

# Afghan Women's Sewing and Crafts Co-operative



Immigrant Services Society of BC  
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## Advisory Committee - Terms of Reference

### Background:

The Afghan Women's Sewing and Crafts Co-operative is a grass roots, community-based initiative and is an example of marginalized women taking matters into their own hands to generate income and gradually eliminate their dependency on social assistance. The members of the Co-operative are Afghan refugees who lived for five to twenty years as refugees in Iran, Pakistan, Russia and India in emergency and charity-oriented situations due to ongoing war. They have recently settled in Canada where the majority of them have been living on income assistance programs.

The Co-operative is a diverse group in terms of ethnic background, language, religion, age, education, mental and physical ability, marital and social status, rural and urban experience, duration of settlement in Canada and many other important factors. These women face huge barriers to settlement, including lack of English skills, little formal education, no formal work experience or training, and no knowledge of the Canadian work force and its norms. Many of the women are war widows and are now the breadwinners of large families - with an average of six children in the family. The women represent urban and rural women who have traditionally contributed to the family income. In traditional society, women in rural areas were more self-assured because they knew their roles were essential to the well being of the entire family. In rural areas, unlike in towns and cities, men's and women's roles are closely interconnected. In their current situation in Canada, women have lost their status and decision making role in the family, community and society. As a result, their participation in political, social and economical aspects of life in Canada is passive and isolated. The focus of this initiative is to help these women to regain their active and empowered role.

The idea of forming a sewing group was first germinated in 2003 and a small group of women succeeded in organizing small exhibitions and activities with the support of Afghan Canadian Women's Network of BC (ACWN). Since September 2004, several organizations have come together to support the development of the sewing group into a co-operative. The organizations that have been involved in an advisory and support capacity are the Afghan-Canadian Women's Network (ACWN), Immigrant Services Society (ISS), Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet), Devco, and Vibrant Burnaby (comprised of agencies such as the Edmonds and Maywood Community Schools, Ministry of Children and Family Development, City of Burnaby, South Burnaby Neighbourhood House and community members in Burnaby). In May 2005, a formal advisory committee was formed and agreed upon the following terms of reference.



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## Role of Advisory Committee:

- Provide suggestions and support to the co-op and its members on a range of issues, from those that relate directly to the development of the co-op to those emerging as a result of co-op members' self-identified needs and barriers.
- Assist the co-op members to establish links to the broader community for the purpose of networking, marketing, creating public awareness and implementing relevant project activities.
- Work in collaboration with individuals and groups to address challenges encountered by co-op members, and connect the co-op to other resources in their communities to reduce barriers.
- Support and assist co-op members lobby for policy and / or program change at the systemic level or find alternative pragmatic solutions. (For example, members of the Advisory Committee are linked to other women's groups and will help the co-op members gain support and assistance with advocacy from these agencies. In addition, some of the members are connected to poverty initiatives in Burnaby. They can assist the women in advocating for change related to earnings and income assistance.)
- Identify ways at which women can lobby at different political decision making levels to reduce barriers for Afghan women—and other immigrants and refugees—who are living in poverty.
- Participate in public awareness activities to raise the profile of the project.
- Challenge stereotypes and promote the strengths and resources immigrant women bring to the community.
- Learn from this group of women and this project to identify how their experiences can be adapted to other immigrant and refugee groups.
- Provide assistance in identifying other possible funding sources.

## Frequency of Meeting:

- -Quarterly meetings

## Chairing meetings:

- ISS will chair until co-op members have been mentored into this role. (i.e., Co-op members will select who will participate on their behalf and these women will be mentored and trained to take on added responsibilities, such as chairing, minute taking and participating in discussions.

## Communication:

- Minutes – ISS to take minutes until co-op members have been mentored into this role. See above.
- ISS to translate minutes for distribution to co-op members.
- Suggested audio recording of meetings and cassettes made available to co-op members to address literacy issues.
- ISS to prepare quarterly reports, which will be distributed, to Advisory Committee members and to a broader distribution list of interested parties.



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## Members of the Advisory Committee

Co-op Sector	Community	Funders	ISS
Melanie Conn -Devco Nicole Chaland – CCEDNet Jan Taylor, BC Co- operative Association  Afghan Women's Sewing and Crafts Co-op representative/s	<u>Vibrant Burnaby:</u> Doreen George, Wendy Borelli (School District 41); Cathy Lavery (City of Burnaby); Gabe Maio (Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance)  <u>Afghan and Women's                      Groups:</u> Afghan Canadian Women's Network of BC Women, Peace & Security representative BC Muslim Women's Association  <u>Others (suggested):</u> Naomi Staddon, Afghans Together Program Representatives from the industry (i.e., sewing and manufacturing) Representatives from relevant government agencies (Citizenship and Immigration Canada; Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance)	Irene Gannitsos, VanCity Foundation. Susan Mussell - Status of Women Canada (SWC)	Chris Friesen, Director Jocelyne Hamel , Program Manager Gulalai Habib, Community Economic Developer

Prepared by Gulalai Habib and Jocelyne Hamel  
 September 2005

