

PHASE 1

Collective Painting



notice, observe, and feel

Art is meant to be felt, not just seen. Allow your own background, experiences, and intersecting identities to shape how you engage with each painting. At your own pace, notice, observe, and feel.

Next to the booklet's page numbers you'll find quotes from HEAL project participants. We invite you to pause and reflect on their meaning. Consider your own responses, and let them guide your journey through the exhibition.



What colours stand out to you?



What symbols or images catch your eye?

What does the painting make you feel?



If the painting had soundscape, what sound might you hear?



What questions come to mind when viewing (or looking at) the painting?



Does the painting remind you of any personal experiences or memories?

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Participants move with dance ribbons at Dentonia Park

Overview

In 2022, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance) embarked on a multi-year project funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Over four years, Hubs of Expressive Arts for Life (HEAL) Project gathered more than 50 newcomer women to connect, create, learn, imagine, and engage in a 12-session program to improve their mental health and well-being. The HEAL project was designed to prevent and address family violence using expressive arts as the foundational approach.

Alongside a interdisciplinary team of artists, healthcare, and settlement workers, the HEAL program was implemented across six distinct newcomer communities.

Participants in each group engaged in artful collaboration to produce two collective paintings. Each painting showcased a culmination of participants' lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.

This gallery booklet features six collective paintings produced by Phase I HEAL program groups including: Arabic-, Bengali-, and Farsi-speaking newcomer women survivors of gender-based domestic violence. It's a glimpse into the transformative power of art as a path to mental well-being, knowledge, and skills development.

Come along with us to explore the symbols and stories shared on these canvases.



(Top left) Participants mold clay representing symbols of support, energy, and inner peace.



(Bottom left) Participants build a nest together.



(Top right) Participants trace their hands as part of the final collective painting.



(Bottom right) Participants make art about their journeys to safety.



(Top left) Participants make art based on program lessons.

(Bottom left) Clay pieces made by participants represent food, cooking, and other everyday objects.

(Top right) Participant paints a portrait of a women unable to speak freely.

(Bottom right) Participants build a nest together.



Bengali participant working on a collective painting.

Preventing and addressing family violence by promoting mental health and well-being

Newcomers experiencing gender-based domestic violence often face unique challenges that can hinder their ability to seek help. The trauma of violence can lead to mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many newcomers may feel isolated, unsupported, stigmatized, unfamiliar legal systems, and fear preventing them from reaching out for help.

Ample research and literature have confirmed that, in addition to psychotherapeutic healing effects, expressive arts groups can provide survivors with skills for healing. Art serves as a powerful tool for trauma recovery. Engaging in artistic activities can support healing by fostering self-discovery and resilience. It can help individuals process their trauma and build confidence. These are not just paintings, but an avenue to share the lived realities of newcomer survivors of gender-based and/or community violence.

New Beginnings Together



The Arab Community Centre of Toronto
ARABIC-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP

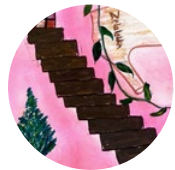
All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Arabic-speaking HEAL group.



The **house of laughter** represents a joyful and welcoming space where dreams flourish. It symbolizes a cherished family home where loved ones and children come together.



The **butterflies** represent relaxation and freedom achieved through meditation, showing both beauty and renewal. It shows positive transformation and recovery like a butterfly's rebirth.



The **staircase** symbolizes our challenging journey, with each solid, concrete step representing the lessons learned along the way. Lessons are like sturdy rocks supporting our progress towards warmth and safety.



The **sun** shields us from life's harsh and cold experiences, while the green branches symbolize how we are united through shared challenges. They represent the love and care that bind us together despite our struggles.



The **book** symbolizes the insightful lessons gained from the HEAL program. It encouraged me to read again. The shades of blue reflect emotional shifts before and after.



The **tree** in the corner is a tree of hope and love. The maple leaf on the branch represents how it has brought us together with love and feelings of faith.



notice, observe, and feel
What colours stand out to you?



Journey to Safety

The Arab Community Centre of Toronto
ARABIC-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP



All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Arabic-speaking HEAL group.



I drew a **self-representation** reflecting my journey from being teased for my height in Yemen to finding fulfillment in Canada. The drawing shows the changes in my appearance and how Canada has helped me embrace and realize my dreams.



This painting is made with love. It reflects how people from diverse cultures and experiences find **peace and freedom** through the shared expression from within their heart.



I drew a **clock** to symbolize how time quietly passes, sometimes without purpose, when on a journey to a new life. It is driven by faith and uncertainty, but it led me to a safe and stable place.



Hope in life and life in hope. I felt scared and in danger for a long time. Now I feel comfortable and safe because I am surrounded by good people.



It is my dream to begin a **business** one day. The ABC's represents learning English and the stability I have in Canada with my family.



Take me to a country of safety. What comes after distress is relief, this is what my experience is.



notice, observe, and feel

What symbols or images catch your eye?

Colours of a Dream Life



Bengalsh-Canadian Community Services BENGLI-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP

All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Bengali-speaking HEAL group.



The **yellow sun** symbolizes hope and reassurance, reminding me that even in darkness, light will come. It encourages me to stay positive and patient, trusting that a brighter future is ahead.



Colourful circle: The mind experiences a wide range of emotions, from sadness to happiness, much like the shifting patterns of a dream. It's a mixed space filled with many thoughts and colors, without any specific structure.



The **butterfly** represents transformation and freedom. It reflects the ability to make life choices. It reminds us that after death they begin their life.



Love is about giving as much as receiving, embodying deep emotions and connections. The **green flower** symbolizes peace and calmness, contributing to health, and representing the sense of home.



Three ladies represents the different human beings and how we are feeling at moments in our life. The flowers on top their heads represent life, calm, and support wellbeing.



Shades of green remind us of home, nature, and the feeling that things are possible for us again. We can do it.



notice, observe, and feel

What does the painting make you feel?

Peaceful Mind, Messy is Beautiful

Bangladeshi-Canadian Community Services
BENGALI-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP



All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Bengali-speaking HEAL group.



Oh Canada celebrates the country's peacefulness and safety. The use of vibrant colors in the depiction highlights its beauty and the welcoming nature of the nation.



Tree and ladder looks like Bangladesh, evoking memories of my childhood and the place where I was born. Forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune as if it were a flute.



The **ladder** symbolizes gradual progress and growth, illustrating how slowly and steadily we can climb towards our dreams. Two hands helping each other at every stage, you have to enjoy all the phases of women's life.



The place that comes to mind is **home in Bangladesh**, evoking memories of childhood. I miss it even more during winter when the leaves fall off, reminding me of the distance from home.



Care from the heart reflects her deep connection and affection for her own country, Bangladesh.



The **traffic light** image represents different life signals: green, I can move forward and achieve my goals. Orange and red reminder to pause and wait patiently. Yellow is love.



notice, observe, and feel

If the painting had soundscape, what sound might you hear?

Unheard Voices of Butterflies



The Neighbourhood Group FARSI-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP

All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Farsi-speaking HEAL group.



The drawing of a **hand** emerging from the water signifies the importance of self-reliance during challenging times. Even when I am overwhelmed, we can reach for our own and other support.



My painting depicts a girl who wants to speak out and survive without being silenced: **Who will let me talk?** It reflects her dreams of a beautiful, free life for her family and herself, despite needing education and age.



The **woman with her mouth covered by a hand** represents the silence imposed on Afghan women who are denied the right to speak out about their rights and freedoms. However, Afghan women are remarkable with patience and perseverance.



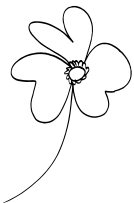
I drew a **leaf** that says, "Woman equals life", and "Love of my mother". Today will pass! After each dark night will be a bright morning. Every sadness and happiness will pass; focus on the present moment.



I drew a **pomegranate** from Kandahar and a bird. My hope is that, God willing, there will be freedom and peace in Afghanistan.



Be courteous, as a **mentor** to youth. As a mother and in my old age I have realized my biggest dream: educating my girls.



notice, observe, and feel

What questions come to mind when viewing (or looking at) the painting?





Our Sun Will Also Rise

The Neighbourhood Group
FARSI-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP



All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Farsi-speaking HEAL group.



My painting depicts the **tears of women** grieving over their closed schools and the loss of their educational rights. Woman means being alive burning and shining.



My drawing shows the **Afghan flag**, a symbol of our nation and identity. Black signifies emerging from darkness, green represents peace and freedom, and red honors those who have sacrificed for our country. The flag also represents the enduring hope for Afghanistan's freedom.



My drawing shows love and peace among our classmates. The **helicopter** represents the security provided by the military, symbolizing hope for freedom and stability in Afghanistan.



People in Afghanistan often have idealized perceptions of foreign countries which don't always match reality. Upon arriving in Canada, I found it challenging to find a **home** and faced many difficulties. My drawing shows the many streets and finally I became a homeowner.



My drawing of **mountains, the sun, trees**, and flowers symbolizes a lush and prosperous country where freedom prevails. When a country is not free, even nature seems to suffer.



notice, observe, and feel

Does the painting remind you of personal experiences or memories?



The act of making art brings together experiences in new and imaginative ways.

Acknowledgements

Our deepest gratitude goes to the HEAL program participants who generously shared their stories and creative expressions, now reflected in these collective paintings. We also extend heartfelt thanks to our art-based facilitators, whose guidance and care fostered the safe and trusting spaces that made this work possible.

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Bangladeshi-Canadian Community Services
TNG Community Services (TNGCS)

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