive other forms of pandemic related government aid.
- Address the mental health needs of survivors whose conditions have been exacerbated over the pandemic. We urge City Council to devote further resources to mental health initiatives through a culturally aware and trauma-informed lens.
- Fund community education programs that work to empower young women, girls, transgender, and gender non-conforming immigrants and teach healthy ways to express masculinity and overcome conflict, like our **AYWA** and **MENar** programs.
- Advocate for and fund culturally responsive initiatives that use disaggregated data to highlight culturally specific needs without reinforcing problematic narratives.
- Commit to supporting immigrant and refugee survivors with culturally and linguistically competent services. The **Arab-American Family Support Center** works to conduct regular cultural competency trainings with our city and community partners, but with your support, we can amplify our impact and empower immigrant and refugee survivors across all five boroughs.

Thank you once again for this opportunity to testify. As always, the **Arab-American Family Support Center** stands ready to work with you in ensuring that all New Yorkers have access to the services they need to lead safe and fulfilling lives.