

# Syrian women's group fends off trauma of war through therapy

By Rahul Gupta Scarborough Mirror  
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Inside the cozy basement of the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, a small group of women get together for tea, snacks and conversation.

It's an unseasonably warm late November day, and the women, all newcomers to Canada, have travelled a long distance to get to suburban Scarborough, many having made the trip on public transit. They get together about once a week to exchange stories and catch up on each other's lives.

Fatima Darwish is telling the group about her life now, much different than the one she left behind in Aleppo, Syria.

Back then she was the equivalent of a junior high school teacher, instructing several subjects from physics to Arabic. Now she's hoping to get onto the teaching rolls of a privately run Toronto Arabic school. Despite perfect fluency in English, she isn't optimistic of her prospects of teaching in the Canadian public school system.

"There's no space for me, maybe next year I will try again," Darwish said. "It's hard because you need Canadian experience to get a job, and we are all newcomers.

"But on the whole, life is better here even though it's so different from Syria," she says, laughing as she adds: "Starting with the weather."

The women make small talk, exchanging smiles and a few laughs. They're prodded gently by meeting facilitator Roula Ajib to practise their English. Some can only speak a few words, others are almost fluent.

Most of them are of Syrian origin, having arrived in Canada a little more than a year ago. With the help of the community centre, the women learn English, plan careers and focus on the next chapter of their lives.

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They also get a rare opportunity to speak openly about their feelings and the trauma suffered from the civil war in their homeland that has left hundreds of thousands dead in almost seven years.

"The women get to express themselves," said Bayan Khatib from the Al-Quazzaz Foundation for Education and Development and the Syrian Canadian Foundation, which runs a group therapy program for Syrian women new to Canada, focusing on mental health.

"Sometimes they need convincing to share their thoughts, but once they start speaking and expressing themselves they don't want to stop."

During the sessions, a therapist offers counselling, and the women can take part in yoga as well as learn more about wellness, from eating healthy to engaging in self-care.

After years spent in a refugee camp in Jordan, Nadima Abdolahaq arrived in Quebec, where she studied French.

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